

The face of paradise

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In the early 17th century, Rome was the melting pot for a new kind of religious painting led by Caravaggio and the Carracci. A pupil of the latter, Guercino produced some profoundly spiritual works, as witness this oil on canvas. The man, still muscular despite his age, turns his face towards a window, where a ray of light shines through the bars. He has an unclouded, steadfast gaze. Peter, in prison, is filled with the faith of one who has fallen. He was one of Christ's first disciples, who had let down his nets on his advice, and made a miraculous catch. "Have no fear: henceforth, you will be a fisher of men," Jesus told him (Luke, 5), and Peter immediately "forsook all and followed him". Simon, named Kephas (meaning "rock") by Jesus, was fallible: he denied Christ three times during his Passion. Imprisoned by Herod Agrippa I, he miraculously escaped, led by an angel.

Here Guercino portrays the man now imbued with an unshakeable faith. He painted the picture during his stay in Rome from 1621 to 1623. Born in Cento in the province of Ferrara, Barbieri was drawn to the works of the Carracci, particularly Ludovico, and much admired his painting for the high altar in Cento. He sought an art based on nature, adopting soft materials with warm shades and a subtle use of bright contrasts. Summoned to Rome by Pope Gregory XV Ludovisi, he produced several paintings celebrating the first Bishop (or Pope) of Rome: "The Martyrdom of St Peter", dating from between 1616 and 1619, now in the Galleria Estense, Modena; "St Peter Weeping before the Virgin", now in the Louvre, and "St Peter Freed by an Angel", now in the Prado, Madrid. This "St Peter in Prison" was given to José de Madrazo y Agudo (1781-1859), painter to Charles IV and director of the Prado, and subsequently joined the collection of the Infante, Don Sebastian Gabriel of Bourbon and Braganza, and his son Peter. It has remained in a Brittany collection since its sale in 1890. **Anne Foster**

| Rennes, Rennes Enchères auction house.