



Gilles Lambert

CARAVAGGIO

1571–1610

A genius beyond his time

Edited by Gilles Néret

TASCHEN

COVER:
Victorious Cupid, 1602
Oil on canvas, 156 x 113 cm
Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen – Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz

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Milan, Bertarelli Collection

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Rome, Galleria Borghese
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Hohenzollernring 53, D–50672 Köln
www.taschen.com
Original edition: © 2000 Benedikt Taschen Verlag GmbH
Text by Gilles Lambert, Paris
English translation by Chris Miller, Oxford
Cover design by Angelika Taschen, Cologne

Printed in Germany
ISBN 978–3–8228–6305–3

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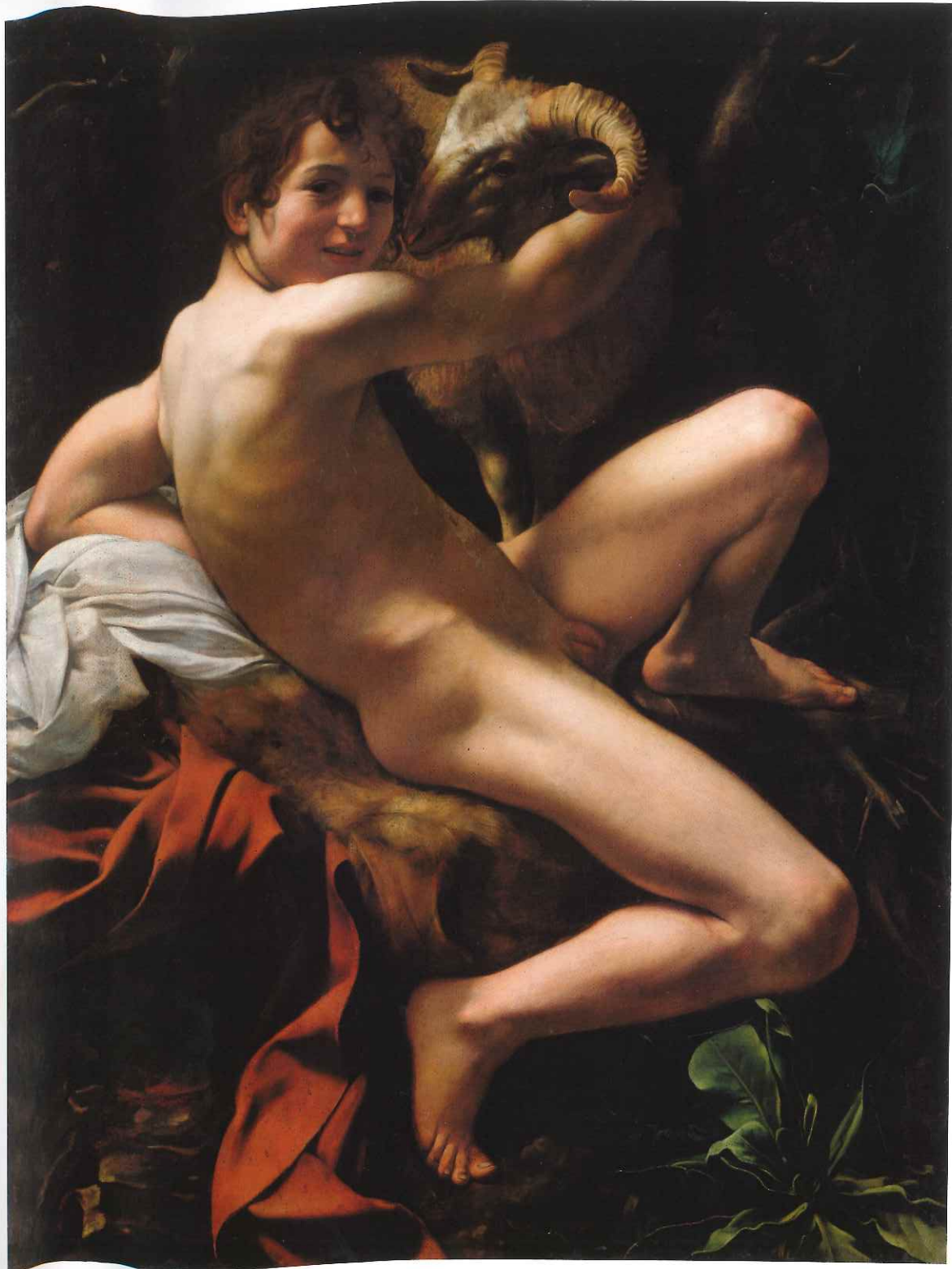
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The Artist as Outlaw

His life was sulphurous and his painting scandalous. Michelangelo Merisi, known as Caravaggio (the name of his native village near Bergamo), was a downright villain. Other artists had had brushes with justice before him: Duccio was a drunkard and a brawler. The quarrelsome Perugino was involved in street fights, and, as a young man, spent time in prison. And the sculptor and goldsmith Benvenuto Cellini, accused of embezzlement, murder and sodomy, was incarcerated in the Castel Sant'Angelo. Caravaggio was repeatedly arrested and imprisoned. He confessed to the murder of an opponent at tennis whom he suspected of cheating, and he was rumoured to have committed other crimes. He was a painter of genius, who worked with extraordinary speed, painting directly onto the canvas without even sketching out the main figures. His powerful patrons found it increasingly difficult to extract him from the prison cells in which he so often languished. Caravaggio risked his life escaping from his last prison, on the island of Malta, as Cellini had done escaping from Castel Sant'Angelo. The evidence suggests that he was sentenced for what we would now term paedophilia. He died, a persecuted outlaw, on a beach north of Rome, perhaps, like 1975 the film-director Pier Paolo Pasolini, a victim of murder.

Caravaggio is the most mysterious and perhaps the most revolutionary painter in the history of art. In Rome, thirty-four years after the death of Michelangelo, he originated a violent reaction to the Mannerism of his elders, which he regarded as constrained, mawkish, and academic. He created a new language of theatrical realism, choosing his models in the streets. In every subject he selected the most dramatic instant, even for the most sacred themes, like the Death of the Virgin, which he painted, almost without precedent, as a night-scene. The primacy of nature and truth was his watchword.

In painting, Caravaggio is the apotheosis of what was later called the "Baroque". On the cusp of the 16th and 17th centuries, the Baroque was a period of fury, ecstasy and excess. The Council of Trent defined the principles of the Counter-Reformation; Popes and Jesuits countered the austerity of Luther and Calvin, who had banished paintings and sculptures from the church, with a great outpouring of imagery, ornament, colours, contrasts and theatrical decors, fit to dazzle the believer and reaffirm the predominance of Rome. Claudio Monteverdi had just invented the operatic form. The work of Caravaggio entered and exacerbated this tempestuous atmosphere. Every one of his works raised a scandal, and he made many enemies. Nicolas Poussin, who arrived in Rome shortly after Caravaggio's death, observed: "He came to destroy painting".



Michelangelo
Ignudi, 1509
Detail of the Sixtine Chapel fresco, near the Flood and above the Eritrean Sibyl

PAGE 6:
Saint John the Baptist, 1599–1600
Oil on canvas, 129 x 94 cm (50.8 x 37 in.)
Rome, Musei Capitolini, Pinacoteca Capitolina

Like Caravaggio, his illustrious forebear Michelangelo frequently painted young men, his models and lovers. But his *Ignudi* are the expression of beauty born of God's hand, whereas those of Caravaggio are invariably somewhat equivocal.

Boy with Basket of Fruit, c. 1593–1594
Oil on canvas, 70 x 67 cm (27.6 x 26.4 in.)
Rome, Galleria Borghese

Boy with a Vase of Roses (copy?), 1593–1594
Oil on canvas, 67.3 x 51.8 cm (26.5 x 20.4 in.)
Atlanta (Georgia), Art Association Galleries
of Atlanta, The High Museum of Art



Boy Peeling Fruit (copy?), c. 1593–1594
Oil on canvas, 75.5 x 64.4 cm (29.7 x 25.4 in.)
Rome, Private collection

PAGE 9:
Detail of *Boy with Basket of Fruit*
Not until 1596, in the *Repentant Magdalene*
(ill. p. 28), did Caravaggio paint his first
portrait of a woman.

The shockwaves produced by his work were powerful and long lasting, and his reputation did not survive them. His name was forgotten, and he had to wait three hundred years for his reputation to be vindicated. His name began to reappear in the late 19th century, but it was not until the 1920s that the work of the art critic Roberto Longhi again brought his name before the public. Only then did his true stature emerge. For Longhi, Caravaggio's influence extended throughout the 17th century and well beyond, as far as Delacroix, Géricault (who copied Caravaggio's *Entombment* before painting the *Raft of the Medusa*; ill. p. 63), Courbet and Manet. "With the exception of Michelangelo, no other Italian painter exercised so great an influence," wrote that hostile witness, the American critic Bernard Berenson, who had little time for Caravaggio and deemed him "incongruous." "After him, painting could never be the same again. His revolution was a profound and irreversible modification of the emotional and intellectual relation between the artist and his subject," declared Giuliano Briganti. André Berne-Joffroy, Paul Valéry's secretary, put it in a nutshell: "In the aftermath of the Renaissance, what begins in the work of Caravaggio is, quite simply, modern painting".

During his lifetime, Caravaggio was deemed unacceptably provocative, and death offered no reprieve. His body was never found, and there were those who claimed that he had organised his own disappearance, and simulated death in order to evade prosecution. His first biographer, Giovanni





Baglione, detested him, and did not spare his memory. Rumours spread; he was accused of plagiarism and theft. His works were reattributed and assigned to his more reassuring rivals, respected academicians of high repute. They included Cavaliere d'Arpino, for whom Caravaggio worked when he arrived in Rome, Guido Reni, who resembled him so little (legend has it that Reni died a virgin), Guercino, Domenichino, Albani, and even Ribera and Zurbarán. In return, works were falsely attributed to him. As Berenson describes it, "any work of strong chiaroscuro presenting huge, obese and vulgar protagonists, sacrilegiously posed as Christ or the Apostles, plumed heads, hordes of men and women wearing an ignoble and drunken aspect, young scallywags playing dice or cheating" was "a Caravaggio".

The few historians who cite his name – one such was Joachim Winckelmann in 1750 – gave no indication of his importance. He who had put the *oscuro* into *chiaroscuro* was himself wreathed in obscurity. He disappeared from lists, chronologies, in short, from the history of art. Luigi Lanzi, whose monumental *Storia pittorica dell'Italia*, was much quarried by Stendhal, could not even spell his name. He appears there as Michelangelo Amerighi or Morigi, and occupies a total of two paragraphs. Stendhal, a great admirer of Guido Reni (whom he considered superior even to Raphael) cites Caravaggio's name just twice in his *Histoire de la Peinture en Italie*, and in his *Promenades dans Rome*, he recommends Domenichino's frescoes at San Luigi dei Francesi rather than Caravaggio's paintings, in which he perceived only "crude but energetic peasants".

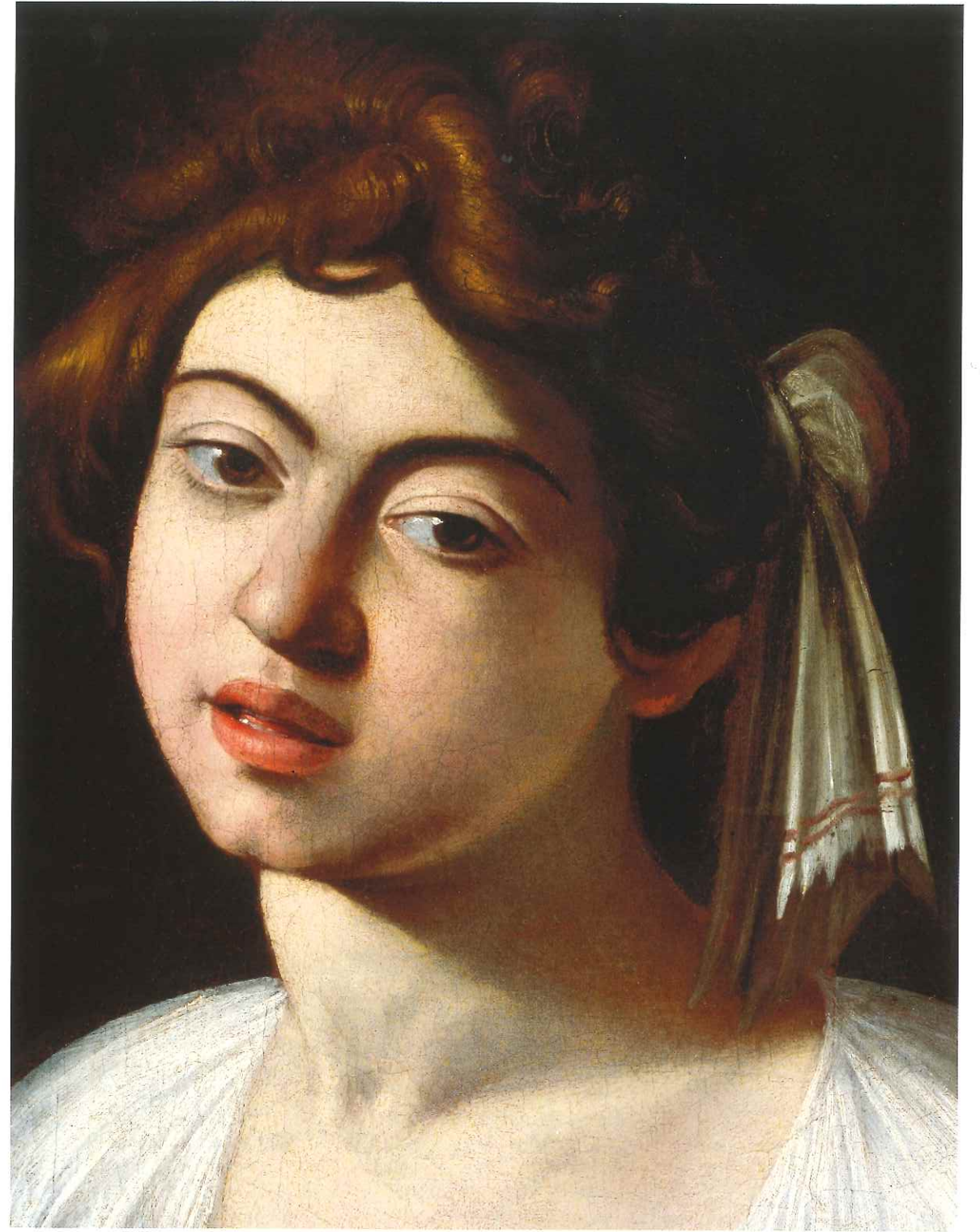
Strange as it seems, the Romantics too gave Caravaggio a wide berth. Balzac does not mention him in the *Comédie humaine*, and Théophile Gautier confines himself to remarking "He seems to have lived in caverns or gambling dens" (*Description du Louvre*, 1849). In his famous *Cicerone*

Detail of *Bacchus*

PAGE 10:
Bacchus, c. 1596–1597
Oil on canvas, 95 x 85 cm (37.4 x 33.5 in.)
Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi

PAGE 12:
Saint Catherine of Alexandria, c. 1598
Oil on canvas, 173 x 133 cm (68.1 x 52.4 in.)
Madrid, Museo Thyssen–Bornemisza

PAGE 13:
Detail of *Lute Player* (p. 14)





Lute Player, 1596–1597
Oil on canvas, 100 x 126.5 cm (39.4 x 49.8 in.)
New York, Private collection loaned to
Metropolitan Museum of Art

(1855), the standard guide-book for the enlightened 19th-century traveller in Italy, Jacob Burckhardt deems the *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* “all but ridiculous” and speaks of “poverty and monotony”. Zola, in his novel *Rome*, praises the Carracci frescoes in the Palazzo Farnese, but fails to mention Caravaggio. In his *Voyage en Italie*, Hippolyte Taine visits Santa Maria del Popolo, where he admires “a charming *Saint Michael* by Guido Reni, a consummately fine *Saint Francis* by Domenichino”, and completely overlooks the *Vocation of Saint Paul*. He did not take the trouble to visit San Luigi dei Francesi, where Caravaggio’s masterpieces hang (it is true that the lighting made appreciation all but impossible at that period).

In the wake of this long and unjustified oblivion came spectacular re-discovery and increasingly rapturous approval. Around 1890, while working on the *Catalogue of the Imperial Collections of Austria*, Wolfgang Kallab detected a common style linking several early 17th-century works of controversial authorship. He concentrated on the treatment of light, the quality of brushwork, and on certain particularities that he studied in depth. He put forward the name of Michelangelo Merisi: Caravaggio. At the time, not a single signed painting was known; even today, only one is known. Little was known of this *peintre maudit*. But the hypothesis gradually came to be



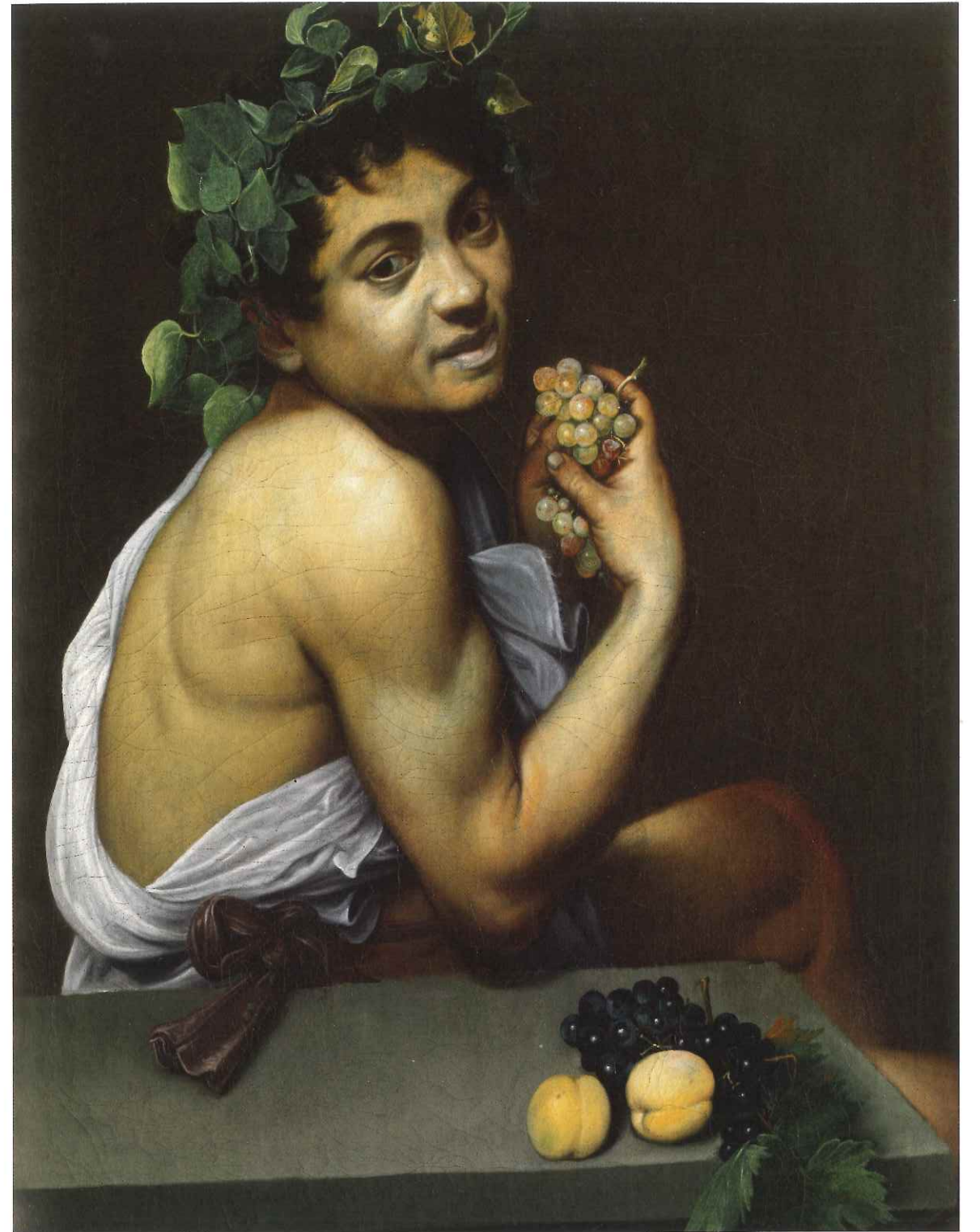
Detail of *Lute Player* (ill. p.14)

accepted. Specialists such as Hermann Voss, Denis Mahon, M. Marangoni, and Lionello Venturi began to define the corpus. The discovery of archive documents in Rome, Naples and Malta gave the work of scholars a new impetus. In 1920, Robert Longhi nailed his colours to the mast: “People speak of Michelangelo de Caravaggio, calling him now a master of shadow, now a master of light. What has been forgotten is that Ribera, Vermeer, la Tour and Rembrandt could never have existed without him. And the art of Delacroix, Courbet, and Manet would have been utterly different”. And thus Caravaggio began a second career as an old master.

Since then, his reputation and influence have grown incessantly. Shortly after the Second World War, in the Palazzo Reale in Milan, an exhibition entitled “Mostra del Caravaggio e dei Caravaggeschi” (Caravaggio and the Caravaggesques) was held. It was conceived by Roberto Longhi, and was a first of its kind; it was also a great popular success. The Baroque had become fashionable. In 1985, the Metropolitan Museum of New York presented “The Age of Caravaggio”, which included the recently identified originals of *Concert* and *Victorious Cupid*. Shortly afterwards, “The Century of Caravaggio in French Collections” opened at the Grand Palais in Paris, with the Rouen *Flagellation* at its heart.

PAGE 16:
Victorious Cupid, 1602
Oil on canvas, 156 x 113 cm (61.4 x 44.5 in.)
Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu
Berlin – Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz

PAGE 17:
Ill Bacchus, c. 1593–1594
Self-portrait
Oil on canvas, 67 x 53 cm (26.4 x 20.9 in.)
Rome, Galleria Borghese





A Revolutionary on the Highroad

Michelangelo Merisi of Caravaggio, a village in the region of Bergamo, had a troubled childhood and adolescence. His date of birth is known to us from the recent discovery of the contract by which he was, in 1584, bound apprentice in the workshop of Simone Peterzano, an established Milanese painter and "pupil of Titian". He was born in September 1571, the year in which, at the Battle of Lepanto, the Ottoman fleet was defeated and Christian dominance of the Mediterranean restored, and a few months before the Saint Bartholomew's Eve massacre in France (August 1572).

During Caravaggio's apprenticeship, Pope Sixtus V ruled over Rome. The Counter-Reformation was in full swing. The Duchy of Milan was dominated by Spain, and was a centre of reaction both religious and artistic. Throughout the rest of Italy, Mannerism prevailed: an academic and rather affected style modelled on the great Roman and Venetian masters. In Lombardy, a freer style had developed, more closely based on reality. It was an early influence in the artistic life of Caravaggio.

His father, Fermo Merisi, was a *magister*, that is, an architect-decorator to the Duke of Milan, the Marquis of Caravaggio, Francesco Sforza I. Caravaggio spent his early years in Milan. In 1576, plague struck the city, and the Duke and his court moved to the Marquisate of Caravaggio. There was no escape, however, for Caravaggio's father and uncle, who both fell victim to the epidemic. His mother brought up her five children in grinding poverty. One of his brothers became a priest, only to be disowned by Caravaggio when, at Rome, the artist was at the height of his fame.

With Francesco Sforza's death, the Marquisate fell to Prince Colonna, and it was almost certainly he who, hearing of the gifts of the young boy from Caravaggio, negotiated a four-year apprenticeship with Simone Peterzano. The protection of the Colonna family was of lasting benefit to Caravaggio, and on one occasion saved his life.

We know little about the activity of Peterzano's studio at the time when Caravaggio was serving his apprenticeship. We know from the *Trattato* (1584) of Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo that Peterzano was reputed for the "lightness and elegance" of his work. His frescoes at the Certosa di Garegnano, near Milan, display a Mannerism tempered with Lombard realism, and a similar impression is given by the *Venus, Cupid and Two Satyrs* (New York, Corsini Collection), in which the treatment of the nudes is reminiscent of the Venetian school. The earliest works of Caravaggio are clearly marked by the influence of the Peterzano.

But other influences also transpire, notably those of the great Masters.



Sofonisba Anguisciola
Portrait of Her Son Asdrubale Bitten by a Crayfish, c. 1554
Drawing, 33.3 x 38.5 cm (13.1 x 15.2 in.)
Naples, Museo e Gallerie Nazionali di Capodimonte

PAGE 18:
Boy Bitten by a Lizard, c. 1595
Oil on canvas, 65.8 x 52.3 cm (25.9 x 20.6 in.)
London, The National Gallery

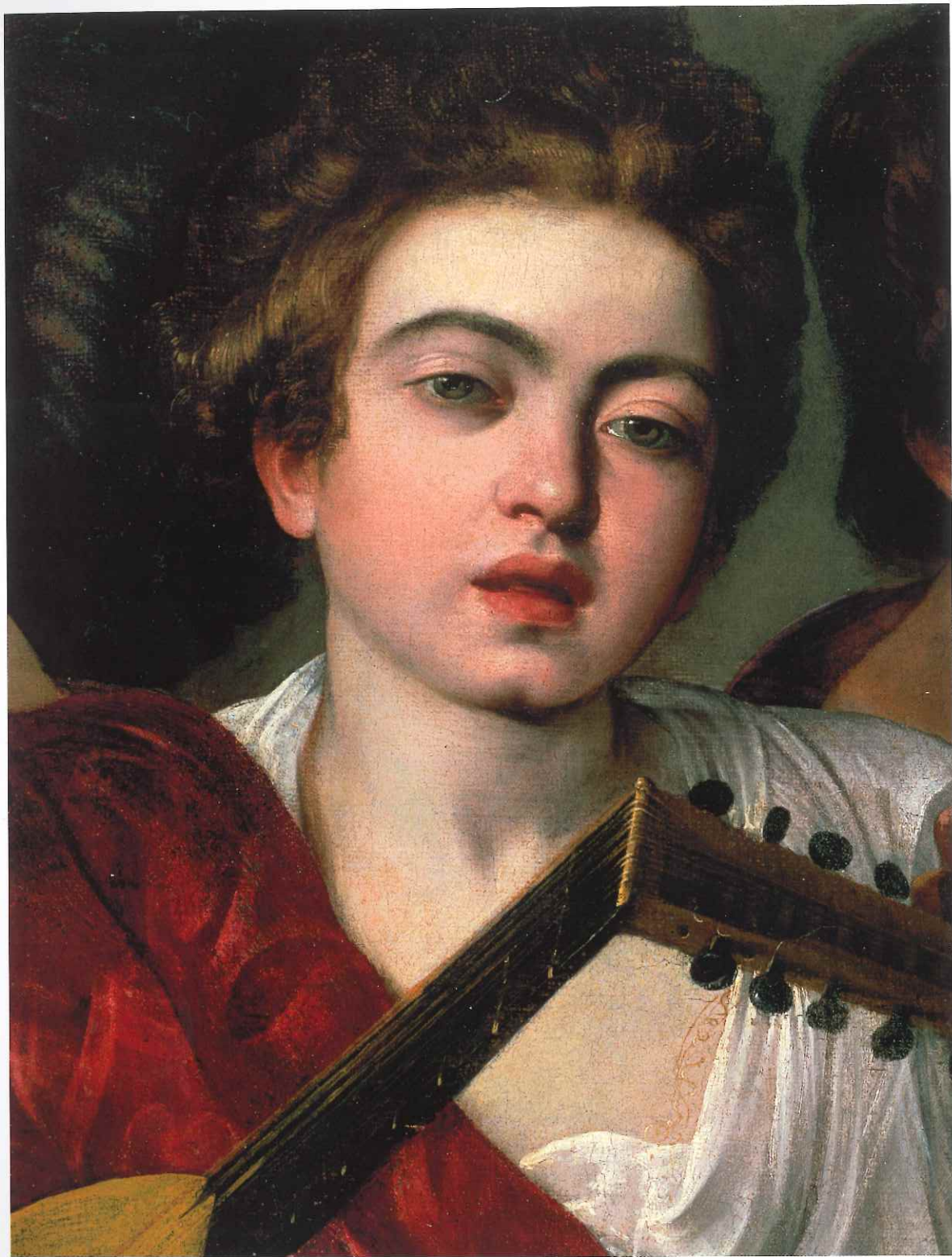
In Milan, Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks* in San Francesco Grande (ill. p. 35) was much admired for its expressive power. In Bergamo, the work of Lorenzo Lotto enjoyed great prestige. Did Caravaggio visit Venice during or after his apprenticeship? Bernard Berenson believes that he must have done, perceiving the influence of Giorgione, Titian and even of Giovanni Bellini in his early work. Mina Gregori, a specialist of our own day, takes the same view. He undoubtedly studied the works of that master of perspective, Andrea Mantegna, at Vicenza, and his only fresco clearly shows this influence. He also travelled to Mantua, where the Palazzo del Te, with its monumental works by Giulio Romano drew the attention of all lovers of painting.

In Milan itself, a new school had grown up in the wake of the Campi brothers; inspired by everyday reality, it treated light in a completely new fashion. It was perhaps from Girolamo Savoldo that Caravaggio received the revelation of *chiaroscuro*: no, light did not fall inevitably from the sky like a gift from the gods. Other painters of a previous generation, such as Moretto da Brescia, Vincenzo Foppa and Girolamo Romanino had revolted against *la maniera*. In Bologna, the Carracci brothers were engaged in a similar enterprise. At Cremona, where Caravaggio studied the frescoes of Pordenone, the famous Sofonisba Anguisciola, who had, as a young woman, known Michelangelo, interspersed her portraits of enthroned

Basket of Fruit, c. 1598–1599
Oil on canvas, 31 x 47 cm (12.2 x 18.5 in.)
Milan, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana

Until 1919, this *trompe-l'oeil* painting was thought to be a Dutch work; today, the attribution to Caravaggio is undisputed.





The Musicians, c. 1595–1596
Oil on canvas, 92 x 118.5 cm (36.2 x 46.7 in.)
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art

princes with scenes from real life. Anguisciola's chalk and charcoal drawing of her little son being bitten on the finger by a crayfish (ill. p. 19) imprinted itself on Caravaggio's memory, and became the subject of one of his earliest Rome paintings.

Caravaggio's training as a painter, his emotional life and youthful experiences remain a matter for hypothesis, as does the formation of his style. In Berenson's view, Venice and its great masters were essential components of that style. The influence of the Lombardy school is equally evident. "In Milan," wrote Roberto Longhi, "a group of native or naturalised painters, had opened a sanctuary of simplicity in art... Theirs was a more familiar view of humanity; combined with a sympathy for humble religiosity, a truer and more attentive sense of colour, and more exact representation of shadows – they even painted night scenes – it opened new avenues of painting to the young artist". Caravaggio had learnt a great deal in Peterzano's studio; he was now a master of technique. At eighteen, full of impatience, ambition and the desire to paint, he set off for Rome.

Why Rome? Caravaggio could have settled in Milan or another Lombard city; the patronage of the Colonna family was felt throughout Lombardy, and art was flourishing. He wanted more; he wanted everything. Rome was the cultural and artistic capital of Italy, indeed, of the world.

It was also a city in the throes of transformation. The dome of Saint Peter's, the biggest building in the world, had just been completed, and the construction of great basilicas such as Santa Maria Maggiore and San Giovanni in Laterano had marked the triumph of Christianity. New avenues were being constructed, such as the Via del Corso. The port of Ripetta on the Tiber opened up the city to the world. Sixtus V had called on all the artists of the peninsula – architects, painters, sculptors, engravers and goldsmiths – to come to Rome. Many Lombard artists responded to his appeal, notably the architect Domenico Fontana, who erected the obelisk in the piazza of Saint Peter's, and the painter Cristoforo Pomarancio.



Detail of *The Musicians*: Self-portrait as singer

PAGE 22:
Detail of *The Musicians*

PAGES 24–25:
The Fortune Teller, c. 1596–1597
Oil on canvas, 99 x 131 cm (39 x 51.6 in.)
Paris, Musée du Louvre

Anecdote here enters painting: a trusting young man is the victim of a theft. Georges de La Tour returned to this theme (ill. p. 94).



The Cardsharps or The Cardplayers,
c. 1594–1596
Oil on canvas, 91.5 x 128.2 cm (36 x 50.5 in.)
Fort Worth (TX), Kimbell Art Museum



Georges de La Tour
The Cardsharps (detail: the cardsharp with
the ace of diamonds), c. 1630
Oil on canvas, 96 x 155 cm (37.8 x 61 in.)
Paris, Musée du Louvre

On the road to Rome, Caravaggio no doubt stopped in Parma; there he would have been struck by the *Deposition of the Virgin* painted for the Capuchins by Annibale Carracci, who had already moved to Rome. This is perhaps the source for Caravaggio's famous and scandalous *Death of the Virgin* in the Louvre (ill. p. 73). Probably he also passed through Viterbo, where he would have seen the *Flagellation* by Sebastiano del Piombo (ill. p. 87). In Florence, he must have dwelt on the works of Masaccio in the Cappella Brancacci at Santa Maria del Carmine. Or so we must suppose, for Caravaggio left no notes, and we can accord little trust to his early biographers, who were jealous when not downright hostile.

The roads were very dangerous; gangs of bandits, such as that of the sinister Sciarra, robbed and killed travellers without mercy. Montaigne, thirty years before, ensured a proper escort before travelling to Rome. No one knows what perils Caravaggio passed through; he probably arrived in 1591–1592. No one will ever know which was the pope whose noisy funeral cortege passed him near the Porta del Popolo: the aged Sixtus V, carried off by the plague, Urban VII, who succeeded him for the period of exactly thirteen days, Gregory XIV, who reigned ten months, Innocent IX, who reigned two months, or, most likely, Clement VIII, of the Aldobrandini family.

Caravaggio had no doubt brought with him a number of canvases painted in Peterzano's studio. But their realist style was unfashionable in Rome, where Mannerism and imitation of Michelangelo or Raphael was the order of the day. The artists then in vogue lacked originality and have left little mark on art history: Sicciolante da Sermoneta, Taddeo Zuccari, Cesare Nebbia, Salviata, Raffaellino di Reggio, and the Cavaliere d'Arpino. The new tendencies finding expression in the work of the Bolognese painter Annibale Carracci, who had just been chosen to decorate the Farnese Gallery, were treated with suspicion and showed no sign of catching on. Kallab, one of those responsible for the "rediscovery" of Caravaggio, wrote: "Young artists arriving in Rome in the late 16th century were in





danger not only of being bound to servile imitation of the Old Masters, but of throwing off their idealism and technical expertise in favour of a hollow, superficial manner: paintings were made rather to be glanced at than studied". Caravaggio had little choice but to comply. He spent a period in the lower depths of Roman society among his fellow-exiles from Lombardy: unemployed stone-carvers, painters and sculptors awaiting commissions, and adventurers seeking easy pickings. He eventually found work with a Sicilian painter whose Roman career was well-established: Lorenzi. In Lorenzi's studio, he found other apprentices from Bergamo, the Longhi brothers. By coincidence, the house of their father Martino the elder, a well-known architect, had been decorated by a painter thirty years older than Caravaggio, Polidoro Caldara (Polidoro da Caravaggio), who left a substantial corpus.

The life of Caravaggio and his friends, such as the Siennese painter Antiveduto Gramatica, was spent in work, drinking, escapades in the brothels, and drunken expeditions into the vineyards of the *campagna* to visit the property of rich art-lovers, many of them known to him through the good offices of another impoverished young painter, Lionello Spada, who was to remain a loyal friend to Caravaggio. Scholars have sought in vain to identify the brushwork of the young Caravaggio in paintings of this period. It seems likely that he also painted some works purely for his own pleasure in this period; if so, they almost certainly ran counter to the prevailing fashion, and could not be sold.

PAGE 28:
Repentant Magdalene, 1596–1597
 Oil on canvas, 122.5 x 98.5 cm (48.2 x 38.8 in.)
 Rome, Galleria Doria Pamphilj

This is Caravaggio's first painting of a woman.

PAGES 30–31:
The Conversion of the Magdalene or Saints Martha and Mary Magdalene, c. 1598
 Oil on canvas, 100 x 134.5 cm (39.4 x 53 in.)
 Detroit (MI), The Detroit Institute of Arts

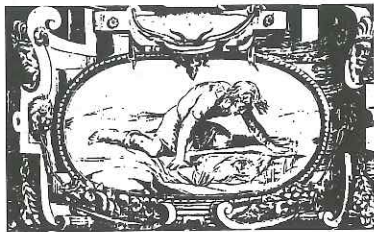
Detail of the jewellery of the *Repentant Magdalene*





The Ecstasy of Saint Francis or Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata, c. 1595
Oil on canvas, 92.5 x 127.8 cm (36.4 x 50.3 in.)
Hartford (CT), Wadsworth Atheneum

In the eyes of many critics, this work marks the birth of Baroque painting.



Tommaso Barlacchi
Narcissus, 1540–1550
Engraving

PAGE 33:
Narcissus, c. 1598–1599
Oil on canvas, 122 x 92 cm (48 x 36.2 in.)
Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Corsini

Then, suddenly, his fortunes changed. The instrument of this metamorphosis was a rich prelate, a “beneficiary of Saint Peter” who enjoyed a Vatican “pension”. His name was Pandulfo Pucci, and, as the younger brother of the Cardinal Pucci who had, in his time, protected the redoubtable Benvenuto Cellini, he was abreast of the new artistic tendencies of the time. He also had a taste for young boys. Fascinated by Caravaggio’s talent and facility, and attracted by his intransigence of character, he offered him board and lodging in return for copying religious paintings; Pucci sent them to the Capuchin convent in Recanati, his native village. None has been found.

Caravaggio had time to spare. He painted whatever he wished, whatever he imagined. Today, it is widely acknowledged that his *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* (ill. p. 18) – with its reminiscence of Sofonisba Anguisciola’s drawing (ill. p. 19) – dates from the beginning of his stay with Cardinal Pucci. The young model is shown at precisely the moment when he reacts to the pain and jerks his hand away. The work is a revolution in itself, marking the advent of the instantaneous in painting. Berenson notes that this break with the conventional must have been perceived as astonishingly innovative. The painting is perhaps allegorical in intention, reflecting the pain inherent in love; the boy’s bare shoulder and the flower behind his ear identify him as a prostitute. The painting is now in the Fondazione Longhi at Florence. A slightly different version, whose authorship is uncertain, is in the National Gallery in London.

Shortly afterwards, between two copies of the Madonna that have not survived, Caravaggio executed a *Boy Peeling Fruit* (ill. p. 8), which was long attributed to Murillo, and later to Le Nain. The *Boy with Vase of Roses* (ill. p. 8) belongs to the same period, as does the very beautiful *Concert of Young People*, sometimes called the *Musicians* (ill. p. 23). The last-named contains the painter’s first surviving self-portrait, in the form of the singer at back right. The presence of a winged Cupid emphasises the homosexual character of the painting, which entered the collection of the Cardinal del



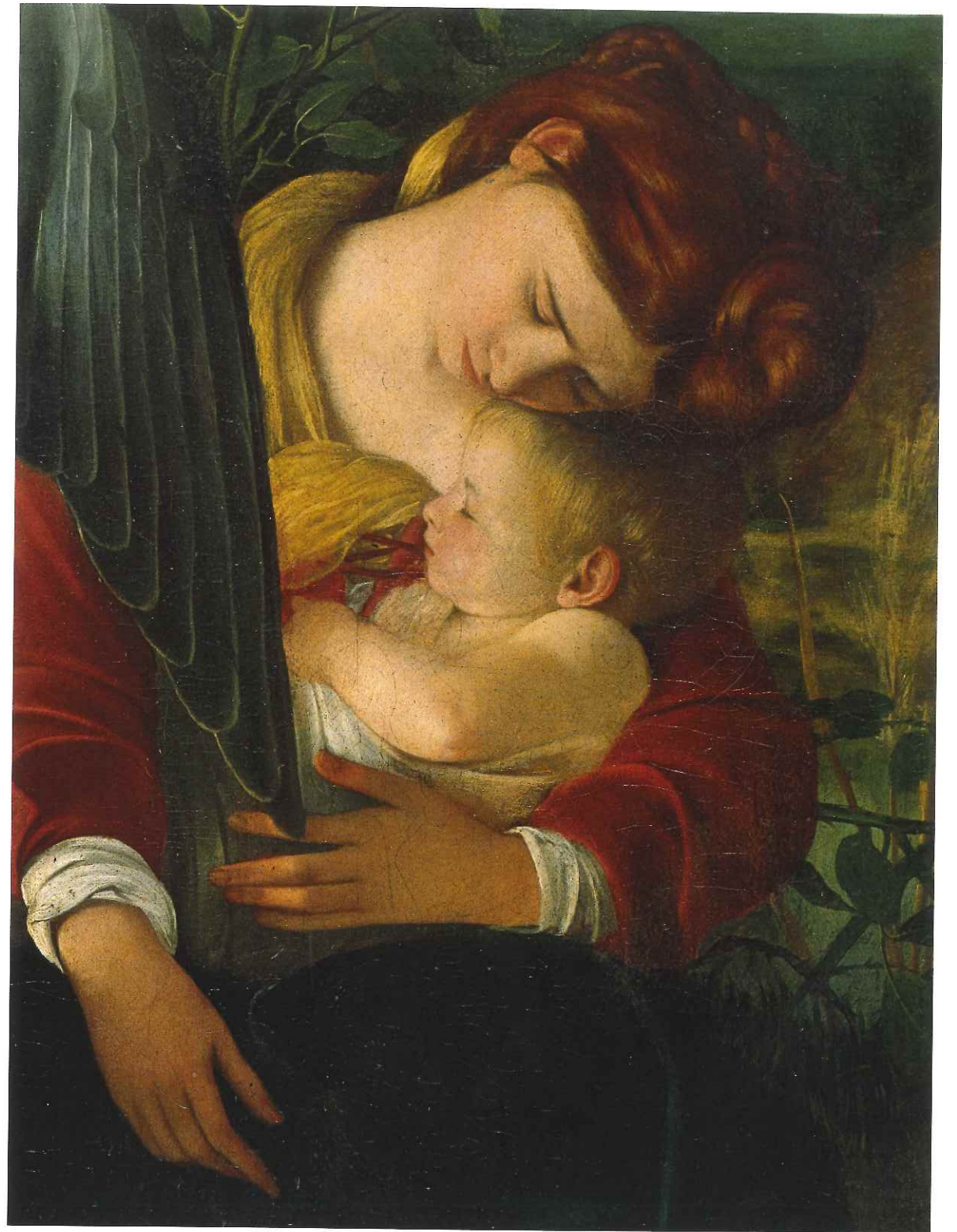


The Rest on the Flight into Egypt,
c. 1596–1597
Oil on canvas, 135.5 x 136.5 cm (53.3 x 53.7 in.)
Rome, Galleria Doria Pamphili

Leonardo da Vinci
The Virgin of the Rocks, 1483–1486
Oil on panel, 199 x 122 cm (78.3 x 48 in.)
Paris, Musée du Louvre



Titian
The Angel Gabriel, c. 1522
Detail of the Averoldi Polyptych, Brescia,
Santi Nazaro e Celso



Judith and Holophernes, 1599
Oil on canvas, 145 x 195 cm (57.1 x 76.8 in.)
Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica,
Palazzo Barberini



The face of Judith is that of Caravaggio's favourite model, Fillide Melandroni, who also posed for the *Saint Catherine of Alexandria* (ill. p. 12 and detail above) and for Martha in the *Conversion of the Magdalene* (ill. pp. 30–31).



Details of *Judith and Holophernes*:
the detached head, and the face of the old
servant-woman who is about to take it.



Monte, another of Caravaggio's patrons. It was sold by his heirs, and reappeared only in 1894 in London, at a Christie's sale.

While staying with Pucci, Caravaggio also painted some still lifes. Three of these have been identified. They are now at the Galleria Borghese, Rome (one with flower and fruit, one with birds) and the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut. They were long considered to be the work of Flemish painters.

This was the period when Caravaggio painted the magnificent *Lute Player* (Hermitage, St Petersburg). The instrumentalist was one of his favoured models; there is a second version of the painting in the Metropolitan Museum, New York, in which the flowers and fruits have disappeared (ill. p. 14). The instruments are painted with minute attention to detail. The lute-player, with his salacious glance and ambiguous charm, seems to have escaped from the *Concert* to live his own life. In the Hermitage version, the score bears the mysterious phrase "Voi sapete chio v'amo" ("You know that I love you"): to whom is this declaration made? In the Metropolitan Museum picture, the score held by the half-naked singer in the foreground also contains a hand-written line, but it cannot, alas, be deciphered.

At this stage of his career, Caravaggio had yet to paint a woman. Only young boys inspired him. But a year later, he turned his hand to a very moving *Repentant Magdalene* (ill. p. 28).

Why did Caravaggio leave the residence of Cardinal Pucci, and perhaps, indeed, Pucci himself? We do not know. Pucci was a difficult character known for his avarice. His protégés were awarded a pittance so meagre that they dubbed him "Cardinal Salad". Caravaggio now found himself penniless and on the street, as he had been when he first arrived in Rome, three years before. He was taken in by Antiveduto Gramatica, his old friend from Lorenzi's studio. Gramatica had "made it"; he was obtaining commis-

sions, and was soon to be received as a member of the Accademia di San Luca.

Shortly afterwards, Caravaggio was struck down by an illness – Roman fever or the plague – that was raging throughout the peninsula. His friend Longhi dragged him to the hospital for the poor, Santa Maria della Consolazione, where he left him, not, perhaps, expecting to see him again. Caravaggio lay among the dying in a dark underground chamber linking the hospital to the neighbouring Palazzo Colonna. Death seemed certain. He owed his life to the Prior of the hospital, a Spaniard named Contreras familiar with the Pucci household, who recognised him, had him transported to a more salubrious room, and commended him to the nuns' care. He survived, but the experience marked him forever, and there is a distant echo of it in several paintings, notably *The Death of the Virgin* (ill. p. 73).

While convalescing at the hospital, Caravaggio is said to have painted several canvases in gratitude for the intervention of the Prior. They were sent to Spain, where, according to Roberto Longhi, they made a deep impression on Velázquez and Zurbarán. There is no trace of them today.

Caravaggio stayed almost six months in the hospital, and his stay inspired one of his best known works, the little *Ill Bacchus* of the Galleria Borghese (ill. p. 17). It is almost certainly a self-portrait; the figure is clearly that of the singer in the group of *The Concert*. The painting was made using a mirror, and the puffy flesh, livid complexion, and the rings around the eyes all suggest that he had not fully recovered. Indeed, he never did; all his life, he complained of head and stomach aches. The *Ill Bacchus* is a penurious god, whose stocks are limited to two apricots and two bunches of grapes. It was painted in the studio of the Cavaliere d'Arpino, then a highly fashionable painter, where the convalescent Caravaggio had been placed either by the Prior or by Cardinal Pucci – not it seems, a man to bear a grudge. The Cavaliere d'Arpino, a former boy-prodigy, was only a little older



Leonardo da Vinci
Study for a Caricature
Milan, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana

The "cabbage-leaf" ears, grimace and toothless mouth of the old servant-woman are inspired by heads drawn by da Vinci, such as this *Study for a Caricature*, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana



than Caravaggio, but was an established society painter who moved in the circles of the papal court. Longhi describes him as an "arriviste". He belonged to one of the most active literary fraternities of Rome, the *Accademia degli Insensati*, so named because they promoted the divine over the evidence of their senses. Torquato Tasso, the poet Battista Lauri and even the future Pope Urban VIII attended the *Accademia*. In the studio, Caravaggio took responsibility for the flower-and-foliage bordering the frescoes commissioned from the Cavaliere. The frescoes of San Atanasio dei Greci (the *Assumption* and *Coronation of the Virgin*) and Santa Prassede have been carefully studied for indications of Caravaggio's authorship. Jullian believes that the flowers in San Atanasio bear the stamp of Caravaggio.

The studio was an excellent place to meet the richest Roman art-lovers: cardinals, ambassadors, and artists of high repute such as Jan Breughel and perhaps Rubens, along with all the dealers of Rome. One of these, Valentin, who had recently arrived from France, took an interest in Caravaggio. In addition to the *Ill Bacchus* of the Borghese Caravaggio painted a *Boy with Basket of Fruit* (ill. p. 8) in the Cavaliere's studio; the painting was later given by Pope Paul V to his nephew Scipione Borghese. The two paintings remained in the studio; in 1607, they were seized in lieu of tax, along with a still life of a basket of fruit, by the agents of Paul V, who had succeeded Clement VIII. At that time, the Cavaliere d'Arpino was out of

The Sacrifice of Isaac, 1596
Oil on canvas, 116 x 173 cm (45.7 x 68.1 in.)
Princeton (NJ), Collection Barbara Piasecka Johnson

PAGE 40:
Saint John the Baptist, c. 1597–1598
Oil on canvas, 169 x 112 cm (66.5 x 44.1 in.)
Toledo, Museo-Tesoro Catedralico



The Sacrifice of Isaac, 1603
Oil on canvas, 104 x 135 cm (40.9 x 53.2 in.)
Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi

favour and was imprisoned for illegal possession of an arquebus. It is possible that Valentin at this period contrived to sell other works painted by Caravaggio painted in almost clandestine fashion in the Cavaliere's studio.

And then he was again out on the street. Though he knew the elite of the art world, it was to the vagabond population of Rome that he returned. Deaf to the advice of Valentin, sure of his own genius, intoxicated with his new freedom, he spent his time in and around the Piazza Navona, mostly in the company of penniless painters like himself. Longhi had settled down, but Lionello Spado took his place, along with Antonio Tempesta, another fugitive from the Cavaliere's studio, and both were ready for any escapade that offered. They provoked the Papal police, hung around with the many Roman women of easy virtue, drank excessively and frightened the bourgeoisie. Caravaggio was twenty years old and wanted to forget his copies of the Madonna, his frescoed floral border: to live and paint as he chose. But he needed money. He turned to Valentin, who advised him to paint religious scenes, for which demand was great. Caravaggio accepted, asked for paint and brushes, and returned to the dealer's house with a second *Bacchus* (ill. p. 10) instead. This time the god wore the chubby features of a healthy boy with a drowsy stare; crowned with the traditional vine-wreath, he carries a



PAGE 43:
Landscape detail from *The Sacrifice of Isaac*



glass goblet in his hand, which seems to have been served from the half-full carafe on the table. The painting is now in the Uffizi, in Florence. Certain details, such as the withered leaves of the wreath and the rotting fruits on the table, are deliberately provocative. This is the first picture cited by his implacable biographer, Baglione: "A *Bacchus* with several clusters of grapes, executed with great diligence, but rather coldly, at the time when Caravaggio was trying to work independently". The painting disappeared. It was miraculously rediscovered in 1916 by Roberto Longhi, who recognised it, despite its condition, in one of the storerooms of the Uffizi. When it was restored, a tiny reflection showing the head of a man wearing a white collar was revealed on the side of the carafe. Three hundred years later, the genius of the painter suddenly became evident.

The *Bacchus* was either refused or sold off for very little, and did nothing to solve Caravaggio's problems; he was still penniless. Convinced of his genius, Valentin begged him in vain to accept a "real" commission, for example, a Crucifixion. Instead, Caravaggio brought him a scene from the streets or the popular theatre, a *Fortune Teller* (ill. pp. 24–25), for which Valentin gave only thirty *écus*. The same painting was later bestowed by Louis XIV on Prince Doria Pamphilj, and is now in the Louvre.

Radiography has shown that the scene was painted over a Virgin in the style of the Cavaliere d'Arpino, to save money. This was the first painting of such a scene, and its vulgarity was deemed shocking – though it inspired the *Fortune Teller* by Georges de La Tour (ill. p. 94). Delighted to have served "Monseigneur" Valentin so well, Caravaggio went out on a spree, which again ended in a confrontation with the Papal police.

What happened thereafter? What arguments did Valentin use to convince the young painter? No doubt he held out the prospect of patronage from one of the richest art-lovers in Rome, his best client, Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte. And Caravaggio: was he tired of life on the street? Did he experience some kind of mystical crisis? At all events, he accepted Valentin's offer and promised to paint a religious subject, the first of his career. But it was not a Crucifixion, a Deposition, or an Annunciation, nor even a Martyrdom. He chose to subject infrequently painted, *The Ecstasy of Saint Francis* or *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* (ill. p. 32). He set to work in Valentin's cellar, determined to acquit himself of this chore as quickly as possible.

And, of course, he painted a masterpiece, which opened to him the doors of the great Roman collectors. It brought him both reputation and the esteem of powerful patrons, and may be considered his first mature work.



Phyllis, c. 1596–1597
Oil on canvas, 66 x 53 cm (26 x 20.9 in.)

This work was destroyed during the Second World War. It belonged to the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum, Berlin.

PAGE 44:
Portrait of Maffeo Barberini
(later Pope Urban VIII), c. 1598–1599
Oil on canvas, 124 x 90 cm (48.8 x 35.4 in.)
Florence, private collection