

This photograph is available in
the print version of *Parables*.

**Guercino's RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON reminds us that
the central figure in this parable and, indeed, in many
of Jesus' parables, is God.**

*Guercino (1591-1666). RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON, 1654-1655. Oil on canvas, 61 ¼" x 57 ½".
Timken Museum of Art, San Diego, CA. Photo: © Putnam Foundation, Timken Museum of Art,
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A Gesture of Reconciliation

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The return of the prodigal son to his father was a popular subject in seventeenth-century Christian art, both north and south of the Alps. The Counter Reformation embraced it as an example of forgiveness and healing between family members; Protestants viewed it as a return to God the Father despite their break from the Roman Catholic Church. Both of these meanings can help us interpret Guercino's *Return of the Prodigal Son*.

This image of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation is a visual exegesis less of the Lukan parable than of the Counter-Reformation emphasis (in response to Protestant critique) on the necessity and benefits of true contrition. The father receiving the penitent prodigal refers not only to God, but also to the Church that, as God's representative on earth, receives the genuinely contrite through its sacraments and ministry.

The artist Gian Francesco Barbieri was born in Cento, a small town outside the metropolis of Bologna. He became known by the nickname "Guercino," the squint-eyed, probably because of a childhood accident. He was apprenticed to Benedetto Gennari the elder, whose brother later married Guercino's sister and they had two sons who worked with Guercino. The artist left these nephews his entire estate as he did not marry and had no children.

Despite the apprenticeship with Gennari, most scholars agree that Guercino was practically self-trained as an artist. In 1612, at the age of twenty-one, the artist had his "big break" when his work came to the attention of a Bolognese cleric, Canonico Antonio Mirandola, who held an ecclesiastical position in Cento. Mirandola helped Guercino secure several important commissions that were noticed by Bolognese patrons. A colleague, Ludovico Carracci, described Guercino as a "great draughtsman and a most felicitous colorist: he is a prodigy of nature, a miracle...who astonished the leading painters."¹

Painting in the third-generation Bolognese style, Guercino preferred a pictorial and rather violently Baroque manner. He visited the artistic centers of Venice (1618), Ferrara (1619 and 1620), and Mantua (1620), but his late style is the result of a two-year stay in Rome (1621-1623).

Guercino painted the subject of the Prodigal Son at least seven times in

his career. His earliest version was created in 1617 and the Timken painting illustrated here is the last.² The patron of this painting is believed to be Girolamo Boncompagni, archbishop of Milan, who commissioned Guercino in 1654 to do a painting of the Lukan narrative with three figures. The archbishop presented the painting as a gift to Prince Colonna and its provenance in the Colonna Collection is well documented.³

The artist was able to return to a much loved and often painted subject with a fresh interpretation at different phases of his life. Each time he skillfully varied the composition. This version includes the contrite son, his forgiving father, and an observant servant. The figures' conventional gestures, which would be known to his audience through (among other things) sacred and secular theater productions, become the focus of meaning in this painting.

The hands of the father and son, for the first time in a Guercino Prodigal Son, are "entwined in a classic gesture of reconciliation and, as carriers of meaning, are positioned at the center of the composition. The hands allude to a subsequent and theologically significant verse from the Gospel of Luke in which the Father grants his forgiveness: 'for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and is found' (Luke 15:24)."⁴ The son wipes his tears as an act of contrition and thankfulness for the forgiveness shown to him by his father—a gesture of climax and catharsis.

The classicizing elements of the composition create a painting less of emotion and passion than of recognized rhetorical gesture of reconciliation. Comparing Guercino's painting with ancient rhetorical tradition was not unknown in the artist's day. In 1646, Commendatore Giovanni Battista Manzini (1599-1646) wrote a letter to a Benedictine monk about this characteristic of Guercino's work. Earlier, Gabriele Paleotti (1522-1597), in a famous treatise on painting after the Council of Trent, had compared the painter with the orator and claimed that the goal of the Christian painter (like that of the orator) was to be found in "persuading the populace and moving it to embrace something"; for the Christian painter, that "something" should be "pertinent to religion."⁵ Guercino learned the gestures of rhetoric through his work with the intellectual Barberini family in Rome and the religious theatre of the Jesuits. The *Return of the Prodigal Son* by Guercino was able to instruct its audience, an integral component of proper rhetoric and goal of Counter-Reformation propaganda.

We may be tempted to read Jesus' parables in light of our own changing contexts. Yet the Gospel of Luke and Guercino's painting remind us that God is the central figure in this parable and, indeed, in many of Jesus' parables. God, the loving Father, stands with open arms ready to receive both prodigals, the one who left for "a distant country" and the one who stayed behind. God invites all of us to the eschatological banquet, which is prepared both for prodigals returned home and elder siblings resentful of their return.

NOTES

1 Denis Mahon, ed., *Guercino: Master Painter of the Baroque* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1992), 156.

2 For further study of Guercino's paintings of the Prodigal Son, see Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons, *Illuminating Luke: The Public Ministry of Christ in Italian Renaissance and Baroque Painting* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2006), 134-164.

3 Mahon, 298. Using extant documents such as the artist's meticulous account book, especially for the years 1629-1666, a large number of correspondences between the artist and his patrons, and the work of his first biographer, Carlo Cesare Malvasia (1616-93), who knew him personally, scholars can trace many of Guercino's works back to their original commissions.

4 Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, "Ma c'hanno da fare i precetti dell'oratore con quelli della pittura?": Reflections on Guercino's Narrative Structure," in *Guercino: Master Painter of the Baroque*, 75-110.

5 *Ibid.*, 196.



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