Joseph Becherer, an IUB doctoral candidate in art history writing on the 16th century Italian Renaissance master painter Pietro Perugino, pulled off a curatorial coup this fall. He has been guest curator at the Grand Rapids Art Museum, which displayed the only Perugino exhibition ever to be seen in the U.S., and the first in more than 50 years internationally.

For this exhibition, "Perugino: Master of the Italian Renaissance," Becherer helped to secure an unprecedented loan of nine Perugino paintings from the Galleria Nazionale dell' Umbria in Perugia, Italy, the largest repository of the artist's works in the world. These nine paintings formed the centerpiece of the exhibition, which featured a total of 35 drawings and paintings in all, including loans from major American art museums such as The Art Institute of Chicago, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The National Gallery of Art, The Cleveland Museum of Art, and The Detroit Institute of Art, among others.

Since 1991, Becherer has been affiliated with the Grand Rapids Community College as a professor and chair of the department of art history, and currently serves as the dean of the School of Social Science and Humanities. Grand Rapids has a sister-city relationship with the city of Perugia. The Grand Rapids Art Museum is the only venue for this landmark exhibition, which opened Nov. 16 and closed on Feb. 1.

Perugino is one of the most distinguished painters of the Italian Renaissance, and his work provided the foundation for the aesthetic developments of the High Renaissance. "As the teacher of Raphael and a colleague of both Leonardo da Vinci and Sandro Botticelli, Perugino played a very prominent and influential role in the history of art," said Becherer. Perugino received some of the most distinguished international commissions of his day—among those is the decoration of the walls of the Sistine Chapel with Botticelli, Dominic Ghirlando and Cosimo Roselli. "Undoubtedly, he was one of the most active masters and teachers of the Italian Renaissance," said Becherer. "A critical study of this master is essential for a more complete understanding of the age."

Nearly three generations of IU scholars and art historians joined Becherer in undertaking the Perugino project. Early on, Becherer contacted his mentor, Bruce Cole, distinguished professor of fine arts and chair of the Department of Art History at IUB, and author of numerous definitive books on the Italian Renaissance, to see if he was "on the right track" in his research. The networking paid off. Cole and a team of IU alumni, graduate students and faculty brought their expertise together to work on the exhibition and the catalog, which examines each work, Perugino's career, and the era in which he lived. Notably, it is the first such catalog on Perugino written in English.

The list of exhibition scholars and consultants reads like an IU art history team roster: Becherer's peers were Jody Shiffman, an art history alumna who helped edit and translate the exhibition catalog, and Katherine Smith Abbott, an IU alumna who is currently a visiting assistant professor at Middlebury College. Part of the catalog came from work done by Julia Conway Bondanella, associate professor of Italian at IUB, who examined the original works of Giorgio Vasari, the first historian of Italian art and the first chronicler of Perugino himself. Other IU alumni included Marilyn Bradshaw, associate dean in the college of fine arts at Ohio University, and Peter Bondanella, distinguished professor of comparative literature at IUB, and director of the West European Studies National Resource Center.

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—Joseph Becherer, Guest Curator, Perugino Exhibit