The squinter triumphs

Andrew Lambirth

To be called ‘the squinter’, which is what ‘il Guercino’ means, might not seem an auspicious nickname for an artist, but it doesn’t appear to have stood in the way of Giovanni Francesco Barbieri (1591–1666), who became one of the most famous Italian artists of the 17th century. Not only was he a distinguished Baroque painter, he was also a very fine draughtsman, and it is this aspect of his achievement which is celebrated in a glorious new exhibition at the Courtauld. Guercino’s quarter-centenary was in 1991, and was appropriately commemorated, but there’s no need of an excuse for a show of this quality. It’s quite simply ravishing.

We are fortunate in the fact that so many of Guercino’s drawings survive and that his career is well documented. We have something like 40 per cent of his output, which may not sound much until you compare it with the meagre 1 per cent of Michelangelo’s drawings which exist today. Working drawings were not generally valued or preserved (Michelangelo, for instance, burnt a lot) but Guercino was unusually attached to his, and kept them by him. Although they are often not in particularly good condition — as a result of the corrosive action of the iron-gall ink on the paper — there are enough to make a thorough assessment of Guercino’s genius. However, he was not always so highly valued, and most of the drawings on view were acquired inexpensively by the collector and founder member of the National Art Collections Fund, Sir Robert Witt, who bequeathed them to the Courtauld in 1952. In more recent decades, the scholar and collector Sir Denis Mahon has been instrumental in bringing Guercino’s achievement to our attention and pressing for a proper evaluation of his career.

This small, focused display begins with a couple of portraits of the squinter himself, depicted in an engraving by Ottavio Leoni and in Cesare Gennari’s lush design for a frontispiece. A childhood accident rendered Guercino cross-eyed but it didn’t affect an aptitude for drawing, which emerged early on. By the age of nine he was apprenticed to a local painter in his home town of Cento, situated between Bologna and Ferrara, and later to Benedetto Gennari the Elder, with whose family he established strong links. (His sister married a Gennari, and it was her sons, Guercino’s nephews, who inherited his estate and looked after it. To them can be attributed the distinctive geometrically patterned mounts into which many of Guercino’s drawings were put.) The portraits preface an exhibition of 34 drawings, most of them done in brown ink with a masterly and versatile touch. Guercino’s springing pen-line is frequently extended by a judicious use of wash, which considerably enhances his range of mood and expression. You can even see the development of the artist’s thought through the constant change and refinement of forms — his intelligence at work through the process, taking up and discarding the different strategies open to him.

The first exhibit depicts a nude youth lying on his back, a marvel of sprawl done from a live model. Notice the different weights of line for depicting contour and musculature, the cunning contrast of thick ink-work in the hair (a Guercino speciality) and the almost dry brushing for the open left hand. ‘An Assembly of Learned Men’, a close-up study of a compositional drawing for ‘Christ Preaching in the Temple’, shows the ink eating into the paper in the burnt-out eyes of the central figure. A more lightly inked drawing is for ‘The Mourning of St Petronilla’; note the whipping, succinct, energetic line. (The excellent accompanying catalogue, £16.50 in paperback, is particularly good at providing comparative illustrations for these narrative subjects.) But the masterpiece among these early works must be the utterly beautiful black chalk ‘Study of a Seated Young Man’. Boldly placed on a large sheet of rough brown paper, this exquisite tonal drawing occupies the space of the page with absolute authority and conviction.

For this drawing alone, which comes from the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, the show is worth seeing.

But there are other delights. Next to it is an ink drawing of an imaginary landscape with a fortified port, probably made for Guercino's own amusement and pleasure. (The artist on his day off, for once not working to commission.) Then there are the subtly balanced applications of wash to the drawing of Dante, and an outline study of a nude man, almost caricatural in its searching linearity if it wasn't so gentle in spirit. Guercino is equally good at women. On the other side of the room is the memorable 'Two Nymphs and a Satyr' (c.1625). Once again, Guercino was probably doing this drawing for his own interest and enjoyment, and he's been a bit obvious and schematic with the satyr, which is not convincingly drawn. The focus is on the two girls, especially on the right-hand figure, who braces her foot against a rock. Here, in the depiction of her back, Guercino demonstrates a remarkable ability to make blank white paper speak, and convey to the eye of imagination the reality of her flesh.

Or look at the lovely 'Nude Woman, Seated, Embracing a Child'. It is both tender and sensuous, immensely charming and seductive, whether or not it is a study for Venus and Cupid as some authorities have claimed. Other subjects of note are the 'Interior of a Kitchen', in which an infant, unbeknown to the busy cook, precariously juggles a large platter under the sardonic encouraging eye of a pixie-hatted youth. This taste for the informal and humorous also pervades 'Interior of a Baker's Shop', all sizzling, economic line; notice the dishevelled stockings — a feature Guercino evidently liked: compare the hint of stocking in the drawing of the 'Nude Woman' mentioned above. An even more unusual subject is 'Two Seated Women Drying their Hair in Front of a Fire'. The pose looks rather uncomfortable (wouldn't it have been easier to kneel?), but the wet and drying hair has been expertly evoked with a few strokes of the brush. Compare the violent kinetic energy of 'Cupid Restraining Mars' (c.1640), the lines like sprung wires in an image that might be a forerunner of Futurism's attempt to capture movement. Guercino can be just as effective in a different way in red chalk, for instance in his famous study of a child seen from behind, standing between its mother's sketchily drawn knees. It's the versatility and virtuosity of his style, its fluidity and robustness, that continue to amaze.

If this magnificent exhibition weren't enough to glut the eye, the Courtauld has mounted a small but equally compelling display of Rembrandt's drawings a couple of rooms away. If you go through two galleries of modern work, noting the interesting Sutherland 'Study for The Origins of the Land' (1950) and the host of Kandinskys by way of rinsing the palate, as it were, you are confronted by 18 drawings by Rembrandt and his studio. There are some very lovely things here: look particularly at the ink landscape 'View of Diemen', the charcoal of an 'Old Woman with a Large Head-dress', and the speedy and exquisite notation of 'Seated Man Listening'. For contrast, there's 'Woman Scolding' and three marvellous red chalk studies of Rembrandt's first wife Saskia. It's a very good show in its own right, but coming after the Guercino fulfils its function by providing ample justification for calling the Italian 'the Rembrandt of the South'.

Click here to return to the article