



GIOVANNI GUERRA

(Moden, 1544 - Rome, 1618)

Mercury Thoth with the head of Argus

extensively inscribed with lettering (throughout), bears inscription: *Mercurius thoyt aegyptiis / sacras litteras / conscripsit* (lower centre), bears inscription in hieroglyphics (upper centre)

pen and brown ink over traces of black chalk

272 x 117 mm

Provenance:

Private collection, North Rhine-Westphalia

This fine drawing is a preparatory design for the figure of Mercury Thoth which adorns one of the seven central columns of the Salone Sistino in the Vatican Library. The face of each cuboid column is decorated with a fresco depicting a single figure, one of the 'Inventors of the Alphabet'. Mercury Thoth, otherwise known as Hermes Trismegistus, is a syncretic Greco-Egyptian deity embodying elements of the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian god Thoth. He is considered the father of Hermeticism and is believed to have killed the many-eyed giant Argus and thus fled to Egypt where he gave the Egyptians their alphabet and law.

The divergence in detail between the drawing and fresco, such as the angle of the caduceus, the location of the two supporting inscriptions and the annotated lettering, indicating Guerra's colour scheme, demonstrate that the drawing is the master's model which was then given to his assistants to execute in buon fresco. The inscriptions denote colour directives for Guerra's assistants to follow: yellow for Mercury's cloak (*g*: giallo); red for his winged sandals (*r*: rosso); white for the wings of his helmet (*b*: bianco); sky blue for his shirt (*a*: azzuro); and green for the lower hem of his shirt (*v*: verde).

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