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Aurora: A Painting of the Coming Dawn

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Abstract

While collectors and scientists sought out the rarest and best preserved naturalia for their collections, others sought out and commissioned paintings and other forms of artifice to go beside them. One artist held in high regard during the era of curiosity cabinets was Guido Reni, artist of the famed 'Aurora,' a copy of which remains in the gallery today. Paintings like this one would have hung regally on the walls of curiosity cabinets, the beauty showing the potential of man, and the themes of nature and classics fitting right in with other pieces surrounding them. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Aurora, Guido Reni, Baroque art, classicism

Disciplines

Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture | Fine Arts | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Industrial and Product Design | Intellectual History

Comments

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Original version online at <http://wonder-cabinet.sites.gettysburg.edu/2017/cabinet/aurora/>

Aurora: A Painting of the Coming Dawn

By Noa Leibson



Copy of Guido Reni's *Aurora*, oil on canvas, 55 x 97 cm, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Jeremiah Zimmerman, Class of 1873, Special Collections and College Archives, Gettysburg College – Photo by Felicia Else

While collectors and scientists sought out the rarest and best preserved naturalia for their collections, others sought out and commissioned paintings and other forms of artifice to go beside them. One artist held in high regard during the era of curiosity cabinets was Guido Reni, artist of the famed '*Aurora*,' a copy of which remains in the gallery today. Paintings like this one would have hung regally on the walls of curiosity cabinets, the beauty showing the potential of man, and the themes of nature and classics fitting right in with other pieces surrounding them.

This copy is in a much different context than the original, being painted on canvas and a smaller size at 55 x 97 cm as compared to the giant, high-flying original. They share the same theme, however, with classical figures gracefully moving onward to bring dawn to the universe. With the mythological theme and ability to be transported, this copy of *Aurora* is a curiosity cabinet curator's dream.



Aurora by Guido Reni, Casino dell' Aurora, completed in 1614, photo by Connor Cunningham

Guido Reni: Baroque Master

Most people knew who Guido Reni was in Baroque Rome. Born in Bologna, he was a painter who learned at the *Accademia degli Incamminati*, or the 'Academy of the Progressives.' This was a painting school led by other famous cousin artists Ludovico and Annibale Carracci. He studied and worked with these artists before breaking out on his own, and Reni ended up making

a huge impact on the tempestuous streets of Italy. Contemporaries nicknamed him ‘Divine Guido,’ though Reni was actually quite quirky and didn’t much embody this nickname in the way of personal mannerisms. None could get particularly close with Reni, as he routinely argued with and cast out his friends, and prevented himself from getting others due to his opinions and superstitions. He was particularly misogynistic, fearing women to be witches, and had a haughty gambling problem.¹ None of these were qualities one would think an esteemed religious painter would have. People valued him enough to commission him, but didn’t like him enough to befriend him.²



Self portrait of Guido Reni, completed in 1604, in Private Collection, photo from WikiArt

At times, Reni’s work was as unpredictable as his own mind, carrying different themes and collaborations of color and light as he sought out his own style. Out on his own in Rome, Reni tried some different painting methods including *tenebrism*, using dramatic illumination to create great contrasts of light and darkness, that treatment known as *chiaroscuro*. This was the style owned by another Rome resident, Caravaggio, who threatened Reni should he continue to paint like that.³ Reni, who was already known to be overly emotional as a response to comments about himself, quickly stopped painting in that way and adopted the eclectic *mannerist* technique that his old mentors the Carracci’s were known for. It was in this technique that Reni used to complete his work, *Aurora*.⁴



Another painting done in Reni's style, *The Rape of Helen* by Guido Reni, completed in 1631, from the Louvre, photo from Wikimedia Commons

Aurora's Story

The fresco, *Aurora*, was completed in 1614 as a commission by Cardinal Scipione Borghese. Art was Borghese's ultimate passion, and he spent his life amassing a personal art collection, from the classical to his contemporary age. He regularly purchased and commissioned art from local artists, including Caravaggio. It is curious, then, that Borghese became a patron of Guido Reni, who by then had a completely opposite style from Caravaggio's tenebrism.



Bust of Cardinal Scipione Borghese, by Giuliano Finelli, completed in 1631-1632, from the Metropolitan Museum of Art



An opposite style of Reni. David with the Head of Goliath, by Caravaggio, completed in 1599, from the Museu del Prado.

Borghese clearly appreciated Reni's work and execution enough though, for the commission that *Aurora* was a part of was the fresco work in Borghese's own garden house, the Casino dell'Aurora, next to his palace. ⁵ Reni was paid 247 scudi and 54 baiocchi for *Aurora*, a very respectable sum for just one piece.



Exterior of the Casino dell'Aurora, photo from Natalizi

The Casino dell'Aurora was a part of a larger complex, the Palazzo Pallavicini-Rospigliosi, which was Borghese's complete palace. It was situated on the Quirinal Hill, filled with gardens and the cardinal's art collection. He had intended for the palace to exist as a summer home. The Casino was made when Borghese expanded his palace, and besides *Aurora*, had other frescoes by artists Paul Bril and Antonio Tempesta.



Exterior of Palazzo Pallavicini-Rospigliosi, photo taken by Carole Wood

The ideas and characters in *Aurora* are born out of *Baroque Classicism*. This is a sub-genre of the Baroque era where artists recall themes from the Classical era, much like people did during the Renaissance. It was a revival of aesthetics and retells ages of the old. Reni was a champion of this genre due to his mannerist method of painting, because that style was known to exaggerate figures and background to embrace beauty and grace, the same traits associated with Baroque Classicism.

This particular painting specifically tells the story of a morning brought forth by the gods. Using characters, it tells time. The main focus is Apollo, god of music, truth, sun, and light. He leads his chariot across the sky, staring forward intently, fiercely focused so as to bring forth the sun and create a new morning over the world. He keeps a taught lead on his horses, which conformationally appear to be of Spanish blood, heavy and stocky, and whose colors are meant to represent the different shades of morning. Apollo's chariot is flanked by several dancing women, the Horae, goddesses of the hours who represent the time of day. The goddesses at the front look back longingly, while those in back are adamant and lively in their desire to move forward. They follow the track set forth by Phosphorus, the ancient personification of the Morning Star. But all chase after Eos, goddess of the dawn, the aurora, who floats amongst the clouds and brings forth a new day as she has plenty of times before. This classical story is told in a linear way, each inch representing a different time of day, night becoming morning. The story changes looking from left to right.⁶ And all of this is shown on the ceiling of the Casino, giving the appearance that the characters are truly flying across the sky.

Reni's method of coloring the scene and applying it directly reflects his education with the Carracci's and present tastes of Rome. Reni uses the bright, colorful palette that he adopted as his medium, the same that the Carracci's used. Besides using the same array of colors, Reni adopted the same compositional elements that his masters employed. *Aurora* closely mirrors one of Annibale Carracci's works in the Farnese Palace. The balance and linear story being told with the characters reflects one of Annibale's specific frescoes in the palace, *Triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne*, which was completed in 1597.⁷ Reni's *Aurora* composition may be an ode to his former mentor then, or simply coincidence from what the Bolognese painter had learned. Reni also uses *quadro riportato*, using illusion to make a painting appear as though it was originally made on an easel, which Annibale Carracci used in the Farnese Palace.



Ceiling and quadro riportato of the Farnese Palace, by Annibale Carracci, completed from 1597-1608, photo from Wikimedia Commons.

[Gardner, Helen, and Fred S. Kleiner. *Gardners art through the ages: the western perspective*, (Boston, MA: Cengage Learning, 2017), 540 [note] This was applied by molding stucco and applying gold leaf to create a fake frame around *Aurora*, to look as though the painting was hung from the ceiling instead of painted on. Reni may have applied the quadro riportato himself, or it was the work of a *gilder*, painters who specialized in simple compositions or patterns, who had worked on the same projects as Reni in the past. ⁸



Triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne by Annibale Carracci, completed from 1597-1608, from the Farnese Palace, photo from WikiArt

The figures in the painting are graceful and diverse, and actually come from Classical sculptures that Reni used as references while painting *Aurora*. Almost every myth told in the painting was painted from sculpture. The Horae in the painting share poses with *The Borghese Dancers*, dancing women on a classical sarcophagus that Scipione Borghese, the same man who commissioned *Aurora*, owned.



The Borghese Dancers, Classical of an unknown date, photo taken by Eugène Atget.

Reni took most of his inspiration from classical sculpture, frequently copying the marble to learn how to paint. As women deeply unsettled him, it comes as no surprise that Reni would use marble ladies as his models instead of real ones. The figures of Apollo and Phosphorus mimic a scene shown on the Arch of Constantine. There, Phosphorus leads the way once more, with Apollo in his chariot close behind. Reni's general distaste for women combined with his love for classical sculpture worked in his favor for this commission, as Borghese would have appreciated the references to his own passion, the classics.



Tondo from the Arch of Constantine, from 315 AD, Rome, photo from Smarthistory.

The Copy

The original *Aurora* remains ever beautiful in Rome, but across the world, Gettysburg College's copy holds beauty and personality in its own right. The copy was purchased in the 19th century by Reverend Jeremiah Zimmerman, and eventually made its way to Gettysburg College. As a clear copy, the later piece is the same composition, the figures and meaning same as it was in 1614. But in analyzing the brush strokes and figures, this *Aurora* holds up a different story in how it was made. The artist, year made, and country it was made in are unrecorded, but the paint sheds some light on that subject.



Copy of *Aurora*, photo taken by Noa Leibson



Detail of Copy of *Aurora*, photo from Catherine Perry

One can't really put a magnifying glass to the original *Aurora*, high on the ceiling of the Casino, but one certainly can with the copy. When that is done, a lot of information on how it was made comes to light, and one can tell a lot about the unnamed artist. The artist used vastly varying amounts of layers on the painting, choosing to use several meticulous layers of paint on the figures, especially the Horae, but used fewer layers on the background. He also lightened the color palette, choosing to use less contrast than Reni used back in Baroque Rome. And if one peers truly closely, especially on Apollo's cape, one can see faint lines from the pencilled outline of the preliminary sketch under the paint, a sign that the artist spent effort on planning his piece. These are actions by someone that especially took pride in painting the figure, and wanted to make sure they got the composition as right and as close to the original as it could be.



Detail of Copy of *Aurora*, photo taken by Noa Leibson

Despite the artist's talents, they seemed to have run into a few hiccups along the way, something that happens to anyone who creates art. A few of the paintings unique traits reveal this. The copy appears to have taken damage while it was being painted, obtaining a few scratches on the lower part of the canvas and removing a cloud layer where the damage occurred. But rather than completely fix the small scratches, the artist simply put another thin layer over top and sealed the painting as it was, leaving the scratches visible if one looks closely.



Detail of Copy of *Aurora*, photo taken by Noa Leibson

The surface that the painting was done on is also curious. In flipping the painting over, it would appear that this new *Aurora* scene was done on a thick panel of wood that fit into the gilded frame. However, on the painted side, the surface is canvas. Painting on wood is a very different sensation than painting on canvas, and artists from all the way back in Reni's day would refuse to paint on it, or choose to paint on canvas and then apply that to wood. This artist may have felt similarly, and adamant on avoiding painting on wood, simply applied their creation afterwards, where the frame would cover this secret. It may also have simply been how this canvas was laid, and not a decision by the artist at all, though preparing canvas with a solid block was uncommon.



Back of Copy of *Aurora*, photo taken by Noa Leibson

The frame and inlaid wood block themselves seem like an ode to the original *Aurora*, and are quite reminiscent of the applied *quadro riportato*. The frame in bulk is made out of wood, then additional parts sculpted on top. The frame was also gilded, the act of painting gold fanciful yet common. Sculpted flower motifs line the frame, similar to how they danced around the faux frame of the original *Aurora*. Seeing as how the wood base of the painting fits so cleanly into the frame, it may have been that the frame was chosen before the painting was even made, which would have been the reason why the artist may have discreetly inserted in a sheet of canvas onto the wood.

The artist was clearly someone who had great experience and passion for the human figure, as the faces of the characters are done with complete grace and undeniable skill, the softness of their expressions holding more care and detail than the majority of the *Aurora* copies, the care taken being praiseworthy no matter what. The handful of quirks and painting process ought not to be seen as a lack of skill or mindfulness, but rather as a result of someone who seems to have been used to painting a different sort of piece. The talent for the figure and gentle execution of the faces look quite similar to works born out of *academic art* and *neoclassicism*, genres that drew from academy education and Classical themes.



Example of an Academic/Neoclassical painting, *The Birth Of Venus* by William-Adolphe Bouguereau, completed in 1879, in the Musée d'Orsay, photo from Fine Art America

These genres were especially popular in France, the same country that Guido Reni gained the most popularity in after his death. Many artists involved in these genres looked up to Reni as a reference for execution of the figure and in use of color during the 18th and early 19th century.⁹ As the painting was purchased in the 19th century, it's very plausible that the copy would be from this period and from France or elsewhere in Europe where Reni was most popular.

Unfortunately, however, no certification or documents survive about the copied *Aurora* that may shed light on the artist and the art piece's history. At this point, it is really not possible to specifically pinpoint the fine details of the copy beyond what is deduced from looking at it. All that remains is the story told by the gilded frame and care in the brushstrokes, backed by knowledge known on the unique Guido Reni and his influence. One need only to look at *Aurora* to know why he was called 'Divine Guido' and to know why copies like this one were made and still revered, here and now in the 21st century.

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