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GIOVANNI FRANCESCO BARBIERI, CALLED GUERCINO  
(1591-1666)

*The Persian Sibyl*  
Oil on canvas, 119 x 97 cm

The *Persian Sibyl* is an original allegorical painting by the great Baroque Italian artist Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, called Guercino (1591-1666).

The prophetess, three-quarter length to the right, is writing on a sheet of paper with a quill, holding her cheek with her other hand while her elbow is leaning on a book inscribed 'SIBILLA PERSICA' placed on a plinth.

Our painting is a rediscovery, previously unpublished and known only to the legendary Guercino scholar Sir Denis Mahon, who wrote a letter to the previous owners stating that it is an autograph work and that it is the actual-sized sketch (or a "bozzettone", the Italian term used by Sir Denis) for the artist's final version of the same subject today preserved at the Pinacoteca Capitolina in Rome and commissioned in 1647 by Conte Carlo Rondinelli, Governor of Guercino's hometown, Cento. This letter, unfortunately, has been mislaid by the previous owner, but it is currently being searched through the Mahon archive at the National Gallery of Ireland.

Dr. Nicholas Turner, the author of the most recent monograph on Guercino, has studied the painting and drawn the same conclusion as Sir Denis Mahon: this is Guercino's full-size sketch for the *Persian Sibyl* in the Pinacoteca Capitolina in Rome.

The present canvas precedes the Roman one as evidenced by a number of factors, including the main features of the artist's pictorial choices. The astonishing quality and clarity of the Sibyl's gaze in this version, engaging the spectator with

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an uncanny stare in contrast with the muted look in the Capitoline picture is the most notable peculiarity.

A deliberate omission of some details in this trial version conforms to the artist's pictorial technique also known as a *risparmio* adopted to save both time and materials. The background here is thinly painted and the brown canvas preparation allows one to grasp Guercino's pentiments, suggesting a greater sense of intimacy with the artist's trial version than in the Capitoline work.

Other differences may be discerned in the contours of the Sybil's fingers which are holding the quill pen and painted with spontaneous handling, as well as for the woman's white sleeves and roseate turban showing the light brown preparation used as mid-tone in contrast with the Roman version where the turban is pale lilac, the sleeves and hands are smoother and brighter, hiding the artist's preparatory phase.

The woman's cleavage, here adorned with a fine lace trim, painted originally higher up, then lowered to the actual position, fascinatingly demonstrate Guercino's troubled graphic concept of the Sybil figure.

Two others detectable unfinished elements, the inscribed book and the unwritten sheet of paper, suggest the artist's freer brushwork compared to the final painting.

The differences in the colours of some details also are significant. For instance, the brooch on the right shoulder and the cloak which are both bright red here, in contrast with their veiled and vanished colours in the finished version, better recall Guercino's reminiscences of the luminous Venetian colouring technique.

Moreover, the plain dark blue border on the neckline of the Sibyl's bodice, obtained with azurite rather than the more expensive ultramarine used for the Capitoline's model, denote the artist's conscientiousness in limiting the cost of his materials.

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Possibly because of Guercino monocular vision (his nickname means “the little cross-eyed”), there were continuous adjustments and revisions also in the perspective, demonstrable here in the plinth angles as well as in the book position rendering, demonstrating a process of tireless self-correction, a typical trait of the artist’s practice.

This early version should be considered as a dress-rehearsal for the finished version, and thanks to its exceptionally fine condition for a picture of this period, the outstanding quality of Guercino’s touch can be appreciated across the entire surface and the greater freshness and spontaneity of this full-sized sketch may be considered prestigious as that of the Capitoline painting.