

A classical painting of a woman, likely Aurora, standing and holding a spear. She is wearing a white dress with a purple sash and a blue headband. To her right is a rooster. The background is dark and textured.

# GUERCINO'S AURORA REDISCOVERED

CHRISTOPHER BISHOP FINE ART

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Dedicated to GWB in friendship and admiration

I would like to thank all the people who believed in  
and helped this project along its long road to fruition

and in particular

Virginia Brilliant, Sarah Dove, John Lloyd, Rick Scorza,  
Karen Thomas, Nicholas Turner, and Allison Wucher

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Nicholas Turner has endorsed the authenticity of both the painting *Aurora* (fig. 1)  
and the drawing *Allegory of Vigilance* (fig. 2) upon first-hand inspection.  
He agrees with the identification of the *Aurora* with the painting in the *Libro dei Conti*  
listed under the year 1662 as *Aurora* and that the *Allegory of Vigilance* is preparatory to  
the *Aurora* rather than being a *ricordo* thereof. A report from Mr. Turner  
signed and dated August 26, 2019 about both works by Guercino is available  
upon request. I would like to thank Nicholas Turner  
for his help in the redaction of this catalog.



Fig. 1 Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, called il Guercino (1591–1666), *Aurora*, 1662, oil on canvas, 99.7 × 80 cm.



Fig. 2 Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, called il Guercino (1591–1666), *Allegory of Vigilance*, ca. 1662, red chalk on cream laid paper, 197 × 139 mm. Collector's mark of Giuseppe Vallardi lower left (Lugt 1223).

## Guercino's *Aurora* and *Allegory of Vigilance*

*Ales diei nuntius  
 Lucem propinquam praecinit;  
 nos excitator mentium  
 iam Christus ad vitam vocat.  
 Auferte, clamat, lectulos  
 Aegros, soporos, desides:  
 Castique recti ac sobrii  
 Vigilate, iam sum proximus.*

With his song the winged herald of dawn  
 announces the rising sun;  
 Just as now Christ, the awakener of souls,  
 calls us back to life.  
 Arise from your beds, he cries;  
 if sick or wrapped in slumber, stay where you are.  
 If chaste, just and sober stand tall and be vigilant:  
 my coming is at hand.

Prudentius, *Hymnus ad Galli Cantum*, 1–8

Guercino's *Aurora* (fig. 1) and the only known preparatory drawing for this composition an *Allegory of Vigilance* (fig. 2) are here presented together for the first time in what is probably close to three hundred years. The pairing represents a rare opportunity to study the full dynamics of Guercino's late working method. It is probable that the *Allegory of Vigilance* is a highly finished preparatory drawing for the *Aurora* rather than being a *ricordo* of the finished composition. With great verve Guercino explores in this red chalk drawing the folds of Aurora's sleeves and the spontaneity of the *disinvoltura* of her hair. In the background great emphasis is placed on the open gullet of the rooster, its gobbler and its waving, exposed tongue (fig. 3). These details are surely meant to evoke the song of the rooster at dawn whose sound almost seems to animate the curls of the goddess's hair even as it ruffles the feathers of his expanding chest. The drawing is alive with the thoughts and hand of the artist.

The figure of Aurora exudes a kind of strength and self-control which comes through in her steadily planted spear held firmly in her right hand. In contrast, with her other hand she gathers the folds of her dress and the silk of her knotted *cintura* with a light, gentle touch. Guercino has superimposed a second passage of deeper red chalk over the first to emphasize the rhythm of her *contrapposto* and the rhymed undulation of the movements of the rooster. To this tangible vivacity is added the subtlety of the evocative stumping to be found in the eyes, mouth and face of Aurora, which gives her an alluring sense of mystery.

In the painting (fig. 1) these ambiguities are resolved into a final visual solution. While the figure of Aurora has achieved a graceful solidity and the rooster a more static, iconic pose, the spontaneity of the drawing has nevertheless inspired the *nonfinito* of key passages such as the hair of Aurora which bleeds gently into the rich brown of the canvas ground and the beautiful variegated silk folds of her cap. The details of Aurora's accoutrements are brought out with unusual clarity. The glint of her spear with its detailed blood red tassel and the carefully articulated painted pink crimson crown and gobbler of the rooster provide the concrete detail that brings the scene to life. The folds of Aurora's yellow silk dress catch the light of the rising sun. The tension in the thinly painted musculature of the hands and in the subtly rendered face are typical of the minimalism of Guercino's last style. With a marvelous economy of means Guercino has even managed to suggest the rising sun through the contrast of two distinct sky blues: a purplish indigo



Fig. 3 Guercino, *Aurora* (detail).

underneath the rich azure blue of the more sparsely used lapis lazuli in the upper right-hand corner of the canvas.

## A Personal *Impresa* for Raffaello Gabrielli

*quin etiam gallum, noctem explaudentibus alis  
auroram clara consuetus voce vocare,  
noenu queunt rabidi contra constare leones inque tueri.*

Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, 4710–11

Why, even the cock, clapping out the night with his wings,  
who is accustomed to summon the dawn with clear voice,  
is one before whom ravening lions dare not stand fast or stare.

This newly rediscovered late painting of Guercino's was commissioned by Raffaello Gabrielli, a *Capitano* of the *Fortezza Urbana di Bologna*. It appears in Guercino's account book in the year 1662 under the title *Aurora* (fig. 4). The *Libro dei Conti* states that the work was commissioned by the Conte Raffaello Gabrielli and paid for by Senatore Lucrezio Ghisilieri for reasons which are unclear. The price (Scudi 37 Lire 2) indicates that the painting was, like ours, a half-length figural composition. This format and price correspond to those of several other paintings by Guercino owned by Raffaello Gabrielli.

Our painting came through to us as "Aurora Goddess of Morning" according to the modern name plate (fig. 5) on its eighteenth-century French frame. This title is perhaps a vague recollection of the original title of the work which has come down to us through the centuries. Establishing the reason for the description of this painting in the *Libro dei Conti* as an *Aurora* rather than as an *Allegory of Vigilance* is the primary aim of this exposition. The fact that the *Aurora* is equally an allegory of vigilance and that the two concepts, Vigilance and Aurora, are intimately linked will be explored throughout this essay. In the end the two titles ought to be considered largely interchangeable and the drawing *Allegory of Vigilance* (fig. 2) might therefore just as easily be called an *Aurora* and the *Aurora* (fig. 1) is equally an *Allegory of Vigilance*.

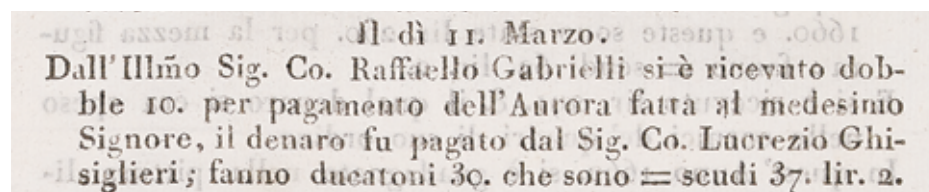


Fig. 4 Entry for the *Aurora* in the *Libro dei Conti* under the year 1662 (Bologna: Jacopo Alessandro Calvi, 1808).



Fig. 5 Original nameplate on the eighteenth-century French frame of the *Aurora*.



Fig. 6 Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, called il Guercino (1591–1666), *Notte*, 1663, oil on canvas, 72 × 65.5 cm, Location Unknown (Christie's, Rome, 15 June 2005, lot 699).



Fig. 7 Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, called il Guercino (1591–1666), *Diana*, 1658, oil on canvas, 73.4 × 66.4 cm, Gabriele Pantucci Collection, London.

Gabrielli owned at least another three Guercino paintings, including a *Notte* (fig. 6) and a pendant pair of *Apollo* (lost) and *Diana* (possibly fig. 7). Although of dissimilar dimensions and of differing features, the *Aurora* and the *Notte* are closely related in symbolism and would seem to have been designed by Guercino at the very end of his career to complement each other. Just as the *Apollo* and *Diana* are paired in terms of the symbolism—day/night and sun/moon—the *Aurora* would appear to be paired in spirit with the *Notte* along the lines morning/night, wakefulness/sleep and awareness/forgetfulness. It is possible that the *Notte* has been cut down (fig. 8), which might help to explain its possible original pairing with the *Aurora*. Regardless, a certain consistency of interests can be detected in the small collection of Guercino's paintings which must have ornamented Gabrielli's residence with its distinct predilection for pendants, and the pose of *Aurora* would likely have rhymed on these walls with that of Guercino's half-figure length Pantucci *Diana* (fig. 7).

Little is known of the life of Raffaello Gabrielli (documented in Ferrara in 1663 and in Bologna in 1670) beyond the basic progression of his military career, which is evident from his correspondence. As a soldier the theme of vigilance or wakefulness would certainly have had deep resonance with his duty to keep the city of Bologna safe from its ambitious neighbors. The rooster was considered sacred to Mars because of its naturally pugnacious nature. *Aurora* stands guard in front of a column or city fortification, blocking our path with graceful authority. The figure of *Aurora* clearly has some connections to *Bellona* (fig. 9), a female incarnation of martial instincts and ought to be viewed as

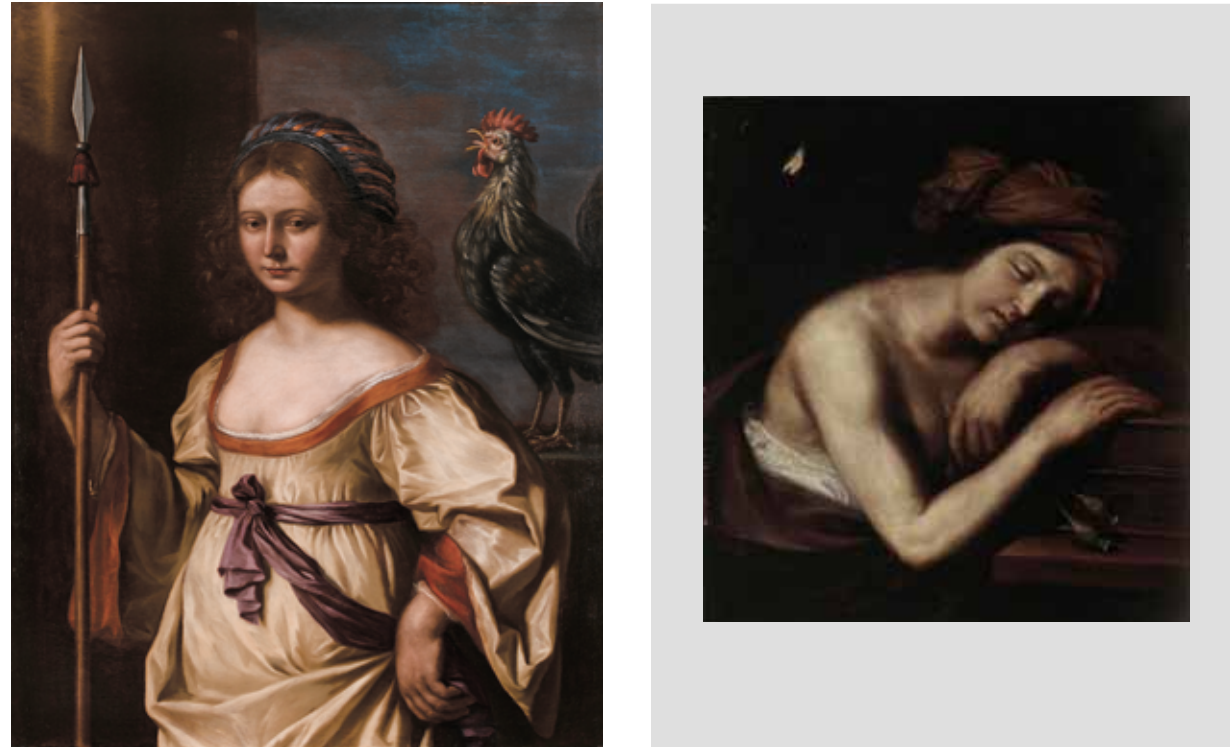


Fig. 8 Comparison of the relative dimensions of the *Aurora* (1662) and the *Notte* (1663).

on some level an allegory of Bologna (*Bononia*) itself. Comparable allegorical figures may in fact be found in the influential *Symbolicarum quaestionum de universo genere* (Bologna, 1585) of Achille Bocchi (fig. 10), where the figure of Bologna stands guard over the liberty of the people. Her vigilance is a guarantor of the freedom of the people of Bologna.

This work must have been a kind of personal emblem or *impresa* designed for Raffaello Gabrielli whose martial resolve it was clearly intended to incarnate. Raffaello Gabrielli was in fact part of a grand military tradition in Bologna which was intimately tied to the Ghisilieri family whose scion Lucrezio made payment for the *Aurora*. In a fifteenth century fresco now in the Palazzo Communale in Pistoia commemorating Grandonio de'Ghislieri (12th Century) (fig. 11) we find not only the imposing figure of the *condottiere* but a Greek-style temple topped with an owl (sacred to Minerva) inscribed "*Virtus Vigilantia Superatur*" (Virtue is Conquered by Vigilance).

Gabrielli was perhaps posted at the time of the commission to the Torre di Galliera as a Captain of the *Fortezza di Bologna*. One *Capitano* was always posted there ("*Alla Torre di Galliera un Capitano, sette custodi, due balestre grosse, e sette da staffa con le sue lance,*" Cherubino Ghirardacci, *Storia di Bologna* (1669) Lib. XIX, 33 "At the Torre di Galliera a captain with seven guardsmen, two large crossbows, and seven horsemen with lances"). Guercino in any case must have been well aware of the location of the Torre di Galliera (fig. 12) as it lies just on the other side of his native city of Cento. The via Galliera leads directly through the Porta Galleria towards Cento and Galliera (fig. 13) beyond. Perhaps the completion of the Porta Galleria in Bologna in 1661 under the patronage of Pope Alexander VII,



Fig. 9 Giovanni Mamolo (d. 1662), *Bellona*, ca. 1645, white marble with gilding, 270 cm, Landeszeughaus, Graz.



Fig. 10 *Quadrato Numero Patrum Beanda Est LIBERTAS POPULI BONONIENSIS* from Achille Bocchi *Symbolicarum quaestionum de universo genere quas serio ludebat libri quinque* (Bologna: Società Tipografica, 1574).



Fig. 11 Florentine, *Grandonio de' Ghislieri*, 1400s, fresco, Palazzo del Comune, Pistoia.



Detail of A *Temple of Vigilance Surmounted by an Owl*.



Fig. 12 Torre di Galliera, ca. 1194, Galliera.



Fig. 13 Coat of Arms of the Borgo of Galliera, from *Stemmi delle città d'Italia* (Milan: Achille Brioschi & Co., ca. 1930s).

a member of the Chigi family (with whom the *Notte* later resided), is not totally irrelevant either in this connection.

The payment for the painting by Lucrezio Ghisilieri (documented 1651) moreover leaves open the tantalizing possibility that this *impresa* was designed for Raffaello Gabrielli by Ettore Ghisilieri (ca. 1605–1676), a prominent Guercino collector, founder of the *Accademia degli Ottenebrati* and uncle of Lucrezio. It shows all the signs of the deep thinking of this seventeenth century

Bolognese humanist and cleric who preached at Santa Maria di Galliera, with its natural associations with the rooster (*Gallo*).

It is not hard to imagine that Lucrezio Ghisilieri, Raffaello Gabrielli and Guercino himself had discussions in the house of Ettore Ghisilieri which led to the creation of the *Aurora* and *Notte*. It was said by Malvasia that one was just as likely to find Guercino in the Palazzo Ghisilieri as in his own studio (*Felsina Pittrice* (1678), 376). The *Ottenebrati* (those who dwell in the shadows (*tenebre*) must have been especially conscious of the subtleties of the symbolism of darkness and light. At the nearby San Martino, moreover, the confraternity of Santa Maria dell'Aurora met on a regular basis to celebrate feast days and special masses. These associations taken together are highly suggestive of the ultimate meaning of the *Aurora* as a personal emblem heralding the triumph of a militant Christian church.

### Guercino's *Gallicantu*

Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes  
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,  
This bird of dawning singeth all night long,  
And then they say no spirit dare stir abroad,  
The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,  
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,  
So hallowed, and so gracious, is that time.

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.1

On its surface Guercino's *Aurora* would seem to be straightforward allegory of Vigilance of the same type as Denys Calvaert's painting of 1568 (fig. 14), now in the Pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna. In Calvaert's painting, as in Guercino's, Vigilance has her spear firmly planted in the ground next to



Fig. 14 Denys Calvaert (ca. 1540–1619), *Allegory of Vigilance*, 1568, oil on canvas, 235 × 169 cm, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna.



Fig. 15 *Vigilantia & Custodia, Emblema XV* from Andrea Alciati, *Emblemata* (Padua: Petro Paulo Tozzi, 1621).

her. She strides forward on the ball of her foot, with her head thrown back towards the horizon under a heavily plumed helmet. Beside her, a rooster, its wings extended, crows a greeting to the rising sun. There is a clear emphasis on the diaphanous nature of the goddess's garb, which she gathers in her other hand. The transparency of her robe becomes in this way a visual metaphor for the thin veil of dawn visible on the horizon behind her.

As in the case of Guercino's painting there are very close iconographic links between Calvaert's *Vigilance* and the figure of *Aurora*. The prime point of coincidence between these two allegorical figures is certainly the rooster, broadly a symbol of morning, but the connections are much more profound than this. The reason for this would seem to be that *Vigilance* is here not only an incarnation of a theological virtue, but a physical manifestation of the immediate pre-dawn moment which coincides with a moment of silence, prayer and hope. This moment is *Lauds*, when the hymn of Zechariah was traditionally sung wherein Christ is celebrated as the "sun of righteousness" (*Malachi* 4.2), who, like the dawn, "from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death" (*ex alto, illuminare his, qui in tenebris et in umbra mortis sedent, Luke* 1.68–80). It is for this reason that roosters were placed on the steeples and *campanile* of churches, according to Alciati (fig. 15), in order to call the mind of the faithful toward heaven at the beginning of the day.

The relevant elision between *Vigilance* and *Aurora* may originate in part with the program for the frescoes of Taddeo Zuccaro (1529–1566) in the Palazzo Farnese at Caprarola devised by Annibal





Fig. 16 Taddeo Zuccaro (1529–1566), *Camera dell’Aurora*, 1562–63, fresco, Palazzo Farnese, Caprarola.

Detail, *Vigilance*.



Caro (1562). Taddeo Zuccaro’s *Vigilance* (1562–3) quite literally introduces Aurora into this room (fig. 16). A *Vigilance* very much in line with Calvaert’s painting is described by Caro:

*Questa donna sarà la Vigilanza. E vuol esser così fatta, che paja illuminata dietro alle spalle dal Sol che nasce, e che ella, per prevenirlo, si cacci dentro nella camera per lo finestrone ch s’è detto. La sua forma, sia d’una donna alta, spedita, valorosa; con gli occhi ben’ aperti; con le ciglia ben inarcate; vestita di velo trasparente fino a’ piedi; succinto nel mezzo della persona; con un mano s’ appoggi ad un’ asta, e con l’altra raccolga una falda di gonna. Stia fermata su’ l’ piè destra; e, tenendo il sinistro indietro sospeso, mostri da un canto, di posare saldamente e dall’ altro d’ aver pronti i passi. Alzi il capo a mirar l’ Aurora e paja sdegnata ch’ ella si sia levata prima di lei. Porti in testa una celata con un gallo suvvi; il quale mostri di batter l’ ali, e di cantare.*

Annibal Caro, *Lettere Familiari* (1574), 301

This woman will represent Vigilance, and should be depicted as follows. She should be shown illuminated from behind her shoulders by the rising sun. In order to outrun the sun she hurries into the room by the aforementioned window. Her guise should be that of a tall, swift, valorous woman with wide open eyes and with arched eyebrows; she should be draped in a transparent veil down to her feet, belted at the waist. With one hand she should lean on a spear, while with the other she gathers the folds of her dress. She stands planted on her right foot, her left foot suspended behind her to demonstrate her alacrity. She raises her head to catch sight of Aurora and appears disgruntled that she has risen before her. She wears a helmet on her head with a rooster perched on its crest, beating its wings and singing.

At the theological level the implications of these iconographic relationships are clearly evident. The rooster is the one who will greet Christ upon his return. According to Paul, the faithful must be ever vigilant for the Second Coming of Christ who will “come like a thief in the night” (*Thessalonians* 1.5.2). *Thessalonians* consistently uses the imagery of darkness and light to recall Christians to a knowledge of God (“You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness” *Thessalonians* 1.5.5). The goal of the Christian is the eternal light of salvation. Paul also uses a good deal of martial vocabulary when speaking of the duties of the Christian (“putting on the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet that is the hope of salvation” *Thessalonians* 1.5.8).

Importantly, this nexus provides us with an understanding of the synergy of the figures of Vigilance and Aurora. Christian vigilance leads to the new dawn Aurora, who is the light of salvation (“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” *John* 8.12). It might even be said that in this work as in Guercino’s *Aurora Vigilance* is at the point of being transformed into a resplendent, emergent Aurora.

This mutual permeability of their respective iconographies should not surprise us given the fact that both figures emerge from the same symbolic world of Paul’s theology. It is this crossover between the martial and theological virtues that must have been of particular interest to the patron, allowing him to claim for himself a spiritual element to his worldly occupation. The guardsmen of Bologna (*vigilanza*), it is implied, show the proper virtues of both the soldier and the Christian. This commonality is embodied in the link between the concepts of the soldier’s vigil and the Christian vigil. The Latin word *vigilarum* connotes discipline but also attention/wakefulness. Vigilance is a theological virtue that aids the Christian to guard against sin and slothfulness (“Awake, ye righteous, and sin not.” *Corinthians* 1.15.34). The flesh must be mortified with consistency (vigilance) in order to achieve Christian self-mastery.

The alert Christian and the vigilant soldier are one and the same. In past times soldiers attended special masses which celebrated their role in exercising Christian soldierly virtues. The spirit of these interconnections can be detected, for example, in the *Scolte Modenesi*, the medieval songs of the military guard of Modena:

*Tu cinge nostra haec, Christe, munimina,  
Defendens ea tua forti lancea.*

Oh Christ, encompass these, our fortifications,  
Defending them with your mighty spear.

*Scolte Modenesi*, ca. 980

In the heart of Aurora lives the martial spirit that prepares the way for the coming dawn. The rooster is the one who crowed at the time of Saint Peter’s denial of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane (*John* 18.27, *Mark* 14.68, *Luke* 22.54–62, *Matthew* 26.34). As Christ is the *aeterno sole* (immortal sun), Aurora’s presence heralds the Messiah’s return. Against her the powers of night and ignorance are helpless. She is the dawn of the new age (“...the night is far spent, but the day is at hand.” *Romans* 13.12–14).

### *Aurora Surgens*

*ora rubor rursusque evanuit,  
ut solet aer Purpureus fieri cum primum Aurora movetur,  
Et breve post tempus candescere solis ab ortu.*

for a sudden flush marked her unwilling cheeks and again faded:  
as when the sky grows crimson  
when the dawn first appears.

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 6.47–9

This construal of Vigilance/Aurora as physically embodied in female form is consistent with the precedents to be found in ancient poetry and the Homeric models (*Iliad*, 19.1 and 24.776) in particular. The electrified strands of Aurora’s hair in Guercino’s painting are in fact extremely close to Homer’s epithet of Aurora as “radiant-hair’d” (ἐνπλόκαμος; *Odyssey*, 5.390). The individualized strands of her

hair are essentially in this way a metaphor for the rays of the sun. She quite literally lights up the world with her presence.

Within this context, the very specific color scheme of Guercino's *Aurora* must be taken into account. Guercino's color choices take their cue from Annibal Caro's description of Aurora as being dressed in a robe which reflects the colors cast by the sun during the various hours of the day:

*Quanto all'abito, componendone pur di molti uno che paia più al proposito si ha da considerare, che ella, come ha tre stati e tre colori distinti, così ha tre nomi, Alba, Vermiglia e Rancia; per questo gli farei una vesta fino alla cintura, candida, sottile, e come trasparente, dalla cintura infino alle ginocchia una sopravveste di scarlatto, con certi trinci e gruppi, che imitassero quei suoi riverberi nelle nuvole, quando è vermiglia, dalle ginocchia in giù fino a piedi, di color d'oro, per rappresentarla quando è rancia, avvertendo, che questa veste deve esser fessa, cominciando dalle coscie, per fargli mostrare le gambe ignude, e così la veste, come la sopra veste siano scosse dal vento, e facciano pieghe, e svolazzi.*

Annibal Caro, *Lettere Familiari* (1574), 299–300

As for the dress, which is made up of many pieces appropriate to her identity, it is important to bear in mind that she has three states, three distinct colors, and likewise three names: *Alba* (White), *Vermiglia* (Red), and *Rancia* (Orange). For this reason I would have her wear a blouse down to her belt of brilliant white, diaphanous and almost transparent. From the waist down to the knees a red skirt, with individual pleats and gatherings that imitate the reflections of the sun in the clouds when it is red. From the knees down to the feet it should be the color of gold, so that the dress represents the sun when it is orange. I should emphasize that the dress should be split from the thighs downwards so as to show her bare legs. Also that the dress, like the blouse, should be blowing in the wind, its pleats ruffled and fluttering.

Similarly, Guercino chooses a golden yellow (*oro*) to represent the brightness of day, an orange (*arancia*) fringe for the dress the light of dawn and a purple (*porpora*) silk belt to embody the ribbon of predawn light. Importantly for our considerations, there was a long-standing basic disagreement regarding the translation of the Latin word *purpurea* which was sometimes translated as deep red (*scarlatto*) and sometimes as purple (*porpora*).

The silk hat of Aurora equally suggests the conversion from the purple aspect of the earliest morning into the oranges and yellows of the rising sun. These elements are seamlessly woven together by the artist into its representation (fig. 17). While the body of the silk cap is blueish



Fig. 17 Guercino, *Aurora* (detail).

purple, the stitched bandings are made of orange silk and the whole is highlighted with yellow studs and ribboning. The manner in which these silk elements catch the light thus becomes a synecdoche for the various stages of early morning. Aurora follows upon Vigilance as the sun turns from ruby red to resplendent yellow (*iamque rubescebat radiis mare et*

*aethere ab alto Aurora in roseis fulgebat lutea bigis* “And now the sea was reddening with the rays of dawn, and from high heaven saffron-hued Aurora shown in roseate car” Virgil, *Aeneid* 7.25–6).

The overall effect might be compared to the beautiful description of a summer dawn by Dante in *Purgatorio*:

<i>Si che le bianche e le vermiglie guance,</i>	so that, where I was,
<i>Là dove io era, della bella Aurora</i>	the white and rosy cheeks of fair Aurora
<i>Per troppa estate divenivan rance</i>	were turning golden with time's ripening
Dante, <i>Purgatorio</i> 2.7–9	Translation Robert & Jean Hollander, 2004

The rising sun is incarnated in the blushing cheeks and mysterious smile of Guercino's *Aurora*. The day is quite literally blushing into existence. Her notable *décoletage* may equally be considered a metaphor for the manner in which the day reveals itself. While these well-established tropes clearly rely on ancient *ekphrasis*, Guercino has nevertheless given these precedents an ingenious twist, creating a Christian Aurora whose vigilance is a model for the soldier-citizens of Bologna.

## Divine Providence at Work: The Crane and the Rooster

Who gives the ibis wisdom or gives the rooster understanding?

*Job* 36.36

The backdrop against which Aurora is set by Guercino suggests a rampart on a city wall, some element of a fortification or perhaps a column in front of which Aurora stands guard with characteristic fierceness. Whichever it is, the analogy between her person and this structural element remains clear. Each provides solid protection from outside interventions. The rooster crows on a plinth-like ledge to the left of Aurora. This element feels far from coincidental. It recalls instead images of roosters on columns such as that in the courtyard of Santo Stefano in Bologna (fig. 18). Called by the Bolognese the *Gallo di San Pietro* this fourteenth-century sculpture might easily have captured Guercino's imagination.

The exact origins of this iconography are difficult to determine, but the combination of the rooster and the column seems to be quite ancient. The image appears, for example, in the *Hours of the Maréchal de Boucicaut* in connection with symbols of the crucifixion (fig. 19) where it clearly recalls the denial of Saint Peter. Even more remotely, the rooster on a column appears on the Attic Greek vases that were awarded to victors of the Athenian games, which depict the goddess Athena with a spear and shield



Fig. 18 *Gallo di San Pietro*, ca. 1300s, Cortile di Pilato, San Stefano, Bologna.



Fig. 19 *Arma Christi* from the *Hours of the Maréchal Boucicaut*, ca. 1405–8, oil, tempera, and gold on vellum, 27.5 x 19 cm, Musée Jacquemart-Andre, Paris, MS 1311, fol. 242.



Fig. 20 Greek, Attic, Euphiletos Painter (attributed to), *Panathenaic Prize Amphora* (detail), ca. 530 B.C., terracotta and black figure, 62.2 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

(fig. 20). Her roosters seem to be votive figures assimilated to the aggressive and warlike character of Athena. The rooster, like the column itself, is a symbol of strength and fortitude. The symbol of the rooster is amplified by the presence of the column through a kind of symbolic redundancy whereby the rooster stands for the strength of the column in *pars pro toto*. These visual precedents help explain how Guercino's *Aurora* is not simply an image of wakefulness or watchfulness, but of strength and ferocity too (fig. 21). *Aurora* is an embodiment of the fortifications of the city of Bologna behind her, just as Athena was once the castle goddess of Athens.

While the mode of transmission to posterity of this image is unknown, it would be hard to deny that this fierce goddess and her roosters also somehow underlie the imagery of Guercino's *Aurora*. There must be some connection between the figures of Athena, Bellona and Vigilance. This genealogy should in principle be traceable following the example of Warburg. It ought to be considered that the rooster might function here in the role of a mediator between the physical and spiritual



Fig. 21 Crispijn van de Passe (1565–1637), *Allegory of Fortitude*, ca. 1600, engraving, 96 mm (diameter). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. (Hollstein 442)



Fig. 22 Jacopo Tintoretto (1518–1594), *Allegory of Vigilance*, 1598, oil on canvas, 108 x 101.6 cm, Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, Alabama.



Fig. 23 Massimiliano Soldani Benzi (1656–1740), *Allegory of Vigilance and Loyalty*, 1680, bronze, 5.8 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington.

worlds and that it is this role that provides the true connection between the pagan precedents and the descendent Christian images. The rooster is a natural herald of the morning and signal of Christ's return but also a psychopomp in Greek religion. The voice of the rooster calling the sun back travels up into the sky in a way that evokes the piercing of the veil between this world and the next.

In many Renaissance and Baroque images Vigilance is represented as a female figure pictured with either a rooster or a crane. The rooster's crow symbolizes the watchful wait for the coming sun. In Tintoretto's *Allegory of Vigilance* (fig. 22), for example, the rooster and the figure of Vigilance, her arms outstretched, both greet the rising sun. Here once more the line between Vigilance and *Aurora* remains ambiguous. The crane, on the other hand, represents disciplined vigilance and forethought due to Pliny the Elder's report that it sleeps with a stone in the claw of its foot in order to guard against being surprised (*Natural History* 10.23). On the reverse of a medal by Massimiliano Soldani Benzi (1680) (fig. 23) we find such a figure of Vigilance holding a lamp with a crane by her side as prescribed by Cesare Ripa.

That these two traditions were hardly incompatible can be seen by their mutual presence in an illustration to a French edition of Ripa's *Iconologia* (1644) (fig. 24). The inclusion of a book and a lamp in this allegory suggests that the female allegorical figure refers to the vigilance required for study as well as to prophetic figures such as Michelangelo's *Erythrean Sibyl* (1508–1512) in the *Sistine Ceiling* (fig. 25). This Sibyl, crucially, was credited with predicting the advent of Christ. Guercino's silk-capped *Sibyls* are in fact very familiar to us, including the prominent pair now in the National Gallery London (fig. 26). Vigilance in this incarnation may be seen as a keeper of the lamp (Vestal



Fig. 24 *Allegory of Vigilance* from *Iconologie, ou Explication nouvelle de plusieurs images ... Tirée des recherches et des figures de César Ripa* (Paris: J. Baudoin, 1644).

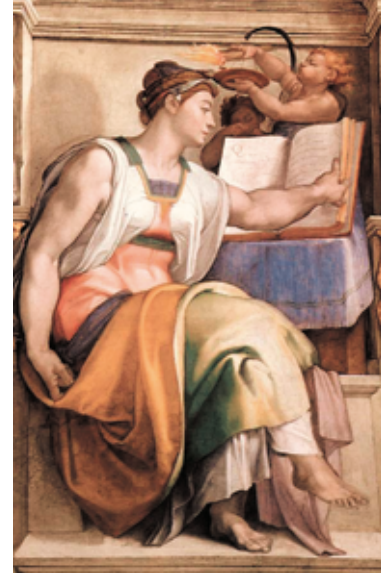


Fig. 25 Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564), *Erythrean Sibyl*, 1508–12, fresco, Sistine Chapel, Vatican.



Fig. 26 Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, called il Guercino (1591–1666), *Cumaean Sibyl with a Putto* (detail), 1651, oil on canvas, 222 × 168.5 cm, National Gallery, London.

Virgin) or the lamp may be understood to light the way to divine Christian revelation (“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.” *Matthew* 5.14).

The thread that runs through this symbolism may be understood in terms of the use of morning as a general stand-in for salvation, just as the night represents perdition. Another way of putting these connections might be to say that the animals present in the illustration of the French edition of Ripa’s *Iconologia* (fig. 24) mitigate against the domination of ignorance and faithlessness. Behind this imagery lies the hope of liberation from the confines of the physical world. In the Egyptian religions the ibis represented both the soul and morning. This aspect of the iconographic duality involved in the figure of Vigilance may in part be understood by way of reference to a passage from *Job*: “Who gives the ibis wisdom or gives the rooster understanding?” (*Job* 36.36). The crux of this connection is in the divine principle which underlies the natural order. The behavior of both animals, as clearly noted by Pliny, is evidence of providence and the divine orchestration of the world. These associations, taken together, point to a larger theme of transcending the corporeal and allowing for the entry of the spiritual into this world.

### God is in the Details: Ulisse Aldrovandi’s Naturalism

Guercino’s *Aurora* displays an unusual level of interest in the concrete details of the paraphernalia of her guard. This is true not only of her spear (fig. 27), which clearly seems to have been modeled on



Fig. 27 Guercino, *Aurora* (detail).



Fig. 28 Guercino, *Aurora* (detail).

a real-life example held in the studio of the Barbieri, but in the extremely close observation of the feathers, beak, tongue, eyes, crown and gobbler of the rooster (fig. 28).

The accuracy of the depiction of the rooster in the *Aurora* seems to have had particular importance for Guercino. Far from being a neutral feature of the painting, these naturalistic details reflect a certain scientific view of the world directly influenced by the Bolognese naturalist Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522–1605). These granular aspects recall the still lives of Guercino’s early career and perhaps also the work of his brother Paolo Antonio Barbieri (1603–1649). It cannot be coincidental in this regard that some of the best work of this type executed by Guercino was done for the Aldrovandi themselves, such as the magnificent *Aldrovandi Dog* now in the Norton Simon (fig. 29).

Aldrovandi published an influential ornithological work, the *Ornithologiae hoc est de avibus historiae* (Bologna, 1599), in which the detailed aspects of the different species of chicken are meticulously cataloged and illustrated (fig. 30). The unspoken goal of Guercino must have been to understand with precision which type of bird



Fig. 29 Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, called il Guercino (1591–1666), *Aldrovandi Dog*, ca. 1625, oil on canvas, 111.8 × 173.4 cm, Norton Simon Foundation, Pasadena, California.

will greet Christ upon his return. This detail carries a larger theological significance. By ascertaining the accurate physical description of this bird access to spiritual understanding is achieved. With its prominent red crown Guercino's chicken is the perfect symbol of the incarnation (fig. 31). Prudentius in fact considered the rooster a *figura* of Christ.

That this way of understanding the world was integral to Aldrovandi's philosophy and that the rooster was far from an incidental player in this phenomenon can be ascertained from Aldrovandi's own personal *impresa* which shows a rooster with a diamond ring in its beak holding a laurel branch (fig. 32). The motto that accompanies this *impresa* is taken from Virgil's *Eclogues*: *sensibus haec imis res est non parva reponit* ("give this matter your best attention; it is of no small importance" Virgil, *Eclogues*, 3.54). Aldrovandi's *impresa* references Aesop's legend of the rooster and the jewel in the dungpile (fig. 33) as a way of highlighting the manner in which the naturalist can understand the nature of god's creation through the smallest detail. The choice of motto underlines the way in which minute particulars are a gateway to understanding God's revelation.

Moreover, in his *Ornithologiae* Aldrovandi explains, referring to two *Imprese* (fig. 34), how the rooster with a laurel branch in its mouth is a symbol of vigilance directed toward eternal glory.

*Habet id Emblemata Io. Baptista Pittonus, Aesopicus Gallus, qui gemmam inventam spernit, et viliores cibum quaerit, cum verbis, PAR IGNORANCE, significat hominem, qui inscius virtutis dulcissimos fructus spernit, vitis sese immergens, et nutriens. Huius emblematis idem (scil. Io. Baptista Pittonus, in insigni Frid. Sigis. Fuccari) author est. Eadem denique ales cum lauro ramo in rostro, et cum verbo VIGILANDO, hominem denotat, qui in vigiliis: non autem in somno, et otio vitam degat, ut bene operando aeternam adipiscatur gloriam.*

Ulisse Aldrovandi, *Ornithologiae hoc est de avibus historiae*, Bologna (1634), 271

Giovanni Battista Pittoni published this emblem of Aesop's Rooster who spurns a gem he has found, and seeks instead a more paltry meal. With the words PAR IGNORANCE, it signifies that the man who in his ignorance spurns virtue's sweetest fruits plunges himself into vices and gorges on them instead. The aforementioned author invented this emblem (namely Giovanni Battista Pittoni, for the eminent Friedrich Sigmund Fugger). Finally, the same bird with a laurel branch in its beak, accompanied by the motto VIGILANDO, denotes the man who spends his life alert and aware, not wasting it in sleep or leisure. Thus, by performing good works, he attains eternal glory.

This contrast between the vigilant and the ignorant man lies at the heart of the symbolism of Guercino's *Aurora* and, as we shall see, of his *Notte* (fig. 6) as well. Ignorance consists in being unaware of the importance of God's grace. Vigilance by contrast consists of being conscious that even the smallest piece of creation evidences divine providence.

The emblem of the *Accademia degli Ottenebrati* was a sun rising over the ocean with the motto *mille trahit* taken from Virgil's description of the thousand colors reflected in the scales of a snake in



Fig. 30 *De Gallinis Patavinis*, from Ulisse Aldrovandi, *Ornithologiae hoc est de avibus historiae* (Bologna, 1637), 310.



Fig. 31 Israhel van Meckenem (ca. 1440–1503), *Salvator Mundi*, ca. 1490–1500, engraving, 20.4 × 14.3 cm, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio.



Fig. 33 Aegidius Sadeler II (1570–1629) after Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger (ca. 1561/2–1636), *Fable of the Cock and the Jewel*, 1608, etching, 9.6 × 11.2 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Fig. 32 Medal with the Portrait and *Impresa* of Ulisse Aldrovandi, detail from the frontispiece to Giovanni Fantuzzi, *Memorie della Vita di Ulisse Aldrovandi* (Bologna, 1774).



Fig. 34 *Impresa* of Friedrich Sigmund Fugger (1542–1600), *PAR IGNORANCE*, 1583, engraving, designed by Federico Zuccaro (ca. 1540/1–1609) and published by Giovanni Battista Pittoni the Elder (1520–1583).

the fifth book of the *Aeneid* (*ceu nubibus arcus Mille trahit varios adverso sole colores* “... as the rainbow in the clouds draws a thousand various colors from the opposite sun” Virgil, *Aeneid* 5.88–9). The manner in which Aeneas marvels at God’s creation must have inspired the *Ottenebrati*. The naturalism of Guercino’s *Aurora* therefore cannot be dismissed as a quest for mere pedantic accuracy. Instead the detail of this painting must be understood to reflect the glories of creation in a way that reflects God’s divine plan. We must be ever vigilant in observing these minutiae of creation in order to understand the meaning of God’s order and to reveal the glorious light of the eternal world.

The spirit of Guercino’s naturalistic observations may have another related and immediate source. In 1659 the Augustinian Giorgio Gregorio di Giesu Maria gave a series of sermons in San Petronio in Bologna published as *Divinita ed innocenza di Giesu Christo manifestata nella sua passione* (Rome, 1659) which included an extended analysis of the symbolism of the rooster. In the seventeenth lecture special emphasis is placed on the power of the rooster’s song to marry martial and spiritual victory. Following Aldrovandi, Gregorio distinguishes between two types of song of the rooster: *Curcursire* and *Cochizare*. The first has the power to predict victory, the second to convert.

*Udite il Venerabile Padre in questo luogo di S. Luca: Gallus avis, quae victa non canit, sic victoriam praesagiit Boetii adversus Lacedemonios; E si potrebbe aggiungere il testo vulgate di Giob, ove del Gallo dice lo Spirito Santo: Dedit Gallo intelligentiam. Dio è, ch’al Gallo dona un’ intelligenza di futura vittoria; però vien’egli mosso a cantar chochizando, come fece in questo caso di Pietro. Dunque lui fu, che mosse il cuor ostinato al negar di Giesù, & alla conversione, e penitenza.*

Giorgio Gregorio di Giesu Maria, *Divinita ed innocenza di Giesu Christo manifestata nella sua passione* (Rome, 1659), 106

Listen to the venerable Church Father on this passage of *Luke*: “The rooster is a bird that does not sing when defeated and thus – [when they sang] – predicted the victory of the Boethians over the Lacedemonians.” And one could add the text of the vulgate of *Job* where the Holy Spirit says of the rooster: “God gave the rooster intelligence.” It is God who gives the rooster knowledge of future victory; other times, however, the rooster is moved to sing *chochizando*, as in the case of Saint Peter. It was he that moved the obstinate heart which denied Jesus to conversion and penitence.

Guercino, the Ghislieris and Gabrielli may well have been in attendance at this series of sermons just three years before the completion of the commission and their special attention to the religious meaning of the rooster’s song could have inspired the themes of Guercino’s *Aurora*. The scientific vision of Aldrovandi, far from excluding a triumphalist Christian world view, serves to emphasize the divine underpinnings of the natural world.

### Guercino’s *Notte* and the *Accademia degli Ottenebrati*

Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming – in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning – lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping

*Mark* 13.35–6

In Guercino’s *Notte* (fig. 6) a half-length female figure wearing a silk turban has fallen asleep on a stack of books while two poppies fall from her hand. She is the counterexample to Seneca’s description of his own profound dedication to study: “*Nullus mihi per otium dies exit. Partem noctium studiis vendico.*



Fig. 35 *Studio*, from Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia* (Padua, 1625).



Fig. 36 Taddeo Zuccaro (1529–1566), *Il Sonno*, 1562–63, fresco, 75 cm (diameter), Palazzo Farnese, Caprarola.

*Non vaco somno sed succumbo, et oculos vigilia fatigatos cadentesque in opera detineo*” (I never spend a day in idleness. I appropriate even a part of the night for study. I do not allow time for sleep but yield to it when I must, and when my eyes are wearied with waking and ready to fall shut, I keep them at their task. Seneca, *Epistles* 8). The imagery of Guercino’s *Notte* may be compared to the figure of *Studio* in a 1625 edition of Ripa’s *Iconologia* (fig. 35), except that it incarnates this principle in the negative. Guercino’s *Notte* lapses away from vigilant study as she falls asleep.

In many ways the *Notte* incarnates the opposite principle of *Aurora/Vigilance*. She is forgetfulness or inattentiveness, sloth and intoxication. *Notte* lives in a dream-world similar to that of the figure of *Sonno* crowned with poppies (fig. 36) at Caprarola. The *Notte* may be considered in this way the spiritual pendant of the *Aurora*. The imagery, as at Caprarola, is principally Ovidian. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid describes Momus’s *Cave of Sleep*:

*... nebulae caligine mixtae  
exhalantur humo dubiaeque crepuscula lucis.  
Non vigil ales ibi cristati cantibus oris  
evocat Auroram.*

Clouds of vapour breathe forth from the earth,  
and dusky twilight shadows.  
There no wakeful, crested cock with his loud crowing  
summons the dawn.

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 11.595–98

The shadowy and foggy world of dreams is diametrically opposed to the clarity and light embodied by *Aurora*. The mention of the cock further underlines the contrast with *Vigilance*. The fundamentals of this opposition have their roots in the opposition of light/darkness and the complimentary Greek concepts of *lethe* and *alethe* (revelation/truth/light vs. ignorance/darkness/forgetfulness).



Fig. 37 Pierre Mariette II (1634–1716) after Charles le Brun (1619–1690), *Aurora*, ca. 1640, etching with engraving on laid paper, 18.9 × 24 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

The set of symbolic relationships at work can perhaps be discerned more clearly in the print after Charles le Brun's *Aurora* (fig. 37). Le Brun's iconography is unusually sophisticated. Here Aurora is depicted as part of series of the hours of the day. She represents the moment when the light of the world is called forth. The rooster on the ledge at left crows as the sun rises. Aurora lifts her eyes toward the rising sun. On the right a satyr gazes out at the viewer while a donkey brays behind him. The child of Aurora, perhaps representative of the new day, rouses itself between her and the satyr. The contrast between the rooster and the donkey is that between knowledge and ignorance and between light and darkness. Night is banished as the Dionysian cedes to the Apollonian.

The same dynamic is at work in the pair *Aurora/Notte* where the rooster banishes the haze of *Notte's* drunkenness. The acceptance of this relationship allows us to understand the slippage between the iconography of the two works. *Notte* retains a surprising amount of the imagery of Vigilance, but she does so against type. The contrast between the *Aurora* and the *Notte* might best be summarized by the words of the *Song of Solomon*: "Ego dormio, et cor meum Vigilat" ("I sleep but my heart is awake," *Song of Songs* 5.2–3) quoted by Ripa in his commentary on the figure of Vigilance. Even with the sleep of reason, God's love is awake.

Guercino's *Aurora* and *Notte* might have been a kind of retrospective reminiscence in this vein on the part of the older artist regarding his ceiling in the Casino Ludovisi (1621) in Rome. The meaning of the *Aurora* and *Notte* taken together is in fact very close to that of the Casino Ludovisi décor. This composition contains not only Aurora in her chariot (fig. 38), but the figure of *Notte* (fig. 39) asleep in front of a lamp with an open book in her lap. The roundel that she inhabits is broken into by the forces of light, as if to emphasize Aurora's role as the dispeller of night and ignorance. It does not seem implausible that at the very end of his career, Guercino should be in this way reflecting one of his first major commissions created over forty years earlier. Such a connection would in part explain the links between his *Aurora* and *Notte*. Banishing the ignorance of the night is the goal of those who



Fig. 38 Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, called il Guercino (1591–1666), *Aurora*, 1621, fresco, Casino dell'Aurora, Villa Boncompagni Ludovisi, Rome.



Fig. 39 Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, called il Guercino (1591–1666), *Notte*, 1621, fresco, lunette of the Casino dell'Aurora, Villa Boncompagni Ludovisi, Rome.

dwell in the shadows (*Ottenebrati*). This banishment requires vigilance from the Christian. The fortitude of Aurora is an inspiration to the world (A mighty fortress is our god, *Psalms* 46). The rooster (Christ) calls forth the eternal light of salvation into the world which is made visible in the figure of Guercino's late *Aurora*.



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