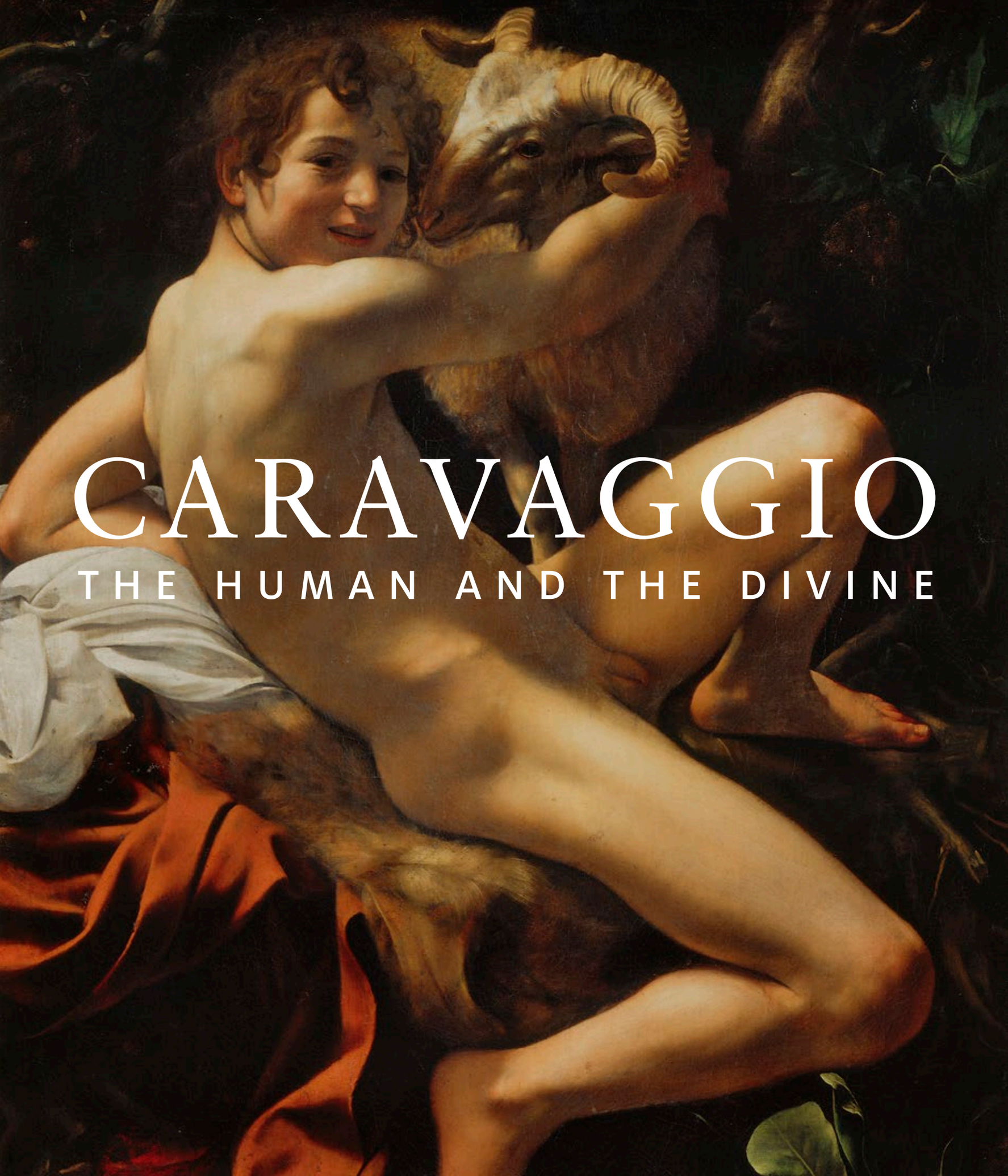


CARAVAGGIO

THE HUMAN AND THE DIVINE

Staatliche
Kunstsammlungen
Dresden

CARAVAGGIO

THE HUMAN AND THE DIVINE

PUBLISHED BY THE
STAATLICHE KUNSTSAMMLUNGEN DRESDEN,
STEPHAN KOJA, IRIS YVONNE WAGNER

SANDSTEIN VERLAG

Contents

VALESKA VON ROSEN

Competing for Attractive Pictures of Youths

CARAVAGGIO'S *SAINT JOHN* IN THE GALLERIA CAPITOLINA

There is much to suggest that the circumstances of viewing the Capitoline *Saint John the Baptist* (Fig. 1) in the Dresden exhibition do not differ fundamentally from those experienced by Caravaggio's contemporaries.[1] Even in the home of its first owner in Rome, Marchese Ciriaco Mattei, it would have hung in a room alongside other contemporary paintings.[2] And, then as now, it is likely that the picture by the young painter from Lombardy, who had been working in Rome for about ten years, attracted the special interest of the viewers. For in 1602, the year the marchese most likely bought it from Caravaggio, the artist had already made a name for himself with numerous much-discussed paintings in the collections of Roman aristocrats and had recently caused a sensation among a wider public with his first chapel decoration. The "romore" stirred up by the paintings in the Contarelli Chapel in the Roman church of San Luigi dei Francesi was recorded by the first viewers.[3] Even if the marchese's collection of paintings in his *palazzo* in Via delle Botteghe Oscure was not open to the public like today's museums and exhibitions, Ciriaco Mattei seems to have been keen to show his new acquisition to as many art lovers as possible. There can be no other explanation for the proliferation of paintings of Saint John that openly reference Caravaggio's picture (Figs. 18–22) by artists working in Caravaggio's immediate and wider circle.[4] The fact that Caravaggio's paintings in the Mattei collection also caused quite a "stir" (*romore*) among those who saw them was noted by the painter's first biographer, Giovanni Baglione.[5]

THE SPATIAL AND SITUATIONAL CONTEXT OF THE PAINTING

What makes the initial reception of Caravaggio's *Saint John* in the setting of a private collection so remarkable is that it was still comparatively new in Rome around 1600. While religious paintings in the secular context of a private home had a long tradition, their purpose until then had been primarily religious; they served to inspire acts of private devotion. Over the course of the 16th century, an unparalleled boom of religious paintings in the secular context led to a widening of the definition of their purpose and, with it, to new forms and practices of their reception. These pictures were now considered "collectable" – a status that had previously been accorded primarily to antique sculptures as well as predominantly small-format objects brought together in collections of art and naturalia.[6] Typically executed on canvas and intended for the profane spaces of a *palazzo*, these "mobile" religious paintings (*quadri*) often featured life-size figures and treated subjects taken from both the New and Old Testament: Saints such as Nicolas Régnier's Dresden *Saint Sebastian* (p. 88, Fig. 11), Old Testament heroes such as Guido Reni's *David with the Head of Goliath* (Fig. 2), and scenes from the Passion such as Leonello Spada's *Christ at the Column* (p. 66, Fig. 8) typify the religious images produced for the burgeoning picture collections of Roman aristocrats and wealthy citizens.[7] Gradually – the dynamics differed from one region to the next – new "profane" subjects were added: still lifes, landscapes, and what we now describe as "genre pictures".

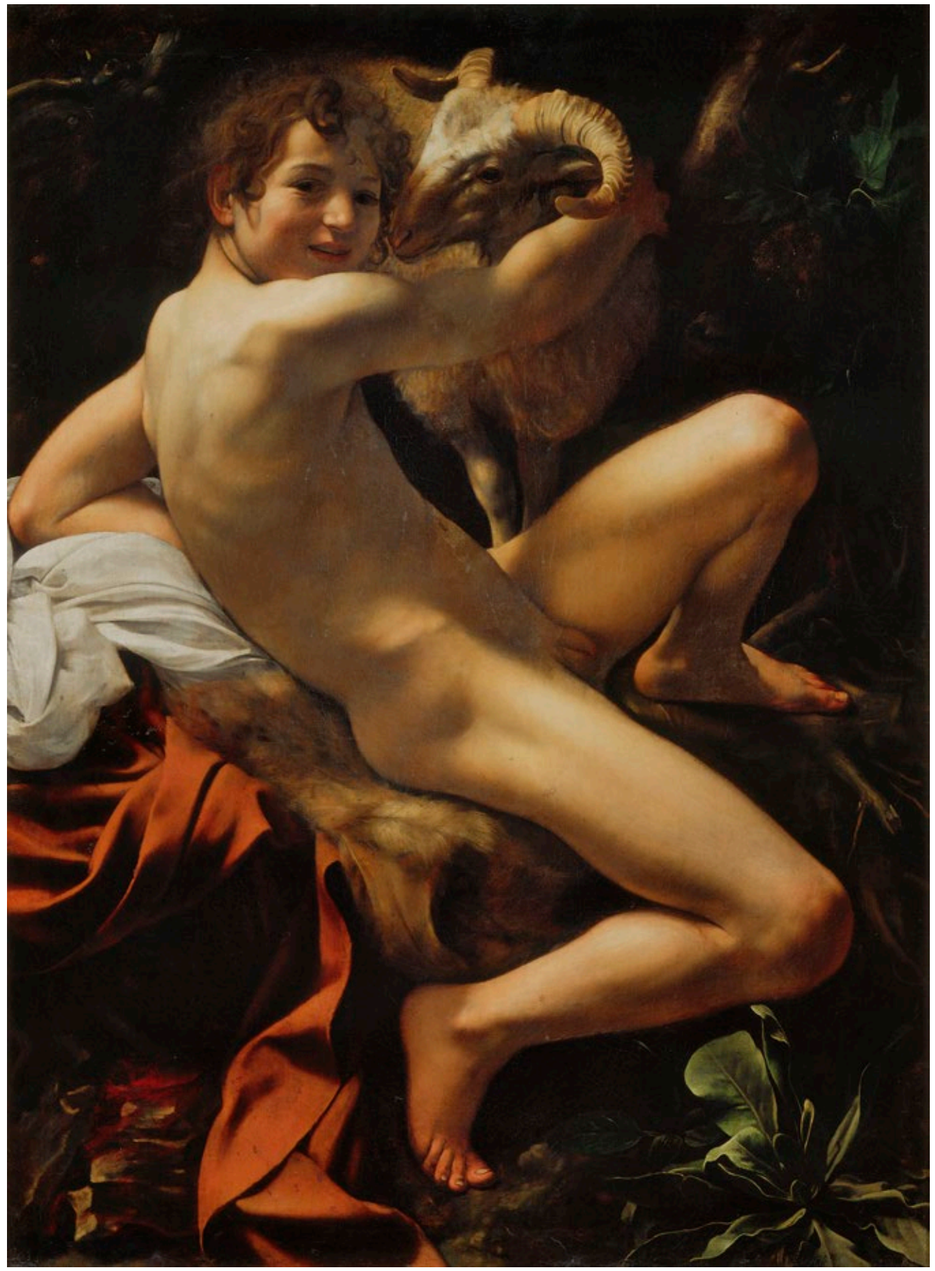


Fig. 1

CARAVAGGIO

SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST

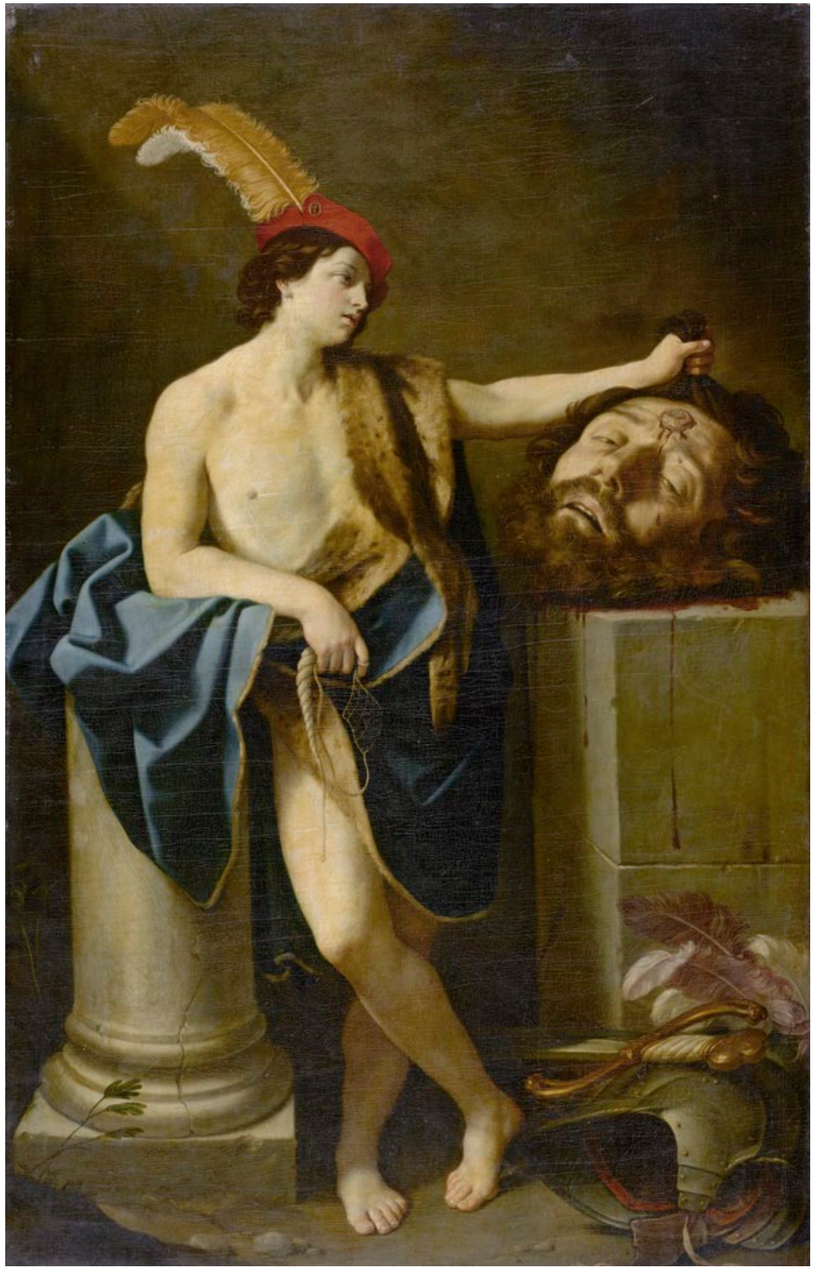
1602

Rome, Capitoline Museums

Fig. 2

GUIDO RENI
(AND WORKSHOP?)
DAVID WITH THE
HEAD OF GOLIATH

c. 1630
SKD, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister



Caravaggio's contemporaries would have described a painting such as the Dresden half-length picture of a *Young Man wearing a Wreath* by the Dutch Golden Age painter Salomon de Bray (p. 113, Fig. 19) as "Ragazzo con bastone" ("Young Man with a Shepherd's Staff").[8]

When the spatial and situational contexts of images change, the images themselves change with them, because the conditions under which works of art are perceived and produced are always interdependent. Without the new context of the private picture collection to frame the reception of art, Caravaggio's *Saint John*, painted for Ciriaco Mattei, would probably look different, and the painter's success in Rome and southern Italy in general would hardly have been as great as it was. In the following analysis, therefore, I use the example of the *Saint John* for Ciriaco Mattei to show how Caravaggio responded to the conditions and opportunities posed by the progressively changing circumstances under which religious images were received in profane spaces. Central to this analysis are three closely related aspects of the painting: its deliberately enigmatic structure, the exceptional attractiveness, if not indeed *lascività*[9] of the figure, and the "interpictorial" potential of the painting, i. e., its inherent allusions and references to other works, both earlier and contemporary.

QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY

In his painting for Ciriaco Mattei, Caravaggio presents us with a life-size figure of a completely naked youth with curly brown hair. Seen from the side and set against a deep black background, he is half-sitting, half-reclining on an indeterminate object in an equally indeterminate outdoor space suggested by leaves and branches. He has his left leg pulled up, his foot close to his buttock, and supports himself on his left forearm behind his back. Reaching across his body with his right arm, he pulls a ram towards him, its muzzle almost touching his cheek. It is this intimate closeness to the animal next to him that determines the boy's posture. At the same time, he turns his head far to the right – abruptly, it seems – to look over his shoulder, directing his gaze out of the picture and at us. The small wrinkles around his eyes and the open mouth with the visible upper row of teeth suggest a smile. Much of the boy's face is shaded by the strong beam of light entering from the upper left. What would generate so focussed a beam in an outdoor space and why it does not illuminate the boy's body more consistently remains a mystery. In contrast to current Caravaggio studies that tend to associate the artist's work with vague terms such as "realism" and "naturalism", his contemporaries perceived the sharply articulated illumination in Caravaggio's paintings as "artificial" (*artificioso*) and "affected" (*affettate*) and thus apostrophized the paintings as "non-naturalistic" (*non naturale*).[10]

The situation depicted provides no clues as to the reason for the singular pose of the boy with the animal or his nakedness. He actually does have clothing, but is sitting on it. The discarded items are a large red cloth that pools on the floor in deep folds, a white cloth, and a soft animal pelt that touches the boy's buttocks and thighs and invites the viewer to imagine the pleasurable feeling of fur on skin.

The image of an undressed young man, reclining in an unsteady pose in an outdoor space as he smilingly embraces a ram, does not form part of the Western pictorial canon. So it should come as no surprise that, even while the painting was still in the hands of the Mattei and also later, when it had passed into different ownership, some viewers were at a loss to identify the figure.[11] Art historians, too, have found it difficult to assign him a consistent identity.[12] When we see the picture today – either here in the exhibition in Dresden or in the Capitoline Museums, where it belongs – and find a label identifying its subject as "John the Baptist", we must

remember that such labels, just like titles of pictures, are modern inventions. The ready information these labels provide about the subject of the painting decisively changes the process of perception compared to the situation in Caravaggio's time. It is safe to assume that Ciriaco Mattei did not instantly present visitors to his collection with the answer to their questions about the naked boy's identity – some of the appeal of the painting evidently lies precisely in the fact that the figure raises questions as to its meaning. There is no text in either the Old or the New Testament that tells of a naked young man with a ram, no Christian legend or ancient myth to provide a clue that would help to decipher the painting. Thus, it is up to the viewer to mentally go through the possible iconographies that combine a naked young man in an outdoor space with an animal of the kind shown here, and to weigh what speaks for and what speaks against the various options of identifying the figure.

Throughout the centuries, viewers have thus mentally "scanned" iconographies and come up with different results. In an inventory of the Mattei collection and in a Rome guide, the young man was referred to as a "coridone" (shepherd) and a "pastor friso" (Phrygian shepherd).[13] The vagueness of these generalized titles that reference a generic Phrygian shepherd rather than a specific mythological figure bespeaks the perplexity of the inventory-writer tasked with categorizing the subject. Modern scholarship has variously chosen to identify the boy as Paris, the son of the Trojan king Priamos who grew up among shepherds,[14] or as Isaac, the son of the patriarch Abraham, who, having been saved by an angel, smiles as he poses with the replacement sacrificial victim.[15] In view of the difficulty of reconciling the image with the rationale of the story of the sacrifice of Isaac and, in the absence of any iconographic parallels, this reading was just as unlikely to prevail as the one that wanted to recognize the young man as Paris. In the end, most viewers of the painting in the Mattei collection probably came to the same conclusion as the majority of the inventories[16] and the two biographers of Caravaggio, Giovanni Baglione (1642) and Giovanni Pietro Bellori (1672), as well as the art theorist Francesco Scannelli (1657).[17] But they would have arrived at their conclusion of "John the Baptist in the Wilderness" in full awareness of the fact that John lacks the unequivocal attributes of the Baptist (cf. Fig. 3 and Fig. 4), namely the reed cross with the banner inscribed "Ecce Agnus Dei" (Behold the Lamb of God) as well as the pointing gesture, which acts as a visual reminder of the Baptist's salvific role in paving the way for Christ at the juncture between the Old Testament and the New one. Viewers would also been baffled by the horns, which clearly identify the "Lamb of God" as a sexually mature male animal, and by the fact that the boy has taken off his clothes for no readily apparent reason. Just how carefully Caravaggio considered the removal of the instantly recognizable attributes is demonstrated by a small detail. The stick under the left foot of the Baptist, which can only just be made out when we look very closely, could possibly be read as a reed cross. If that is the case, the boy casually uses his foot to prevent it from rolling away so that his right hand can grasp the ram.

Caravaggio continued to pursue this calculated, strategic obfuscation in conjunction with a deliberate semantic openness of the figure in his later depictions of Saint John for other Roman collectors. Tellingly, after the success of the painting in the Mattei collection, the Baptist became his most sought-after subject. In the painting for Ottavio Costa, executed between 1604 and 1605, the saint has a clearly visible reed cross, but no animal (Fig. 5).[18] In the picture of the Corsini Collection (Fig. 6),[19] probably painted at the same time for a patron whose name has not come down to us, the picture frame strategically cuts off the reed cross, and, once again, the animal is missing, although the bowl could indicate that it is nearby. In the *Saint John the Baptist* of Caravaggio's final years (Fig. 7), acquired from the painter's estate by Cardinal Scipione Borghese, the boy is holding a shepherd's crook without so much as a hint of a crossbar. Here, the animal is once again a horned ram, but it shows less interest in the boy than

Fig. 3

MARCELLO VENUSTI

SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST

early 1570s
Rome, Santa Caterina dei Funari,
Cappella Torres

Fig. 4

GIUSEPPE CESARI, CALLED
CAVALIERE D'ARPINO

SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST

c. 1603–1606
Rome, Galleria Borghese

in the foliage on which it nibbles with relish.[20] None of these works feature the Baptist's pointing gesture, the banner, or a halo that would have dispelled any association of a profane or mythological figure. Indeed, Caravaggio's downward gazes and deep black eye sockets in the paintings for Ottavio Costa (Fig. 5) and the Corsini Collection (Fig. 6), together with the factual "darkness" of the figures, also heighten their metaphorical *obscuritas* (ambiguity), which had been, not without reason, a popular device in rhetoric and poetics since antiquity.[21]

THE IMAGINARY "PICTURE CAROUSEL"

The following applies to each of these works, and especially to their prototype in the Mattei collection: the structural distinctiveness of the pictures initiates a process of interpretation or reception that can be described as a process of tentative semantization and that functions via the mental recall of familiar images of Saint John. While we now have ready access to a veritable treasure trove of images for comparison, Caravaggio's contemporaries, unless they had copies or reproductive engravings to hand, had to call on their inner eye to visualize images of Saint John they had already seen and committed to memory. Within easy reach were the altarpiece by Marcello Venusti in the neighbouring church of Santa Caterina dei Funari from the early 1570s (Fig. 3)[22] and perhaps also the small slate tablet in the Borghese Collection by

IRIS YVONNE WAGNER

Transformation and Innovation in Caravaggio's Work

Despite intensive research, few facts are known about Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's life and education before his arrival in Rome in 1592. None of his early works have come down to us, so that his artistic development can only be traced on the basis of art-historiographical evidence, surviving sources, and his works made as an already independent artist.

At the age of thirteen, Caravaggio began a four-year apprenticeship as a painter in Simone Peterzano's studio in Milan. The apprenticeship contract is dated 6 April 1584, but little is known about his tasks in his master's studio.[1] We do not know whether he actually worked for Peterzano for four years or more, nor whether he moved to another workshop or undertook study trips. The author of the present essay, too, can only identify the factors that may have influenced his work on the basis of the documents and other scraps of information that have come down to us and one must necessarily accept that these amount to no more than an approximation of the artist's personality – incomplete and not definitive.

The year Caravaggio began his apprenticeship, the Archbishop of Milan, Carlo Borromeo, died. He was a leading figure of the Catholic reform in the wake of the Council of Trent. He followed the ideal of poverty and venerated saints and their relics in a special way. His manual on church construction and decoration, published in 1577, had a great influence on the Baroque architecture of the Counter-Reformation in Rome and elsewhere.[2] Although no direct connection with Caravaggio can be proven, Borromeo's written instructions on the use of art in churches influenced the work of subsequent generations of artists and may therefore have been important for Caravaggio's work. Some art historians see the ideal of poverty promoted by Borromeo as the starting point for Caravaggio's religious works.[3]

In addition to the Lombard school and its important representatives such as (mid-period) Lorenzo Lotto, Sofonisba Anguissola, or Vincenzo Campi, it was Venetian art that influenced Caravaggio's work. His teacher, Simone Peterzano, boasted that he had been a student of Titian, although this has been disputed. Coming to Rome afforded Caravaggio the opportunity to study not just ancient marbles or Roman painting and sculpture but also Venetian as well as Florentine art. His first patron and promoter, Cardinal Francesco Maria Del Monte, had Venetian works by Francesco and Leandro Bassano, Palma il Vecchio, Tintoretto, and Titian in his collection. Moreover, it is likely that Caravaggio saw works by Ludovico and Annibale Carracci on his way to Rome via Bologna. We have no documents to trace the exact route he took and to reconstruct which works he studied along the way, and so we have to rely on comparative pictorial analyses to provide an idea as to what he saw and studied. As Sebastian Schütze explains, the cinquecento had given rise to a vast repertoire of forms, stylistic devices, and pictorial concepts that eventually came to inform Caravaggio's work. However, it was not until he reached Rome that these influences and stimuli could unfold and Caravaggio could develop an autonomous and distinctive profile.[4] In the following, I will present a series of works and types of works that could have either directly inspired Caravaggio's pictorial inventions or that offer an insight into the cultural context in which his works were created.

PORTRAITS OF MUSICIANS

When Caravaggio arrived in Rome, probably in the summer of 1592, he was unknown as an artist and initially worked in several of the established workshops. Gradually, he achieved some degree of artistic autonomy with relatively small paintings of half-length figures, including self-portraits. His *Self-Portrait as Bacchus* (*Sick Bacchus*) and the *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* (p. 171, Fig. 2) are among the earliest of his surviving paintings. His pictures of boys playing music chimed with the interests of his patron Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte. As the diplomatic representative of Ferdinando I de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, the cardinal resided in the Medici-owned Palazzo Madama and was not only a collector and patron himself, but also acted as art agent for the Grand Duke. He took Caravaggio into his household in the mid-1590s, and the artist lived in the cardinal's *palazzo* until about 1600. There he was able to gather experience, broaden his horizons, and establish a network of important contacts with future clients, which was to have a significant influence on his career. In addition to *The Musicians* (*Concert of Youths*; p. 95), painted for the art and music-loving cardinal around 1594/1595, Caravaggio also produced several versions of the *Lute Player* (Fig. 1) as well as other works such as *The Cardsharps* (see p. 84) and *The Fortune Teller*.[5] In the 15th and 16th century, scenes of music-making and images of performers represented a genre in its own right, and the disciplines of music and the fine arts were often compared with each other. There was, furthermore, an established tradition of portraits of musicians, for example *The Lute Player* by Bartolomeo Passarotti, painted in 1576. In the mid-1590s, Annibale Carracci painted the *Portrait of the Lute Player Giulio Mascheroni* (Fig. 2), which is now

Fig. 1

CARAVAGGIO

LUTE PLAYER

1595/1596
Saint Petersburg,
Hermitage

Fig. 2

ANNIBALE CARRACCI

PORTRAIT OF THE LUTE PLAYER GIULIO MASCHERONI

c. 1593–1594

SKD, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister

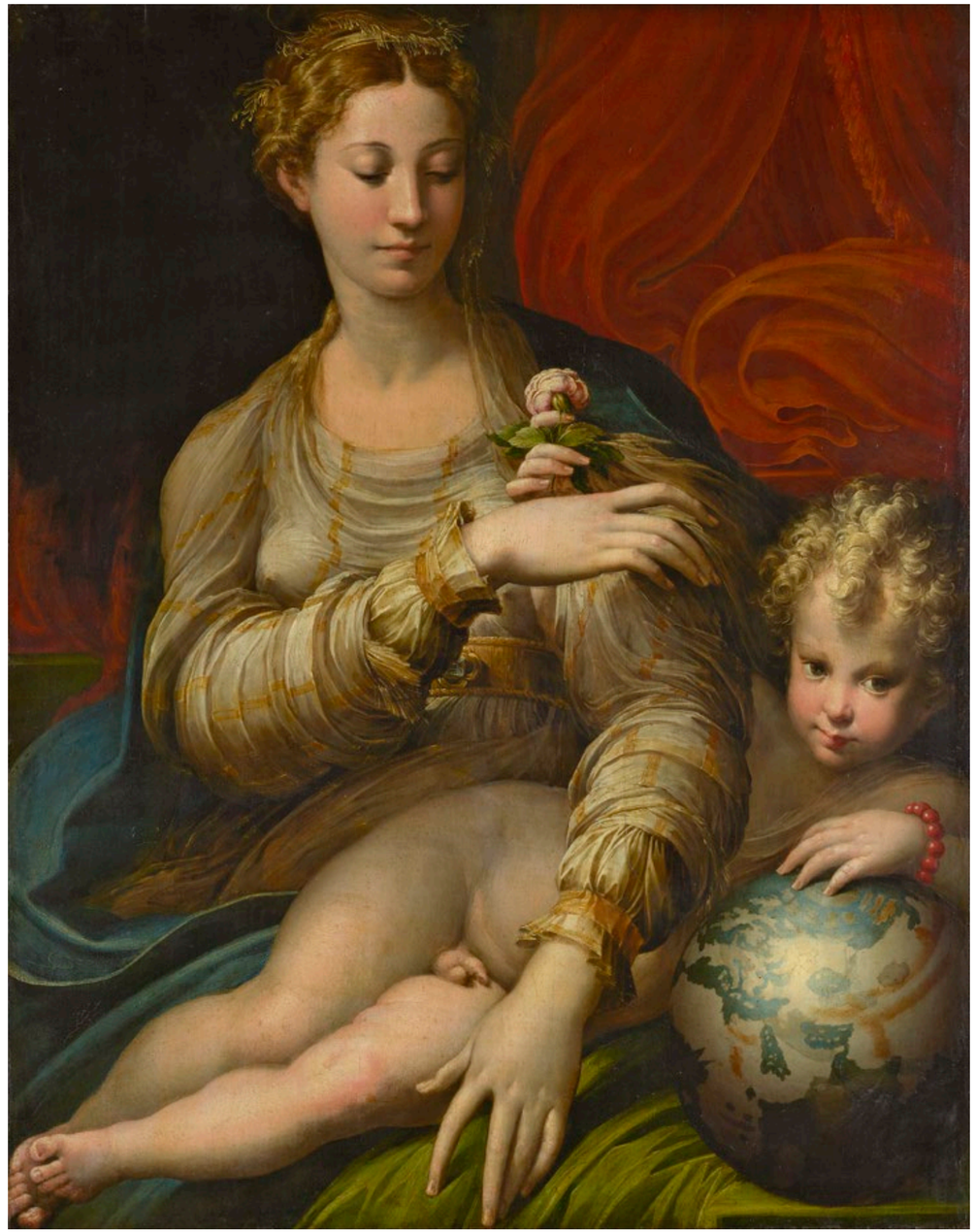
Fig. 3 ▷

FRANCESCO MAZZOLA, CALLED PARMIGIANINO

MADONNA WITH THE ROSE

c. 1529/1530

SKD, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister



in Dresden. Mascheroni was a renowned court lutenist in Bologna and a member of the music ensemble Concerto Palatino from 1589 to 1602.[6] Carracci's portrait of him was created in Bologna, shortly before the painter moved to Rome in 1595. Set against a diffuse, indeterminate background, the musician looks at the viewer, his lute raised as if to play, testing out a note, his face and hands picked out by the light. The notes and the quill at the lower edge of the composition indicate that the sitter is in the process of composing a piece of music. Thus the portrait presents painting and composition as sister arts.

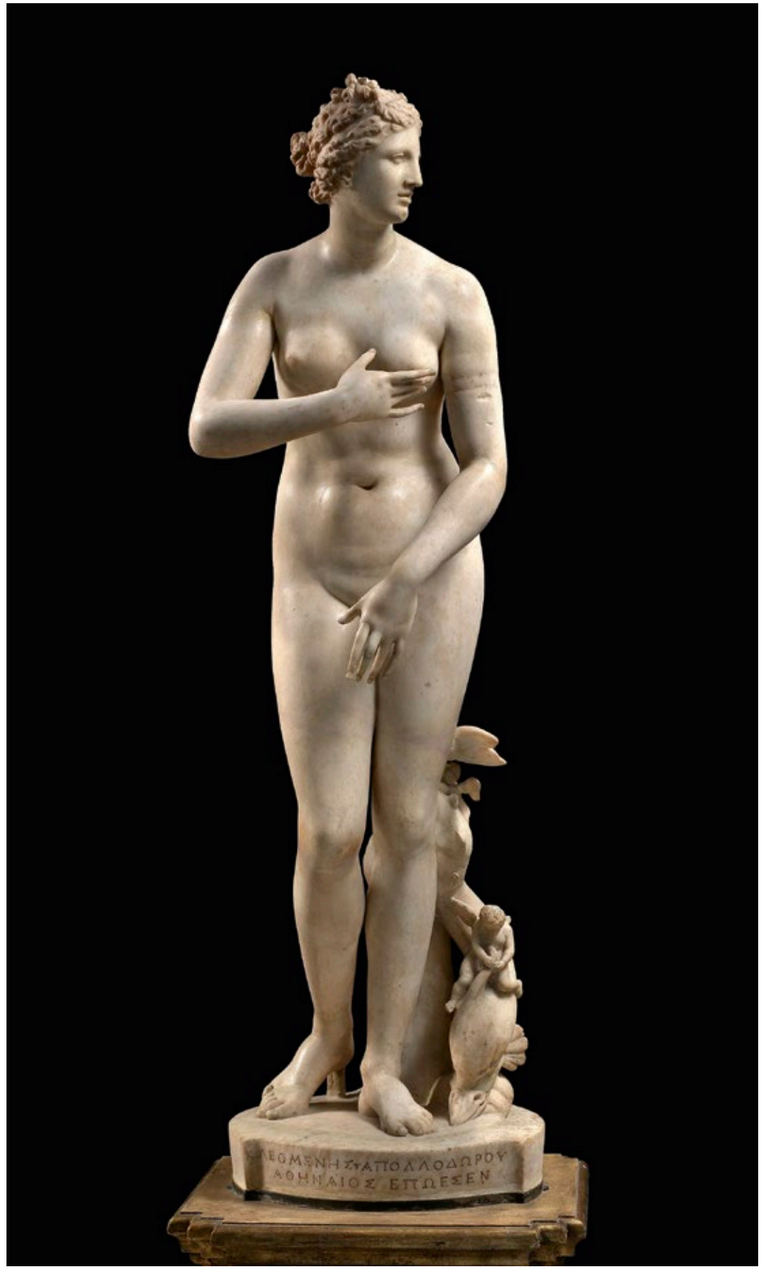
Caravaggio's *Lute Player* of 1595/1596 from the Giustiniani collection is the earliest version and may have been a gift from the cardinal to his friend Giustianini, prompting Del Monte to commission a second version for himself. The figure of the boy in a white shirt stands out sharply against the dark background. The light coming from the left and the shadows created by it give the figure and the objects a near-tangible volume. To the right of the young lutenist is a bouquet of assorted flowers in a glass vase. A still life of fruit is arranged on the marble tabletop, which is set parallel to the picture plane, separating the pictorial space from that of the viewer. Directly in front of the boy lies an opened music book and a violin with bow. The features of the youth are based on those of a model who has been variously identified as Caravaggio's studio assistant Mario Minniti or as the castrato singer Pedro Montoya.[7] What matters in terms of the picture's meaning, however, is not so much its portrait-like character as its direct appeal to the senses. Accompanying himself on the lute, the boy with the slightly opened mouth sings a love madrigal by the Netherlandish composer Jacques Arcadelt, which was popular at the time and has been identified from the score.[8] Thus the boy alludes to the sense of hearing; the sense of touch is evoked by the hands on the lute, the senses of taste and smell through the still life of fruit and the bouquet of flowers and, last but by no means least, the sense of sight through the painter's virtuoso command of his art.

Fig. 4

CLEOMENES, SON OF APOLLODORUS OF ATHENS (AFTER)

APHRODITE, SO-CALLED VENUS MEDICI

Late 2nd to early 1st century BC
Florence, Uffizi

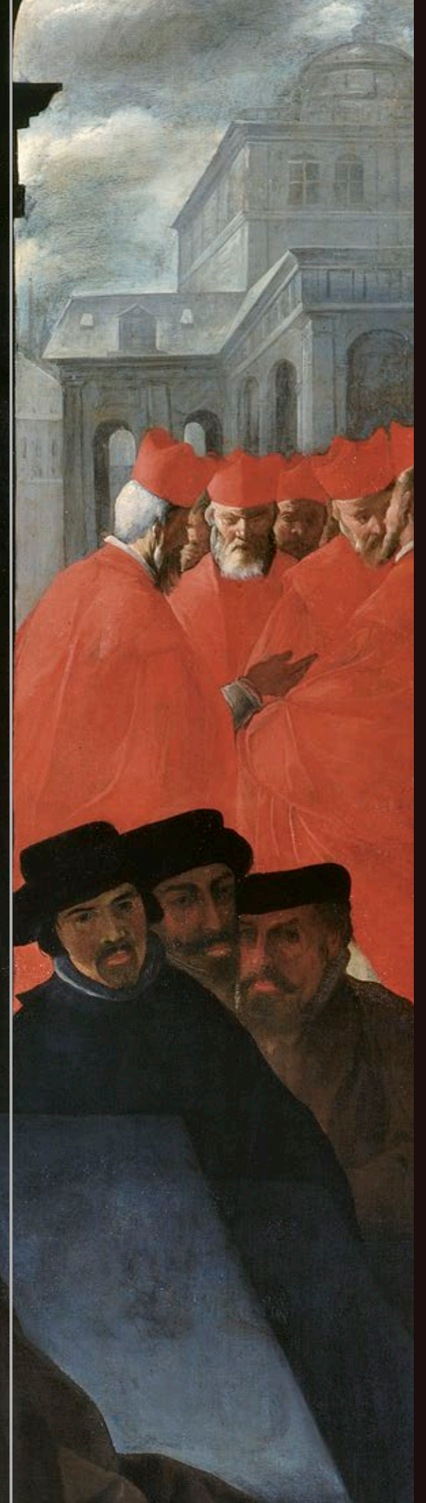


Like Caravaggio's *Saint John the Baptist* (p. 15, Fig. 1), Parmigianino's *Madonna with the Rose* (Fig. 3) is a painting that plays with the ambiguity of its subject.[9] The painting was originally commissioned around 1529/1530 by the writer Pietro Aretino – celebrated and notorious in equal measure for his satires, comedies, and erotic poems.[10] When Pope Clement VII arrived in Bologna for the coronation of Charles V as emperor, the artist presented it to the pontiff.[11] Clement VII eventually left the painting to Dionigi Zani, who, in turn, gave the *Madonna with the Rose* to his son Bartolomeo, in whose home, the Villa Zani in the hills of Bologna, Vasari saw it before the publication of the first edition of his *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* in 1550.[12] Perhaps Caravaggio saw it there as well on his way to Rome. But he may also have seen any one of the numerous copies of the painting that already existed by the time Vasari saw it. So it is not unlikely that Caravaggio knew the *Madonna with the Rose*. In 1752, Count Paolo Zani accepted the offer of August III, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland, and sold the painting to his court in Dresden.

It shows a beautiful young woman with a blond curly-haired boy sprawled naked across her lap, playfully looking at the viewer, his head slightly lowered. His left arm resting on a globe, he raises his right hand to offer the woman a blush-coloured rose. With her gaze lowered towards the flower, her regular features and long, slender hands, she is a figure of great elegance, dressed in a white dress that clings to her body in gentle folds that emphasize her breasts.

Are we looking at the Virgin and Child or at Venus and Cupid? The erotic aura of the female figure and the provocative nudity of the boy show Parmigianino breaking with established conventions and deliberately playing with the multivalency of the image of the Madonna. It is not by chance that Parmigianino's Madonna – in terms of the inclination of her head, the evenness of her features and the way she holds her arms and hands – draws on the classical type of the *Venus Pudica*, which goes back to the celebrated *Aphrodite of Knidos* by Praxiteles and was known from numerous Roman copies (Fig. 4). Moreover, the two key attributes – the rose and the globe – can be interpreted as both Christian and profane symbols. In Christian iconography, the rose is not only the symbol of the Virgin Mary; in conjunction with the Christ Child it also alludes to the Passion. In antiquity, on the other hand, the rose symbolized love and beauty; it was said to have sprung from the blood of Venus when she scratched herself on a thorn bush. Similarly, the globe as a symbol of the world can be found in depictions of Christ as *Salvator Mundi* and in the context of the god of love, Cupid/Amor. There the globe is symbolic of the all-encompassing power of love, as it was first described by Virgil and later taken up by an illustration of a triumphal banner proclaiming "amor vincit omnia" (love conquers all) in Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* of 1499.[13]

Caravaggio referred to this theme in his painting *Victorious Cupid* of 1602 (p. 27, Fig. 14), now in Berlin, in which we can just make out a celestial globe, obscured by Cupid's right leg and a white sheet. In its ambiguity, the *Madonna with the Rose* is open to sacred as well as profane interpretations, which a sophisticated, erudite viewer was able to discern. In his paintings, Caravaggio, too, made use of this fluid transition between Christian and pagan ideal figures, as can be seen in his treatment of *Saint John the Baptist*.



CHRISTOPH ORTH

Of Saints and Heroes

NEAPOLITAN AND
SPANISH PAINTING IN THE LIGHT
AND SHADOW OF CARAVAGGIO

As art centres, Rome and Naples were not independent from each other at the beginning of the 17th century. On the contrary, there was a constant flux of artists between the Eternal City and the metropolis at the foot of Mount Vesuvius – not only Romans and Neapolitans but also Flemings, Frenchmen, Germans as well as Italians from other regions of the country. These "commuting artists",[1] among them important painters such as Giovanni Baglione, Domenico Zampieri (called Domenichino) and Giovanni Lanfranco, thus shaped the art of both cities in equal measure. One of the most magnificent results of this artistic exchange is the Cappella del Tesoro di San Gennaro in the cathedral of Naples, with frescoes and altarpieces by Domenichino, Lanfranco, and Ribera (Fig. 1).[2]

Having become part of the Spanish Empire in the early 16th century, Naples was marked by its allegiance to the Spanish crown. For two centuries, Spanish viceroys ruled the Mediterranean metropolis and the surrounding country. The development of Neapolitan painting in the 17th century was thus shaped by two factors: on the one hand, the influx – usually via Rome – of artists from different countries and different artistic schools and, on the other, the influence of Spanish culture brought to bear by a circle of wealthy and influential Spanish patrons.

Caravaggio was one of the artists who found their way to Naples in the early 17th century, albeit not for artistic reasons. Having killed a man in an altercation, he had to flee Rome at the end of May 1606. He initially found refuge on one of the estates of the Colonna family, whose members had already protected him in Rome. During his stay there, he probably already started receiving and working on commissions from Naples, given to him primarily through his patrons' extensive network of contacts.[3] He stayed in Naples only twice for a relatively short time, from October 1606 to July 1607 and again – after stops in Malta and Sicily – from October 1609 at the latest to July 1610.[4]

Despite the briefness of these sojourns, Caravaggio's art left a deep and lasting impression on Naples. Of seminal importance were the works from the time of his first stay, particularly those that were accessible to the general public. These include *The Seven Works of Mercy* (Fig. 2) in the Pio Monte della Misericordia, *The Flagellation of Christ* (Fig. 3) for the de Franchis family chapel in San Domenico Maggiore, and the *Madonna of the Rosary* (Fig. 4). The latter may have been painted several years earlier,[5] but was in Naples in 1607, in the possession of the artists and art dealers Louis Finson and Abraham Vinck, who were trying to sell it, albeit without success. These works were readily viewable to successive generations of artists and allowed for a sustained engagement with Caravaggio's work.

Fig. 1

GIOVANNI LANFRANCO

PARADISE

1641–1643
Fresco in dome of Cappella del Tesoro
di San Gennaro in Naples Cathedral

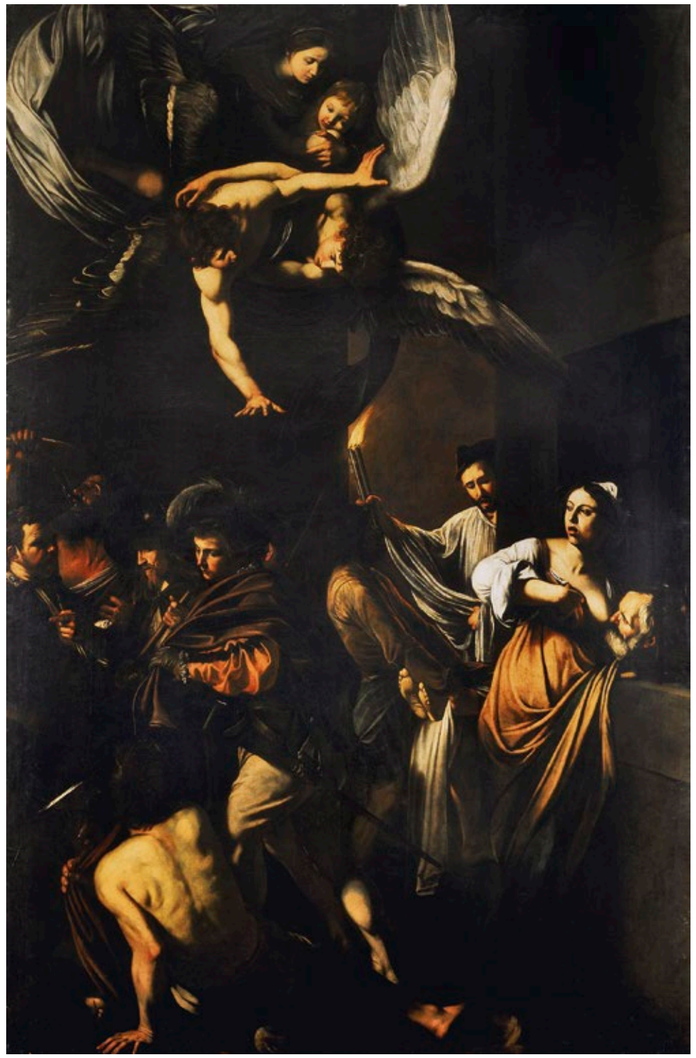


Fig. 2

CARAVAGGIO

THE SEVEN WORKS OF MERCY

1606

Naples, Pio Monte della Misericordia

Fig. 3

CARAVAGGIO

THE FLAGELLATION OF CHRIST

1606–1607

Naples, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte

Fig. 4

CARAVAGGIO

MADONNA OF THE ROSARY

1601–1605

Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum

HUMAN SUFFERING AND DIVINE REWARD – MARTYRDOMS BY JUSEPE DE RIBERA AND LUCA GIORDANO

One of the most important artists in Naples in the first half of the 17th century was the Spaniard Jusepe de Ribera. Following a period in Rome and northern Italy, he settled in Naples in 1616 and stayed there until the end of his life.[6] Ribera's *The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence*[7] (Fig. 6), painted around 1625, shows clear echoes of Caravaggio's Neapolitan *The Flagellation of Christ* (Fig. 3). Ribera must have known and studied this work closely. It was not without reason that the contemporary art theorist and biographer Giulio Mancini, in his *Considerazioni sulla pittura*, described Ribera as a follower of Caravaggio's "school" – even though Caravaggio never ran a workshop in the strict sense of the word. Like Caravaggio's *Flagellation*, Ribera's *Saint Lawrence* is compositionally divided into three groups: a group of figures on the left, the martyred man in the middle, and another myrmidon on the right. The lighting, too, follows Caravaggio's example: the sole henchman on the right is shown from the side with the light emphasizing the left half of his body, especially his upper arm and shoulder. And while the body of Lawrence does, of course, differ from that of the scourged Christ, the tension of his upper body, the emphasis on the bent knee, and the dramatic lighting clearly draw on the example of Caravaggio. The same applies to the figures on the left, a standing elderly man in the background and a boy in front, who bends down to gather up the saint's garments. The latter picks up on the similar figure in Caravaggio's *Flagellation*, which, in turn, is based on a much-celebrated classical sculpture. The knife grinder from an *Apollo and Marsyas* group (Fig. 5), discovered in Rome in the early 16th century, inspired numerous artistic adaptations.

Fig. 5

MASSIMILIANO SOLDANI-BENZI
REDUCED COPY AFTER
THE ANTIQUE STATUE OF
THE ARROTINO IN THE UFFIZI,
FLORENCE

KNIFE GRINDER

c. 1700
SKD, Skulpturensammlung

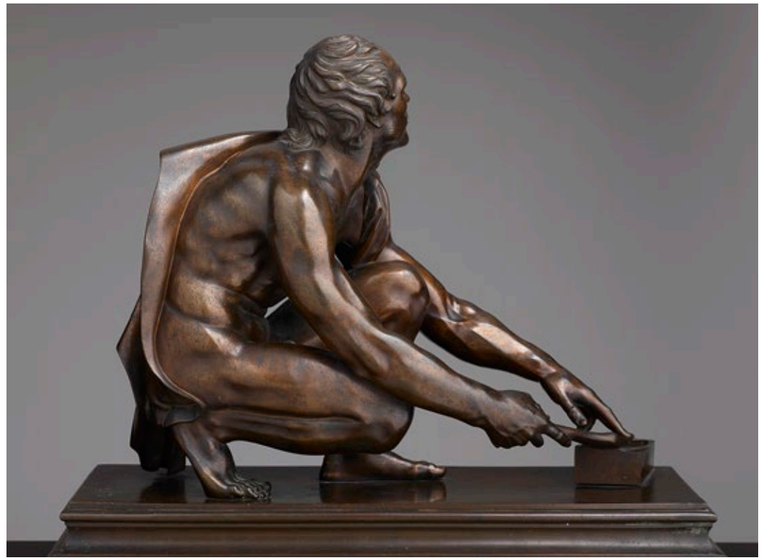
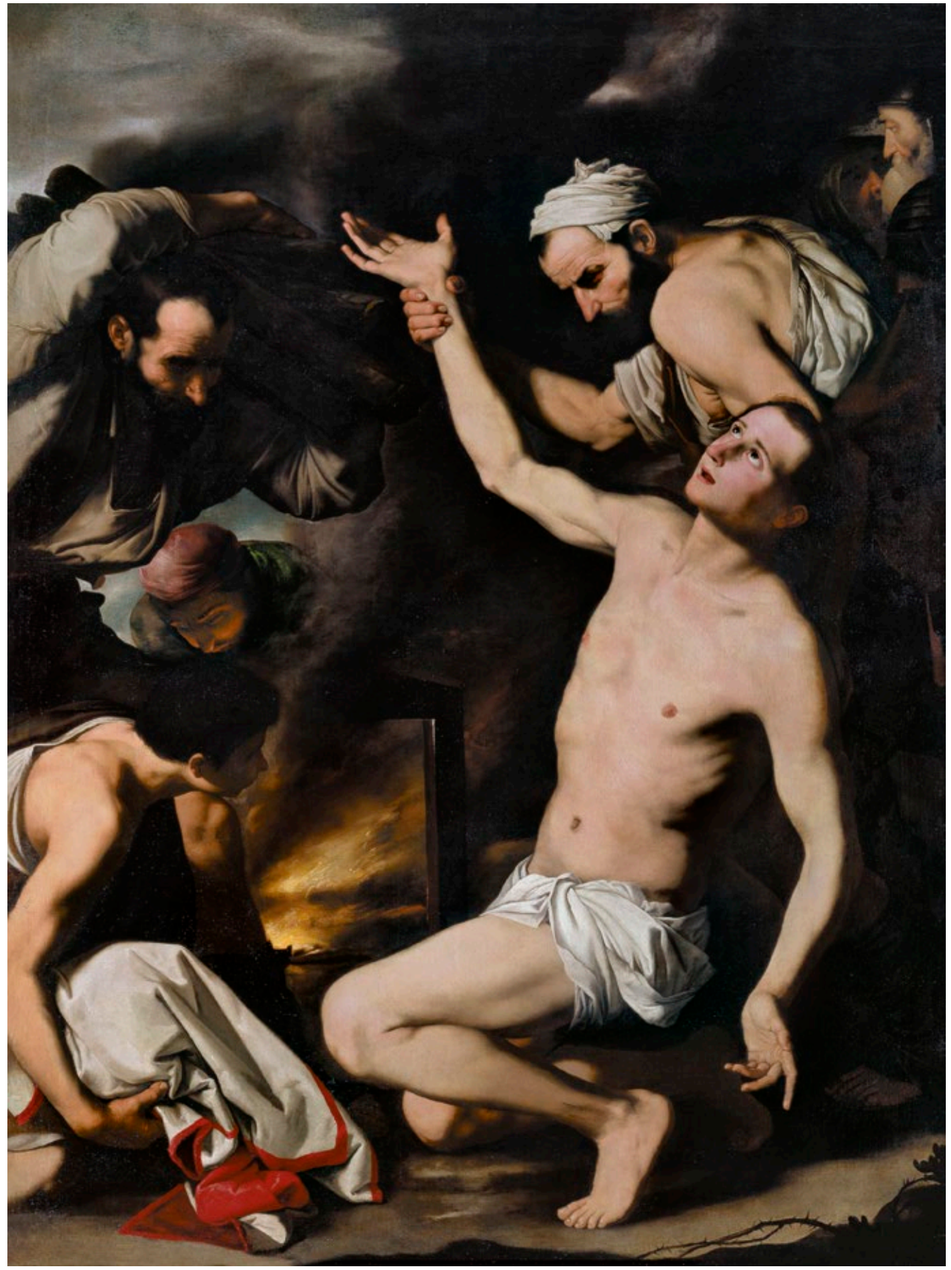


Fig. 6 ▷

JUSEPE DE RIBERA

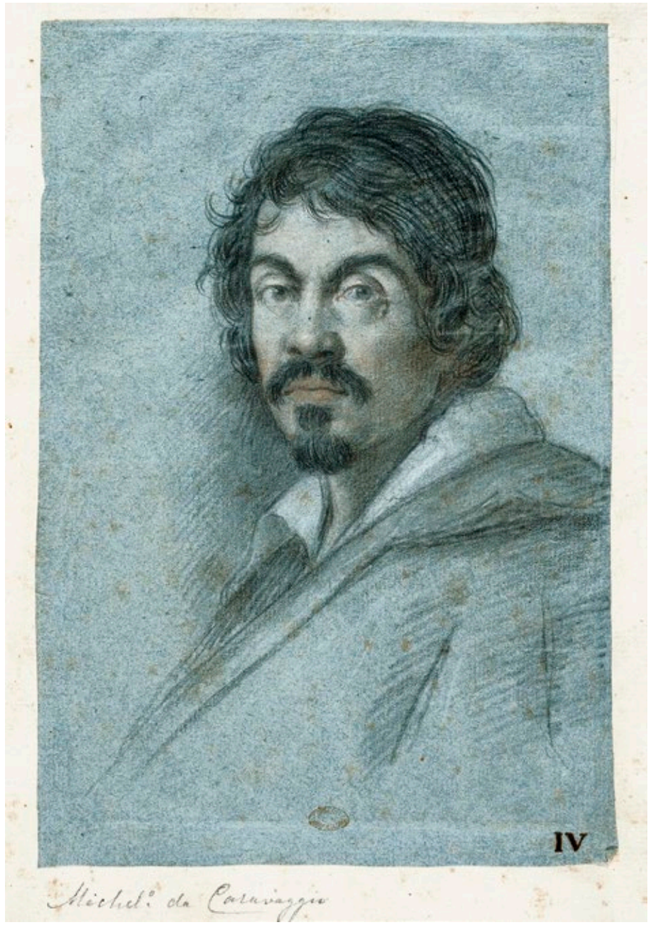
THE MARTYRDOM
OF SAINT LAWRENCE

c. 1625
SKD, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister



VERENA PERLHEFTER

“Una vita violenta”[1] The Life of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio



◁ Fig. 1 Ottavio Leoni
PORTRAIT OF CARAVAGGIO, 1621–1625,
Florence, Biblioteca Marucellian

Fig. 2 Caravaggio
BOY WITH A BASKET OF FRUIT, 1593/1594
Rome, Galleria Borghese

“He was dark, with dark eyes and black eyelashes and hair, so it seemed only natural that his pictures, too, should appear dark.”[2] Michelangelo Merisi, called Caravaggio (Fig. 1), was stylized by his contemporaries as a negative counterpart to Raphael, that paragon of beauty and purity, who had even had the grace to die on a Good Friday. Instead of the beauty and grandeur of the ancient world, Caravaggio showed his viewers the unwashed feet of the poor.[3] This seems to have perturbed subsequent generations as well. Writing in the mid-19th century, Jacob Burckhardt still claimed that Caravaggio “[…] attempted to show his viewers that all of the sacred events occurring in ancient times were as commonplace as the goings on in the alleyways of southern cities in the late 16th century.”[4] This view of Michelangelo Merisi began to change only in the 19th century, when the Romantic notion of the tragic genius, of the criminal with noble motives, of the artist-as-bohemian, acquired the appeal that still resonates today. Considered in relation to his time, Caravaggio’s life was not especially extraordinary – only his art and artistic legacy create the impression that it was.

On 30 September 1571, Michelangelo Merisi was christened in Milan; his baptismal name and the date suggest he was born on the previous day.[5] His parents had moved from the nearby small town of Caravaggio. His father, Fermo Merisi, was a master mason from a middle-class family of landowning artisans; his mother, Lucia Aratori, also came from a respectable family in Caravaggio which maintained good relations with Francesco Sforza, the Marchese di Caravaggio, and his wife Constanza Colonna.[6] In 1576, the family fled the plague in Milan, returning to Caravaggio, where Fermo Merisi died in 1577, leaving behind three children in addition to Michelangelo. On 6 April 1584, a four-year apprenticeship contract for Michelangelo Merisi, then aged thirteen, was concluded with the Milanese artist Simone Peterzano, who was tasked with painting the decorations of the Castello Sforzesco in Milan.[7] In raising the apprentice’s dues, the fatherless family faced serious financial challenges and was compelled to sell certain properties. Through Peterzano, Michelangelo also became acquainted with Venetian painting. Michelangelo’s mother, Lucia Aratori, died on 29 October 1590; once the issue of inheritance had been settled, the young painter left the town of Caravaggio.

THE YEARS IN ROME

Caravaggio may have reached Rome by late summer of 1592.[8] It has been conjectured that he made a stop in Bologna, where he became acquainted with the innovative paintings of the brothers Agostino and Annibale Carracci, who had programmatically broken from the prevailing Mannerist mould. At that time, Rome was experiencing a veritable building boom that attracted craftsman, painters, and architects from all over Europe. For the city’s numerous cardinals, having splendid *palazzi* built, decorated, or renovated and collecting and displaying art there was a way of finding entry to the closed world of

Roman aristocracy.[9] When Caravaggio reached the Eternal City, it had swollen to 110,000 residents – in 1560 its population had been only 70,000. And although Naples and Milan were far more populous, this growth in numbers reflects that Rome was on the upswing. Admittedly, everyday life in Rome was coarse in the extreme: at the bottom of the "food chain", marauding bands roamed the streets, while at its apex, Rome's noble families and clerics abused their powers and were involved in corruption of a more discrete kind.[10] As one historian wrote: "The noblest of people bloodied their rivals until they finally got into the Conclave."[11]

Fig. 3 Caravaggio
MARTYRDOM OF SAINT MATTHEW, 1599/1600, Rome, San Luigi dei Francesi

Caravaggio spent his first months in the city as a servant to Pandolfo Pucci, for whom he copied devotional pictures. He fell ill during this period, and moreover found the servants' food unpalatable, and decided to leave "Monsignore Insalata" before very long.[12] He then worked in the workshops of various painters, among them Giuseppe Cesari. Just a few years older than Caravaggio, this artist – who bore the elegant title "Cavalier d'Arpino" – headed a workshop specializing in various types of painting. Caravaggio was responsible for flowers and fruit.[13] In Cesari's workshop, the young painter finally found himself in a suitable milieu, albeit in a subordinate position. One of his colleagues was Floris van Dyck, who wrote of Caravaggio in the reports about the artists of Rome he conveyed to the Flemish biographer Karel van Mander, who subsequently mentioned Caravaggio in his *Het Schilderboeck* of 1604. Caravaggio also formed a friendship with Prospero Orsi, an expert in grotesque painting who was known as "Prosperino delle Grottesche" for this reason, and who also acted as an art agent – in subsequent years, for Caravaggio as well. "If we consider Caravaggio's demeanour and temperament, which would soon become a matter of record, it seems likely that he was noticeably lacking in 'social skills' and a capacity for teamwork. And given his evident problems with authority, it would have been uncharacteristic for him to have spent an extended period of time accepting directives from a man who was essentially his peer."[14]

It was probably during the period he spent with Cesari that Caravaggio became acquainted with the Sicilian Mario Minniti, who moved in with him, and seems to have served as a model for his early works, among them the *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* (Fig. 2) and *The Lute Player* (p. 39, Fig. 1). After seven years, Minniti, himself a painter, returned to Syracuse with the intention of establishing himself there. The friendship between the two painters is said to have endured until Caravaggio's flight from Rome and death. The first work securely attributed to Caravaggio, the *Boy Peeling Fruit* (1591/1592), dates from this period. In the ensuing years, Caravaggio painted *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* (Fig. 2), *Bacchus*, *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* (p. 94, Fig. 1) (all 1593–1594), the *Fortune Teller,* and the first paintings with religious subjects: the *Penitent Magdalene*, the *Rest on the Flight to Egypt*, and the *Ecstasy of Saint Francis* (all 1594).

In 1594, Caravaggio found temporary accommodations in the *palazzo* of Monsignore Fantino Petrignani. There, he painted *The Cardsharps* (c. 1595; p. 84, Fig. 7), the *Lute Player* (p. 39, Fig. 1), the *Basket of Fruit* (both 1595/1596) and the *Medusa* (c. 1596). It is believed that sometime in early 1597, Caravaggio moved into living quarters at the Palazzo Madama, owned by the art-loving Cardinal Francesco del Monte, who became his long-standing patron.[15] Alongside his fondness for music, the cardinal was also interested in the natural sciences, and sponsored scientific experiments which concerned, among other things, light effects and optical phenomena. Here, Caravaggio could have become acquainted with the latest discoveries concerning the use of prisms. It was also here, presumably, that he created the *The Musicans* (1597; p. 95, Fig. 2), as described by the artist and writer Giovanni Baglione.

Fig. 4 Caravaggio
JUDITH AND HOLOFERNES, 1598/1599, Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini

On 11 July 1597, Caravaggio was interrogated by the municipal authorities as a witness following a night-time disturbance. Produced towards the end of that year were the paintings *Martha and Mary Magdalene*, *Saint Catherine*, and *The Sacrifice of Abraham* (all 1597–1598). On 3 May 1598, Caravaggio was arrested briefly, evidently for carrying a weapon illegally, the first of several such incidents. However, he succeeded in clearing himself of the allegation by invoking his membership of the household of Cardinal del Monte. "Caravaggio's delinquency bears a telling social stamp: that of a crime instigated by forfeited social standing. Around 1570, the Merisi family had enjoyed a respectable status. […] That this prosperity dissipated rapidly during the artist's youth as a consequence of numerous plague deaths in 1576–1577 and other familial misfortunes diminished nothing of his sense of entitlement to a genteel, one might even say aristocratic, way of life. […] For a painter with the affectations of a cavalier striving to maintain a haughty show of honour while having to lower himself by seeking commissions, quarrels without end were all but inevitable."[16]

Dating from this year is *Judith and Holofernes* (1598–1599; Fig. 4).

On 23 July 1599, Caravaggio received a commission for the two lateral images for the Contarelli Chapel in memory of Cardinal Matteo Contarelli (actually Mathieu Cointrel) in the Church of San Luigi dei Francesi. It resulted in *Saint Matthew and the Angel* (1599; p. 47, Fig. 8), the *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* (1599/1600; Fig. 3) and the *Calling of Saint Matthew* (1600; p. 80, Fig. 4). These works mark a radical step that takes naturalism to the extreme. At the same time, Caravaggio began to heighten the impact of his images through the use of dramatic chiaroscuro effects, which guided the viewer's attention towards certain "spots" in the visual narrative. Through the Contarelli Chapel, this new conception of painting made Caravaggio famous overnight and had a bewitching and galvanizing effect on other painters.

In 1600, Francesco Boneri, known as "Cecco del Caravaggio", began appearing as a model in Caravaggio's paintings. He may be identical with the "Francesco garzone" who is mentioned as residing in Caravaggio's home on Vicolo San Biagio in the annual census taken in 1605[17] – and, moreover, with the individual referred to as "Caravaggio's 'owne boy or servant that laid with him', mentioned so unabashedly by the cultivated Englishman Richard Symonds, who went on a grand tour of the continent between 1649 and 1651."[18] It must be borne in mind, however, that friends often shared a bed during this period, and that apprentices would customarily share the lodgings of their masters, which could well involve sleeping in the same bed. When we consider that homosexuality was still punishable by death in Rome at that time, reports of this kind may have stemmed from rumours put about to discredit a competitor and endanger his life.[19]

Dated 5 April 1600 is Caravaggio's acceptance of a commission to execute a

As soon as Caravaggio's *John the Baptist* was unveiled, it became the subject of much discussion. The portrayal of the saint as a boy – undressed, embracing a ram – provoked speculation on its underlying message and the painter's motivations. The picture bears all the artistic qualities that made Caravaggio's works so powerful. His chiaroscuro, his radical naturalism, and the bold new narratives he told in his images became the ideal for other artists to follow: Nicolas Tournier, Peter Paul Rubens, Gerard van Honthorst, Jusepe de Ribera, and Francisco de Zurbarán, to name but a few. This richly illustrated catalogue traces Caravaggio's influence and shows how his paintings spurred creative responses and renewed pictorial invention, not just in contemporary acolytes but even followers working centuries later.

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