

WALL TEXTS

GUIDO RENI

THE DIVINE

23 NOVEMBER 2022 TO 5 MARCH 2023

Exhibition annex

Introduction

This exhibition presents the star painter of the Italian Baroque: Guido Reni (1575–1642). Disdained in the nineteenth century and later outstripped in popularity by his contemporary Caravaggio, he today no longer holds the place he deserves in the general consciousness. In his own time, however, Reni was one of the most successful and most celebrated painters not just in Italy but all over Europe. Prominent members of the aristocracy and clergy vied for works by his hand. Reni already earned the epithet “the Divine” during his lifetime. On the one hand it was a reference to his fame as an artist who, well aware of his abilities, was occasionally known to put on diva-like airs. On the other hand, the honorary title *il divino* points to his subject matter: Guido was the painter of the divine, whether the Christian heaven or the world of the Greek and Roman gods. With his vivid pictorial language he translated the invisibility of the celestial realm into the beauty of painting. The show is the first for more than thirty years to unite Guido Reni’s paintings, drawings, and etchings and offers new perspectives on this fascinating artistic figure.

Io Guido Reni Bologna:

Facets of a Painter’s Personality

Thanks to the detailed biography published in 1678 by the scholar Carlo Cesare Malvasia of Bologna, we are better informed about Guido Reni than about most other Old Masters. That account also offers eloquent testimony to the painter’s idiosyncratic and ambiguous personality: at once deeply religious and superstitious, fearful of women and full of love for his mother, tremendously successful on the art market and hopelessly addicted to gambling. Yet far from being a lonely and misunderstood genius, he was a celebrated star of his trade. On a sheet of sketches bearing remarkable witness to his self-examination through the medium of drawing, he practised his signature, writing “I, Guido Reni, Bologna” over and over again. In another rare document, his account book of the years 1609 to 1612, the painter kept careful track of the expenditure and income of his work in Rome. A group

of paintings of the *Assumption of the Virgin* never before united in an exhibition offers a fitting introduction to Reni's art. This was a theme that preoccupied the artist and to which he often returned, from his initial years in Bologna to his late phase. The earliest version, which belongs to the Städel Museum, forms the point of departure. A painting that virtually lays out the programme of his artistic ambitions, it would serve as a basis for several further interpretations of the motif in formats both small and large. No subject matter is better suited to demonstrating his "celestial ideas", the angelic and paradisaical qualities of Reni's painting that contemporary sources already identified as his unique selling point.

On His Way:

Reni's Beginnings in Bologna

Reni started out by training in the workshop of the Late Mannerist Denys Calvaert, who had made a name for himself in Bologna primarily with small-scale paintings on copper and recognised Guido's talent early on. After ten years and a quarrel with his master, he entered the academy of the Carracci in 1595. This was an innovative art school that had set out to reform painting and the methods used to teach it. There, it was Ludovico Carracci who supported and encouraged Reni, while his cousin Annibale eyed the young pupil suspiciously as a future rival. Nevertheless, Annibale's artistic influence would prove decisive for Guido. The Carracci entrusted him with small commissions which, unlike Calvaert, they allowed him to execute on his own account. In 1598, he parted ways with Ludovico, again in the wake of a dispute. It was in these years that Reni painted his first altarpieces and smallscale works. He also produced virtuoso chalk drawings that demonstrate how, even at this early stage, he combined Calvaert's Late Mannerism, the Carracci's reform painting and his own study of the High Renaissance masters (above all Raphael and Parmigianino) to arrive at an entirely independent synthesis. Until his departure for Rome in 1601, his most important clients included the Dominican female and male convents in Bologna.

Caravaggist or Anti-Caravaggio?

The First Years in Rome

In 1601, the ambitious young painter was drawn to Rome, the capital of the Papal States, to which Bologna also belonged. There he shared quarters in the guesthouse of Santa Prassede for two years with Francesco Albani and Domenichino, his two artist friends from home. He executed several substantial commissions for Cardinal Paolo Emilio Sfondrati. In Rome, however, Reni did not join his Bolognese compatriot Annibale Carracci, nor the revolutionary Caravaggio – whose own star was just

beginning to rise – but instead associated with the Cavalier d’Arpino, an established and well-connected Late Mannerist.

Guido’s biographer Malvasia portrays him as a kind of “anti-Caravaggio.” And indeed, the elegance and ideal beauty of his painting style contrast starkly with the Lombard’s naturalism and dramatic chiaroscuro. Paradoxically, Reni nevertheless soon became a first-generation “Caravaggist,” if only for a few years (ca. 1604–06), and with a highly individual and selective interpretation of his fellow painter’s art. Examples include Reni’s *Christ at the Column*, the large altarpiece of the *Martyrdom of Saint Catherine* and the *David*, for which he moreover looked to an ancient sculpture for orientation. His endeavours also encompassed episodic forays into the genre of landscape with small figural staffage. Reni thus expanded his horizon substantially during his initial years in Rome.

In the Service of the Borghese:

Reni as a Fresco Painter (and Draughtsman) in Rome

During the second phase of his stay in Rome, which lasted, with interruptions, from 1607 to 1614, Reni’s most important patrons were Pope Paul V Borghese and the cardinal-nephew Scipione Borghese, who together employed him for several years as a “court artist.” Within a brief timespan, the newcomer had thus advanced to become the leading painter in the Eternal City. As he documented in his account book, he carried out mainly large fresco projects for the Borghese: in the Vatican Palace, San Gregorio Magno, the Quirinal Palace and Santa Maria Maggiore as well as the Casino Pallavicini-Rospigliosi, home to his famous *Aurora* fresco, one of Rome’s leading sights up until well into the nineteenth century.

In the exhibition, a selection of superb preparatory drawings for all his fresco projects represent this important aspect of Reni’s oeuvre. Encompassing composition studies in pen and ink and detail studies in chalk, they offer striking insights into his design process and his draughtsmanship.

After Reni returned to Bologna for good in 1614, Cardinal Pietro Aldobrandini commissioned him with the decoration of a chapel in the cathedral of Ravenna, but he was no longer willing to subject himself to the physical strain of fresco painting. Instead, he drew the cartoons (designs to scale), of which two rare examples have survived, and left the execution of the paintings to his assistants.

Back in Bologna:

Reni’s *prima maniera*

During his time in Rome, Reni travelled periodically to Bologna and took on commissions there, until finally returning to his native town once and for all in 1614. To pick up the thread of his earlier successes, he now had to re-establish himself as

the foremost painter of Bologna. He developed what he had learned in Rome to arrive at a forceful, monumental and highly original style featuring sculpturally modelled individual figures or small figural groups set off against dark backgrounds – what Malvasia would refer to as Reni’s *prima maniera*. In this initial stylistic phase following his return, spanning approximately a decade until the mid-1620s, he also processed elements of his preoccupation with Caravaggio, for example in his depictions of half-length figures. At the same time, he continued to take inspiration from the Mannerist tradition of his teachers, as we see in works such as the only recently rediscovered *Conversion of Saul*.

A major commission, the huge altarpiece of the *Pietà dei Mendicanti*, kept the artist busy for years. In our show, a whole series of composition drawings for this work provides instructive insights into its planning process. In his *Allegory of the Union of Drawing and Painting* Guido moreover created a vivid symbol of the affiliation between the two arts. It was in around 1625, finally, that he first devoted himself to depicting *Lucretia* and *Cleopatra*, which were to become two of his most sought-after subjects.

Arie di teste:

Head Studies and the “Heavenward Gaze”

Reni’s draughtsmanship culminated in his “expressive heads” (*arie di teste*) in black and red chalk. Already highly valued and collected by his contemporaries, these head studies usually feature the “heavenward gaze”, which has become synonymous with his style and has found countless imitators. According to Malvasia, Guido himself boasted about his ability to depict heavenward-facing heads with raised eyes in a hundred different ways. It was from classical sculpture – the head of *Laocoön*, the *Dying Alexander* and the *Niobe* – that he developed this Pathosformel with its rapturous transport to the celestial spheres and appeal to the viewer’s emotions. His study of Raphael’s drawings of heads also played a role here, as did his keen interest in extreme emotions and the traits of old age.

Usually, these studies were used in the detailed preparation for individual heads in paintings, the expression of which was of especial importance to Reni. The earliest examples, executed either in black or red chalk, date from the period of his frescoes in Rome. From the 1620s onwards, he generally laid out his head studies in black chalk and then added subtle accents in red and white chalk.

Bologna’s Naked Heroes:

The Male Nude

In the years of his *prima maniera* in Bologna (ca. 1614–25), Reni produced a substantial number of large-scale works in which he was repeatedly preoccupied with

the male nude, sometimes in combination with its female counterpart. Mythological figures such as Hercules, Bacchus, Hippomenes and Apollo dominate, but religious and allegorical motifs such as the Old Testament hero Samson and personifications of sacred and profane love also occur. The monumental compositions all concentrate on a single protagonist or the interaction between two, staged like sculptures with only very few props. While muscular, the bodies are nevertheless characterized by slender elegance and graceful lines giving movement and animation. The “idea of the beautiful” (as it would later be dubbed by the art theorist Giovan Pietro Bellori) which finds vivid expression in these works is informed by the study of classical art and nature.

To the extent that we have been able to identify them, Guido’s patrons for these works ranged from the Zambeccari family of Bologna (*Samson*) and the poet Cesare Rinaldi (one of the artist’s versions of *Bacchus and Ariadne*) to the Duke of Mantua (the *Hercules cycle*). As the preparatory drawings for the last-named series suggest, the other paintings will presumably likewise have been preceded by nude and compositional studies.

Bright Palette and Divine Light:

Reni’s *seconda maniera*

From the late 1620s, Reni’s palette brightened noticeably. As Malvasia recounts, the painter made increased use of lead white to keep his paintings from darkening, a problem he had observed in the older works of other artists. The strategy would prove successful: to this day, Guido’s compositions of the last two decades of his career stand out in displays of Italian Baroque painting for their vibrancy of colour. Malvasia distinguished sharply between this *seconda maniera* (second style) and the artist’s earlier work – an assessment that is only, however, partially justified. It might be more correctly seen not as a break but as an evolution, especially relating to colouration and the partly freer application of paint.

The characteristic silvery hue of these paintings, resulting in works of unprecedented radiance, is particularly suitable for depictions of visions in which a divine light bursts into the scene from the upper left or right. One of the pre-eminent subjects in this phase was the suffering Christ, his beauty nevertheless unblemished, on the cross or as a half- or threequarter- length figure but always isolated from any narrative context. In the few portraits by Reni that have survived, he reveals himself to be a master of the dignified official likeness. We encounter the cardinal legates of Bologna, for example, as full-length figures decked out in splendid vestments, majestically enthroned, their eyes firmly fixed on the viewer from out of the distance. And finally, Guido also returned again and again to mythological themes, from individual figures to *Bacchus and Ariadne*, a monumental painting for the English

queen, meanwhile lost but documented in the exhibition by an etched copy and drawings by the artist's hand.

Guido Reni invenit:

The Printmaking Oeuvre

Reni engaged in printmaking throughout his career, producing nearly forty etchings in all – not copies of his painted compositions, as one might expect, but each one an independent pictorial invention. The Städel Museum possesses prints of most of them, on display for the first time in this exhibition. Guido presumably preferred the etching technique on account of the facility of its handling, which resembles that of the pen or chalk in the drawing medium.

Among the earliest in this group is his copy of Parmigianino's *Entombment* and thus a homage to the great master from his native Emilia. Through the process of copying, Reni also picked up the technique of that "father of the Italian etching." Also in his early years, he illustrated a book documenting the decorations made for the festive entry of Pope Clement VIII into Bologna in 1598. Not long afterwards he received the commission for the etchings in a booklet commemorating Agostino Carracci, who had died in 1602. In Rome he cooperated with various publishers, among them Nicolas van Aelst. Frequent motifs are now the Virgin and Child and the Holy Family, subjects that served not only as testimonies to Reni's skill, but also as objects of pious devotion.

From the 1620s onwards, Guido moreover collaborated with the printer and woodblock carver Bartolomeo Coriolano, who transferred his draft designs into masterful chiaroscuro woodcuts. Reni was thus emulating his models Raphael and Parmigianino, who also had specialist printers realise their pictorial inventions in multicoloured woodcuts.

Non finito:

Reni's Last Works

A remarkable group of paintings survive from the last years of his life, some of which are mentioned in the 1642 inventory of Guido's estate. Exhibiting various degrees of incompleteness, they were executed with great painterly liberty and verve, leaving entire sections in a state of relative sketchiness. The palette is so strongly subdued as to tend towards monochrome. Malvasia commented on these works with some reserve, dismissing them as labour-saving compromises necessitated by the painter's gambling addiction. Elsewhere, however, he praised them as art for connoisseurs. The assessment of the *non finito* in Reni's late work is similarly controversial to this day: are these "finished" paintings intentionally left in a sketchy state? Or are they *abbozzi*, compositions laid out with preliminary brush drawings and initial glazes but

never carried to completion with further layers of paint? In fact, aspects of non finito and abbozzo intertwine so complexly that the question arises anew for each individual work. Often, for example, Reni began a painting within the context of a commission or to have it “in stock,” and then postponed the finishing stages. At the same time, he seems to have taken an increasing liking to the aesthetic qualities of the *non finito* and sometimes even appears to have deliberately employed it as an artistic device to demonstrate his brilliance by the art of the rapidly dashed-off sketch. The late works thus provide fascinating insights into the master’s working process and, despite or because of their unfinished character, form the painterly finale furioso of Reni’s oeuvre.

Epilogue: Exhibiting Reni – Past and Present

By the nineteenth century, the art of Guido Reni (and most of his contemporaries) had fallen out of favour as other aesthetic preferences came to the fore. It was only after World War II that art-historical research and the broader public slowly began to rediscover him and his work. In 1954 his native Bologna staged the first monographic show ever dedicated to him. A travelling exhibition followed in 1988/89 whose venues – in addition to Bologna, Los Angeles, and Fort Worth – also included the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt.

Both exhibitions are documented in a number of press photos that provide remarkable insights into the changing forms of display. In Bologna in 1954, for example, in keeping with post-war tastes, the paintings were shown in starkly purist manner on white partition walls – and without frames. At the height of postmodernism in the late 1980s, on the other hand, the Schirn opted for a classical architectural setting with columns and entablatures as well as vibrant wall colours. Even if its design and concept are yet again different, the current show at the Städel Museum is indebted to its predecessors in many respects.