

WANTED



Michelangelo Merisi
A.K.A. Caravaggio
For the Murder of
Ranuccio Tommasoni
in Roma, Maggio 1606

Considered Armed and Dangerous
Last Known Whereabouts Napoli
May be Painting under an Assumed Name
200 scudi Reward for Information
Leading to his Apprehension

Caravaggio: a Lost Soul, a Study in Black and Light

by Michael Sofie

Although mostly forgotten for his paintings after his premature death in 1610, Caravaggio's use of naturalism had a profound influence on the art of the seventeenth century beginning with the Baroque period. How can students of art history reconcile his striking religious paintings with his volatile, destructive, and rebellious behavior; and did his personal life affect Caravaggio's painting and the evolution of his style? What little historians can piece together of his life comes from Church, legal, and police records. Born Michelangelo Merisi in a small Lombardy town forty kilometers east of Milan from which he would take his name, Caravaggio was apprenticed at thirteen to a Milanese artist, a pupil of Titian. After 4 years there, he spent some time in Venice.

With the death of his mother and father by 1592, the twenty-year old artist "received only a modest part of the estate, mostly in cash," and moved to Rome to pursue his career. The rough life learned on the streets of Rome would indelibly imprint the rest of his adult life. There he produced mundane items to sell on the street to eke out a meager existence and eventually found lodging with "Cavaliere d'Arpino, one of the leading painters of his day." Caravaggio's earliest efforts, *The Boy with a Basket of Fruit* (2), *The Lute Player* (5), and *The Boy Bitten by a Lizard* (3), were the first to use his self-portrait in a variety of poses.

Several early contacts with a couple of artists allowed his talent to be seen by "a more discerning class of patron," which led to him being offered rooms by Cardinal Francesco del Monte. Thus from this more reliable base at the Palazzo Madama, Caravaggio intermixed religious and secular projects, including *The Fortune Teller* (11),

and *The Cardsharps* (9) with *The Ecstasy of St Francis* (7), *The Penitent Magdalen* (13) and *The Conversion of the Magdalen* (17). The association with the Cardinal would help him secure his first public commission in 1599 for *The Calling of St. Matthew* (25) and a companion piece, *The Martyrdom of St Matthew* (26) for the Contarelli Chapel. These painting employed his use of chiaroscuro, in Italian meaning “light and shade,” to focus the viewers attention to a particular action or subject of the paintings.) The expert use of chiaroscuro with its different light and dark values, helps create volume and depth making it ideal to create dramatic effects., “Displayed in a dark chapel, Caravaggio’s paintings take on a vivid, lifelike quality intended to heighten the religious experience.”

While his fortunes and public acclaim for his paintings were on the rise in the late 1500’s, Caravaggio’s rebellious and quarrelsome nature manifested itself in several altercations, one in which he required a barber to dress a blade wound. Although he was entitled to carry a sword, as he lived at del Monte’s residence and was the Cardinal’s painter, the streets he frequented and the people he met there meant that he might need to use it; which led to altercations as recorded by the police.

Not all of his paintings were appreciated for their realism and he soon discovered that to please those churches that commissioned paintings required modification of his visions. *The Conversion of St Paul* (30) for the Church of Santa Maria del Popolo, which shows the moment that God opens Saul’s eyes on the road to Damascus, with a powerful and dramatic use of light. One Church Official believed that the horse was too prominent and commented, “Is the horse God?” and Caravaggio shot back, “No, but he stands in God’s light.”

“For the rest of his life, Caravaggio devoted himself almost exclusively to religious paintings. He continued to interpret spiritual subjects in rational, earthly terms, peopling his canvases with figures based on life.” His final lesson was to acquiesce to the Contarelli Chapel’s demand that he provide an alternate painting to the rejected *St Matthew and the Angel* (27), because it lacked “decorum” and they objected to the saint’s bare crossed legs. The second version was “a more conservative and classical approach” with St Matthew (28) in a contrapposto pose and the angel in a traditional relationship to him.

For the remainder of his time in Rome, “Caravaggio’s name appears in the Rome’s police records every few months;” thus the life of “the most famous painter in Rome” was “punctuated with crime.” He was brought to trial no less than eleven times with the charges mostly involving violence. Caravaggio either libeled a rival; was imprisoned for a short time; threatened a waiter with a sword; was arrested for disturbances; or arrested for carrying a sword and dagger without a license; imprisoned for insulting a mother and daughter; wounded a rival over a girl; for a dispute with his landlady; or wounded himself by an unknown assailant. Counter to upheaval in his personal life from 1601-1606, Caravaggio produced a profusion of glorious religious paintings that brought new life to traditional themes. *The Crucifixion of St Peter*(31), *The Supper at Emmaus* (33), *The Incredulity of St Thomas* (35), *The Taking of Christ* (37), *The Entombment* (40), *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (39), *Christ on the Mount of Olives* (47), *Madonna of the Rosary* (49)(pilgrims with dirty feet) and *The Crowning with Thorns* (43) all with emotional power, capturing a moment with light.

Caravaggio was commissioned to paint a portrait (52) of the aristocrat Camillo Borghese, the newly elected Pope Paul V in 1605 as a papal favor as the Church was a

major patron of the arts. Another rejection, *The Death of the Virgin* (54), followed because of his treatment of the sacred subject and scandalous charges that Caravaggio used a well-known prostitute as his model.

His stay in Rome ended in the spring of 1606 when he killed Ranuccio Tommasoni in a dispute over a tennis game and fled south to elude the authorities; by now Caravaggio's notorious behavior was well known (Poster). From this point forward he would be on the move and paranoid to evade assailants and pursuers real or imagined. By fall he was in Naples and painting once more and the year there was spent glorifying Mary Magdalen, the Virgin Mary, Christ, and the Saints. "The city had not known a painter of outstanding talent for many years," and "Caravaggio had no difficulty obtaining a number of commissions." As Prose insists, "Naples' shadows [had] changed him. His blacks [had] never been blacker. Much of his canvas [was] given over to dark and empty space." Another starker *The Supper at Emmaus* (55) followed, a dark *The Magdalen in Ecstasy* (56), a more dramatic painting, *Madonna of Mercy* (57), and probably *The Flagellation of Christ* (60) flowed from his brushes.

Constant work evidently kept him out of trouble with the law until "he set sail for [the island of] Malta late in 1607." Whether Caravaggio had heard that a new important Church there required decoration or he desired to become "a knight in the Order of St. John" is not clear. He soon had ingratiated himself to the Grand Master Alof De Wignacourt (62) with a flattering portrait, as well as a Florentine Knight (63), which led to the commission of *The Beheading of St John the Baptist* (65) for the Church of San Giovanni. De Wignacourt was so pleased with the huge painting that he made Caravaggio a Knight in the Order, but unfortunately he became embroiled in a quarrel with "a fellow knight of a higher rank," and was imprisoned. He "made a daring

night-time escape,” and “[i]t may be that the knights helped him to escape...to avoid having to punish so famous a painter.”

On the run again, he took refuge from the Knights in Sicily in the fall of 1608, and moved from Syracuse to Messina then to Palermo to escape retribution from the powerful Order of St. John. Commissions for *The Burial of St Lucy* (68) in Syracuse, *The Raising of Lazarus* (69) and *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (70) in Messina, and *The Nativity with St Francis and St Lawrence* (71) for Palermo were among his last known painting from that period. While in exile in Sicily, Caravaggio held hope that his friends could secure a papal pardon for him for the murder of Tommasoni and he would be able to return to Rome. While in Messina, it was rumored, he had a scuffle with “a schoolteacher who objected to the undue interest which Caravaggio seemed to be showing in some of his boys.” Caravaggio returned to Naples “to be closer to Rome when and if the pardon materialized.”

In Naples he was set on by a group of attackers and so badly wounded about his face and gashed so viciously he was barely recognizable. Although reported dead, Caravaggio would stay in Naples for about eight months recuperating from his injuries. He was preparing some paintings as peace offerings to take to Rome if word came that he had been granted a pardon; one of which evidently was *David with the Head of Goliath* (75), notable for Caravaggio’s startled face on Goliath’s severed head, perhaps a harbinger of the fate awaiting him. Some confusion exists about his last few days; some suggest that he had not heard of the pardon and went to Port’ Ercole on his way to Genoa or Rome; and other theorize he was held there for a crime he did not commit and missed his boat. In either case Caravaggio contracted a fever, perhaps malaria and died several days later in July of 1610, at the age of 38.

Caravaggio never married so no Church records exist to indicate if he regularly attended Mass, Confession, or patronized the Church at all. His lifestyle of roaming the streets and associating with lower society would indicate he was not very devoted. Perhaps his religion was demonstrated in his magnificent painting which glorified the Saints, the Virgin, and Christ; to have the scenes that Caravaggio painted fully realized in his mind were truly divinely inspired. "Caravaggio told the story of Christianity as it had never been told before, as an actual happening....What in effect [he] was doing systematically and deliberately, for the first time in art history, was destroying the space between the event in the painting and the people looking at it."

His techniques were either appropriated, improvised, or embellished; chiaroscuro was not new, but he used more intense light and deep dark shadows; and he used a perspective and a chiaroscuro intended to bring viewers as close as possible to the scene's space and action, almost as if they were participating in them." Caravaggio "painted directly from life," did not use preliminary sketches, painted quickly, and "create[d] in a painting what he ha[d] in his imagination."

He sometimes employed "an old-fashioned technique at one time used by tempera painters" of using the butt end of his brush to score lines in the priming to position his figures on the canvas. Gash and others have noted that he would mix tempera into wet oil paint to heighten the depth and brilliance of the whites. (107)

Caravaggio would inspire a group of later artists called "Caravaggista" with his techniques, and, "it is to this unruly genius we must look for the style that was to revolutionize European art, less on account of its visual naturalism...than its psychological realism, which plumbed the depths of human feeling." His influence on later artists, as much outside Italy as within, was immense....Caravaggio injected a naturalism into both

religion and the classics, reducing them to human dramas played out in harsh and dingy settings of his time and place.” “His revolutionary art must be considered a major factor in the direct or indirect influence, of the greatest painters of the seventeenth century, Rubens, Hals, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Velázquez, and Bernini.”

Although mostly forgotten for several hundred years, Caravaggio’s output of around seventy known paintings in fourteen years is extraordinary considering the power they still possess today and the influence his style had for future generations of painters. “Having spent his brief, tragic and turbulent life painting miracles, he managed...to create one – the miracle of art, the miracle of the way in which some paint, a few brushes, a square of canvas, together with that most essential ingredient, genius, can produce something stronger than time and age, more powerful than death.”



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54



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29



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44



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48



51



52



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71



60



55



56



68



62



63



70



44



74



26



75



37

<http://caravaggio.com/> for larger images and information

Caravaggio Paintings

- 1 the boy with a garland of ivy 1593/94
- 2 the boy with a basket of fruit 1593/94
- 3 the boy bitten by a lizard c.1594/96
- 4 concert of youths 1595/96
- 5 the lute player 1595/97
- 6 st john the Baptist Caravaggio???
- 7 the ecstasy or stigmatization of st francis c. 1595/97
- 8 basket of fruit c. 1596/99
- 9 the cardsharps 1595/97
- 10 bacchus 1595/97
- 11 the fortune teller 1595/97
- 12 ditto “ inferior
- 13 the penitent magdalen 1596/98
- 14 the courtesan ‘phyllis’ c. 1598/99
- 15 the rest on the flight into Egypt 1596/98
- 16 st Catherine of Alexandria c. 1598/99
- 17 the conversion of the magdalen c. 1598/99
- 18 judith and holofernes c. 1598/99
- 19 portrait of monsignor maffea barberini ? 1604 by Caravaggio ??
- 20 portrait of ? monsignor “ “ ? 1598/99
- 21 medusa 1598/1600 on shield
- 22 narcissus c. 1598/1601
- 23 david with the head of goliath ? 1598/1601
- 24 detail below
- 25 the calling of st matthew 1599/1600
- 26 the martyrdom of st matthew 1599/1600
- 27 st matthew and the angel 1602
- 28 ditto 1602 2nd version to please clergy of san luigi
- 29 the conversion of saul (st paul) 1600/1601 on panel
- 30 ditto “ 1601 oil on canvas
- 31 the crucifixion of st peter 1601
- 32 the calling of st peter and st Andrew or the walk to Emmaus c. 1601-02/06 Caravaggio ??
- 33 the supper at Emmaus 1601
- 34 the crowning with thorns 1601/03 Caravaggio ??
- 35 the incredulity of st. Thomas 1601/03
- 36 st john the Baptist 1602
- 37 the taking of Christ 1602
- 38 victorious love c. 1602
- 39 the sacrifice of Isaac c. 1603

- 40 the entombment 1602/04
- 41 st francis praying 1602-04 copy
- 42 st francis in prayer c. 1604/06 or 1607/10
- 43 the crowning with thorns c. 1602/04
- 44 madonna of loreto (Madonna of the pilgrims) 1603/05
- 45 st john the Baptist c. 1604/05
- 46 ditto " 1604/06 or 1608/10
- 47 christ on the mount of olives 1604/06
- 48 st Jerome in meditation c. 1605/06
- 49 madonna of the rosary 1605-05/1607
- 50 st Jerome writing 1605/06
- 51 ecce homo 1605/06 or 1609 Caravaggio ??
- 52 portrait of pope paul v 1605/06
- 53 madonna of the serpent (Madonna of the grooms of st anne) 1605/06
- 54 the death of the virgin 1601/06
- 55 the supper at Emmaus 1606
- 56 the magdalen in ecstasy 1606 original?
- 57 magdalen of mercy (the seven works of mercy) 1606/07
- 58 the flagellation of Christ 1606/07
- 59 salome with the head of john the Baptist 1607/10
- 60 the flagellation of Christ 1607 reworked 1610?
- 61 the crucifixion of st Andrew 1607
- 62 portrait of alof de wignacourt in armour with his page 1607/08
- 63 portrait of fra Antonio martelli with a sword and rosary beads 1607/08
- 64 st Jerome writing 1607/08
- 65 the beheading of john the Baptist 1608
- 66 sleeping cupid 1608
- 67 st john at the spring ?1608 original?
- 68 the burial of st lucy 1608
- 69 the raising of lazarus 1609
- 70 the adoration of the shepherds 1609
- 71 the nativity with st francis and st Lawrence 1609
- 72 salome with the head of john the Baptist c. 1609
- 73 the annunciation 1608/10
- 74 the denial of peter 1610?
- 75 david with the head of goliath 1607 or 1609/10
- 76 st john the Baptist 1610

<http://caravaggio.com/> for larger images and information

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