

# CARAVAGGIO & THE CARAVAGGISTI

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*Narcissus* c1597/99

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio  
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*St Mary Magdalene with the smoking flame* c1640

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Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio  
*Narcissus* c1597/99

oil on canvas 115,5 x 97,5 cm  
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome  
© 1991, Photo Scala, Florence – courtesy of the Ministero per Beni e Att Culturali

# I

## EARLY WORKS 1590s

### Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio

#### Narcissus c1597/99

oil on canvas 115.5 x 97.5 cm  
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome  
© 1991, Photo Scala, Florence, courtesy of the Ministero per Beni e Att Culturali

#### Boy bitten by a lizard c1595/1600 (cover)

oil on canvas 66 x 49.5 cm  
The National Gallery, London © The National Gallery, London

Caravaggio's early works in Rome featured young models, costumed and posed to evoke poetic themes that were reminiscent of Giorgione's 16th-century Venetian 'fancy portraits'. Using friends and associates as models, presumably because he could not afford paid ones, Caravaggio, himself still only in his twenties, evolved a novel imagery drawn from Roman street life, depicting gypsy fortune tellers and cardsharps. He also painted allegories of the senses, for example *Boy bitten by a lizard*, and reworked classical themes, such as *Narcissus*, disguising both in modern dress and painting his visibly 'present-day' models in a direct 'first-person' style.

The model for Caravaggio's *Narcissus* most likely posed over a mirror laid on the studio floor. While we are looking up at the boy bitten by a lizard (pictured on the cover) from a slightly lowered viewpoint, we are looking down on Narcissus, crouching over the reflection of his own image. In both cases, Caravaggio's models are positioned close to him and almost fill the pictures, giving the impression that they are also very close to us and could step out of the frame into our world.

Caravaggio's representation of *Narcissus* (from the story told by the ancient Roman poet Ovid) shows him doubled and inverted, playing-card-style. By his clever use of a studio prop, the mirror, Caravaggio creates a powerful image of self-love. The circularity of his composition, balanced around the fulcrum of the boy's spotlight knee, further emphasises the psychologically charged point of the ancient myth he has re-imagined and re-presented. Working like a modern-day theatre director, Caravaggio stages the scene as a pared-down tableau, with minimal props and dramatic lighting, allowing the actor/model to portray his tragic fate in the 'first person'.

Caravaggio's freshly realistic approach caused a stir and almost immediately attracting copyists. Even contemporary rivals such as Giovanni Baglione admired Caravaggio's convincingly lifelike illusions. *Boy bitten by a lizard* astonished early viewers – the damp rose petals trembling in a transparent glass carafe, and the unmistakable sense of sudden shock and pain that contorts the young boy's face, making him rear back and cry out. Baglione later described the impact of this startling work: 'you could almost hear the boy scream, and it was all done meticulously'.

#### K-6 LOOKING & MAKING

**Look** at *Narcissus*. What is Narcissus looking at? **Imagine** where he could be. What do you think will happen next? **Read** the classical story of Narcissus as told by the Roman poet Ovid. **Think** about and **discuss** how Caravaggio painted this portrait and its reflection.

**Draw** or **paint** a portrait and its reflected image using a small hand-held mirror.

#### 7-10 FRAMING QUESTIONS

Discuss *Narcissus* in reference to Caravaggio's practice of working directly on canvas, using a model with artificial lighting. How would he have positioned the model? Where would the light source have been? Comment on Caravaggio's important use of one mirror as a studio prop and possibly another as a technical aid.

Analyse the painting focusing on composition and formal elements. What is the focal point? Explain how light and shade are used to direct the audience through the scene.

Examine *Boy bitten by a lizard* (cover). Caravaggio's contemporaries were amazed by his ability to convey the intense emotion of surprise and pain on the boy's face. What other devices are used in this painting to convey the immediacy and shock of the moment?

Caravaggio's dramatic effects of light and dark became one of the signature methods used by baroque artists to create drama, immediacy and tension in their works. In *Boy bitten by a lizard* Caravaggio takes his interest in light and reflection further. How have the room and the world beyond been suggested in this painting? What symbolic meaning may the mirror or reflection hold for Caravaggio in relation to the acts of painting or viewing an artwork?



Georges de La Tour  
*St Mary Magdalene with the smoking flame* c1640

oil on canvas 116.8 x 91.8 cm  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation  
Photograph © 2003 Museum Associates/ LACMA

# I

## EARLY WORKS 1590s

### Georges de La Tour

#### St Mary Magdalene with the smoking flame c1640

oil on canvas 116.8 x 91.8 cm

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation  
Photograph © 2003 Museum Associates/LACMA

Born in Lorraine, La Tour seems to have spent his entire career far from cosmopolitan centres, living and working in provincial France. Little is known of his training but his earliest figures were modelled by a single source of light that cast deep, slanting shadows in the style of Caravaggio. La Tour was one of the last strictly Caravaggesque painters and his concern with simplicity, realism and austere quietness went out of fashion during his lifetime.

Instead of depicting the repentant St Mary Magdalene in the traditional way, in the grotto where she lived in prayerful retreat, La Tour situates her in a simple, timeless chamber. The pensive young woman stares fixedly at the flame of her oil lamp. Her contemplation seems directed to mysteries deeper than the mundane mortality of the skull on which she lays her hand. The warm light illuminates a bare room and a few items on the table: two books, a plain wooden cross and a scourge of braided rope.

The true subject of the picture seems to be the flame, its subtle glow caressing the distinct surfaces and textures of flesh, hair, bone, leather, wood and cloth. Dressed in red and white, emblematic of the Passion and echoing Caravaggio's *Penitent Magdalene*, La Tour's quiet maiden might be linked to the mystical spirit of *St John of the Cross*, who spoke of 'the living flame of love' that draws spiritual pilgrims out of 'the dark night of the soul'.

#### K-6 LOOKING & MAKING

Meet Mary Magdalene. Point out what she is looking at. Name five different objects in this room. Think about what each one could symbolise.

Dream up a thought bubble for her.

Research the biblical story of Christ's relationship with Mary, especially around the time of Christ's death and resurrection.

Look at the colour scheme of the painting and describe the feeling it evokes.

Imagine how the artist painted this artwork. Describe the process from start to finish.

#### 7-10 FRAMING QUESTIONS

Examine this painting and identify the influence of Caravaggio on Georges de La Tour's painting style and technique.

The naked candle flame is often seen in works by the Caravaggisti. In the composition it acts as a focal point. Explain how the flame can also allude to the act and technique of painting. What else can the flame symbolise? List other symbols and their possible meanings in this work. Are these consistent with those used by Caravaggio?

Research other representations of St Mary Magdalene in religious art from this time. How does La Tour's depiction of the repentant saint differ from other paintings of the same subject matter?

How did the Roman Catholic Church contribute to the decline in popularity of Caravaggesque painters during the early 1600s?

Debate the influence Caravaggio's style had on French and northern European artists and what affected the decline and transformation into a revival of classical art.



Michelangelo Merisi Da Caravaggio  
*St John the Baptist in the wilderness* c1604

oil on canvas 173.4 x 132.1 cm  
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri Purchase: Nelson Trust 52-25  
© The Nelson Gallery Foundation – All reproduction rights reserved.  
Photography Robert Newcombe and Edward Robison (6/2000)

## II CARAVAGGIO UNSETTLES ROME

### Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio St John the Baptist in the wilderness c1604

oil on canvas 173.4 x 132.1 cm  
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri  
Purchase: Nelson Trust 52-25 © The Nelson Gallery Foundation  
Photo Robert Newcombe and Edward Robison (6/2000)

The life of this saint held a special fascination for Caravaggio, who painted him many times. But rather than depict St John in the traditional manner, as haggard and prematurely aged, he instead followed Leonardo's example, presenting him as young, beardless and beautiful. According to the gospel, John the Baptist was an ascetic who preached in the wilderness in Judea, saying, 'Repent ye: for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.' Matthew (3:4) also tells us: 'The same John wore garments of camel's hair and a leather belt about his waist: and his food was locusts and wild honey.'

Painted for Ottavio Costa, one of his most enthusiastic patrons, the slightly surly-faced model posing for this St John was one of Caravaggio's favourites. Caravaggio approached religious subjects as if painting portraits, here modifying but not idealising the young man's distinctive, angular features under a raking light. The harsh lighting exposes his dirty toes, a slightly roughened elbow, long lean muscles and unfurling diagonal swathes of deep red drapery. The model's indispensable physical presence is confirmed by Caravaggio's curious habit of making incisions into the canvas (occasionally visible to the naked eye), fixing the relative positions of the limbs and head as a reference for subsequent sittings.

Notable here are the somewhat mismatching focal contrasts between the young man's face and elbow, so sharply registered, and the blurred area around his abdomen. David Hockney has recently proposed that experiments with optics, using mirrors or lenses as aids to translate an image under his eyes onto the canvas, may have been part of Caravaggio's studio practice. The art critic Giovanni Pietro Bellori, had, after all, disdainfully described Caravaggio's studio as a type of 'walk-in' camera obscura and declared his 'easy style' a bad influence on younger artists, because 'the moment the model was taken from him, his hand and mind became empty'.

### K-6 LOOKING & MAKING

**Focus** on the figure of St John the Baptist. How does Caravaggio make us do this? What do you think St John is thinking about?

**Locate** clues that tell us he spent much of his time in the wilderness?

**Look** at this picture and the real artwork. **Discover** the many ways Caravaggio has applied the paint. **Compare** the painting techniques of other artists in this kit – Baglione, Valentin and Gentileschi – with those of Caravaggio.

### 7-10 FRAMING QUESTIONS

Caravaggio was inspired by the life of St John the Baptist and painted this figure several times. Describe Caravaggio's representation of St John the Baptist with reference to his practice. Discuss the use and pose of the model, props, the painting process, and materials and techniques.

Investigate how Caravaggio's representations of saints differed from those by other artists. How far removed are Caravaggio's representations of saints from his sinners?

Discuss Caravaggio's realism. Explore his practice of dramatic lighting, close-ups, cropped images and deep shadows. Examine the connection to techniques used in 20th-century film noir and science fiction films.

Research the work of contemporary artists influenced by modern cinema including Cindy Sherman, Tracey Moffatt and Bill Henson. Compare their artwork to Caravaggio's focusing particularly on the techniques used in film. What other relevance might Caravaggio have for today's audience? Present a case.



Giovanni Baglione  
*Sacred love and profane love* 1602

oil on canvas 240 x 143 cm  
signed and dated: 'IO Baglione/R:F:1602'  
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome  
© Archivio Fotografico – courtesy Soprintendenza Speciale  
per il Polo Museale Romano

## II

# CARAVAGGIO UNSETTLES ROME

### Giovanni Baglione

#### Sacred and profane love 1602

oil on canvas 240 x 143 cm  
signed and dated: 'IO Baglione/R.F./1602'  
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome  
© Archivio Fotografico, courtesy Soprintendenza Speciale per il Polo Museale Romano

Baglione gained notoriety as Caravaggio's rival and adversary in the 1603 libel suit he brought against a group of fellow painters who, he said, had slandered him and his work in mocking verse. This painting was mentioned in the trial and is one of the earliest examples of Caravaggio's impact on painting practice in Rome.

Trained in the late mannerist school, Baglione was one of the first Roman painters to understand and adopt Caravaggio's stylistic innovations in open competition for the attention of the same patrons. Rather than being flattered by this, Caravaggio was enraged, regarding Baglione as a common thief of his imagery. Baglione's *Sacred and profane love*, with its slashing contrasts of darkness and light, openly refers to a prior work by Caravaggio, *Love victorious* (commissioned by Cardinal Giustiniani and now in Berlin).

The meaning of Baglione's allegory remains disputed. Is it the eternal battle between divine love and earthly love, or between vice and virtue? Some scholars believe the allegory had a more personal meaning for Baglione, and that the grotesque figure at the left looking over his shoulder is a 'portrait' of Caravaggio as the devil. According to the art historian H Röttgen, Baglione's canvas was thus conceived as an open accusation of Caravaggio's homosexuality. Although the true circumstances of Caravaggio's private life, like the meaning of this picture, remain unverifiable, his combative and provocative personality attracted as many scandals and slurs as his style attracted followers.

#### K–6 LOOKING & MAKING

**Find** a monster face, a single feather and a jewel. **Count** the number of wings. **Point** out the areas of the painting that are dark and those that are light. **Find** examples of other opposites.

**Imagine** who these three figures are. How can you tell?

**List** the clues.

**Invent** a movie scene from which they might appear. How does the movie end? **Give** the movie a title.

**Draw** a cartoon strip animating your movie scene or make a poster advertising your movie.

#### 7–10 FRAMING QUESTIONS

Analyse the composition of *Sacred and profane love* in reference to light and dark contrasts. Describe your interpretation of Baglione's allegory?

List the elements used by the artist to support the claim that it depicts the 'eternal battle between divine love and earthly love'. Compare it with *Love victorious* (not in this exhibition but pictured on page 56 of the exhibition catalogue), Caravaggio's interpretation of the same theme. Analyse the differences between both artists' approaches. What elements of the Caravaggesque (Caravaggio's signature techniques) has Baglione used?

Caravaggio's painting style and relationships with other artists had a controversial impact on art practice in Rome. Discuss this in connection with the 1603 libel suit brought against Caravaggio by Baglione.



Valentin de Boulogne  
*A musical party* c1626

oil on canvas 111.5 x 146.5 cm  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of The Ahmanson Foundation  
Photograph © 2003 Museum Associates/LACMA

### III

## NEW SUBJECTS FOR ART AFTER CARAVAGGIO 1610s & 1620s

### Roman street life subjects

#### Valentin de Boulogne

##### A musical party c1626

oil on canvas 111.5 x 146.5 cm

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of The Ahmanson Foundation  
Photograph © 2003 Museum Associates/LACMA

Influenced by Caravaggio and his follower Bartolomeo Manfredi, the French artist Valentin painted a series of colourful tavern scenes with musicians, soldiers, harlots, cardsharps and gypsies. Rome at this time had many such cheap taverns, natural haunts for young artists who found models among their fellow customers. Throughout the 1620s Valentin belonged to one such notoriously rowdy artists' group, and is said to have died after plunging into an icy fountain one morning after a night of excessive drinking and carousing.

Valentin's depictions of Rome's vagabond street life were, like Caravaggio's, sensitive to the individuals' inner life and personal dignity. His figures are never ribald or grotesque. In this world of fragile, momentary, unreliable relationships – a world typified by chance encounters in dim, smoky taverns – Valentin succeeded in imbuing images of revelry with melancholy and subtle menace. Here, in *A musical party*, each of the figures seems in some way transported by the power of music.

Such tavern scenes might be interpreted as metaphors of life in a difficult time. Clusters of themes, ultimately deriving from Caravaggio's poetic, early Roman genre paintings, reappear. For example, children to represent youth and its passing, innocence and its loss; fortune tellers to evoke the uncertainty of the future and of whether fortune is fate or chance; and music to create moments of sympathy and glimpses of transcendence.

#### K–6 LOOKING & MAKING

**Observe** the action. **Discover** the clues that tell you what the people are doing in this painting? **Find** all the different instruments and name them. Are instruments like these still played today?

**Find** the sheet of music and imagine the music that is being played.

**Investigate** musical instruments of the baroque period.

**Draw** another musical instrument that could be played at this musical party.

#### 7–10 FRAMING QUESTIONS

Valentin was a French artist drawn to Rome, where the presence of the pope and his cardinals meant there was plenty of patronage for public and private artistic projects. What can you deduce about life in Rome in the early 17th century from his painting? Why was this a popular topic?

Examine the composition. The scene is relayed through an intriguing interplay of facial expressions, gestures and double meanings. As in the theatre, we can read the story through gesture and expression. How does technique animate Valentin's work like a piece of theatre? Identify who the characters are and what they may represent. Research their link to the realities and myths of Roman society at this time. Within scenes such as this, where is the line between fact and fiction drawn?

Examine the *Fortune teller* by another French artist, Simon Vouet (also in the exhibition). The story of the fortune teller seducing the artisan while her colleague picks his pocket was a popular folk tale of this time. Vouet has 'choreographed' the scene to a specific rhythm. How has this been achieved? Compare to Valentin's work. Identify Caravaggesque techniques that each artist has adapted in differing ways.

Research why, in a time of focus on religious themes in painting, the representation of 'common people' and 'street life' was so popular.



Simon Vouet  
*The fortune teller* 1617

oil on canvas 95,3 x 135,3 cm  
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome  
© Archivio Fotografico – courtesy Soprintendenza Speciale  
per il Polo Museale Romano

### III

## NEW SUBJECTS FOR ART AFTER CARAVAGGIO 1610s & 1620s

### Roman street life subjects

#### Simon Vouet

##### The fortune teller 1617

Oil on canvas 95.3 x 135.3 cm  
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome  
© Archivio Fotografico – courtesy Soprintendenza Speciale per il Polo Museale Romano

Simon Vouet, the son of a Parisian painter, arrived in Rome in 1613. This is his first surviving dated work: a direct response to Caravaggio's naturalism and novel subjects drawn from the vibrant street life of the city. It was painted for Cassiano del Pozzo, a famous scholar and patron of the arts, who probably wrote the inscription on the back of the picture: 'Egyptian commonly called gypsy telling the fortune of the foolish artisan, painted from the life by Simon Vouet 1617'.

Caravaggio's early painting, *Gypsy fortune teller*, was known to Vouet and Cassiano del Pozzo, who perhaps asked Vouet to produce something similar. The attractive gypsy reading this young man's palm is clearly a motif derived from Caravaggio. However, Vouet extended the theme to incorporate the coarser characterisation of the old crone picking his pocket. Her gesture of open contempt defines our role as spectators who are complicit with the deception.

Vouet's three-quarter length figures, close to the picture-plane and brightly lit against a dark background, demonstrate his reliance on the work of Bartolomeo Manfredi. The so-called *manfrediana methodus*, which became widespread in Rome in the second decade of the 17th century, combined Caravaggio's popular genre subjects of gamblers and fortune tellers with the harsh chiaroscuro of his religious works. Vouet was summoned back to Paris by King Louis XIII, and his later career as a successful court painter took him far away from the Caravaggism of his early Roman years.

#### K–6 LOOKING & MAKING

What do you think is happening in this painting?  
What do you think the fortune teller is saying to the man? **Write** a dialogue and act it out for an audience.

Find out what the other woman is doing. How can you tell?

**Describe** the characters in this painting.

Where did artists look to get inspiration for their paintings at this time?

**List** places you might look today for inspiration for your paintings.

#### 7–10 FRAMING QUESTIONS

The story of the fortune teller seducing the artisan while her colleague picks his pocket was a popular folk tale of this time. Vouet has 'choreographed' the scene to a specific rhythm. How has this been achieved?

Compare to Valentin's work. List the points of similarity and difference. Which is more successful in conveying the activity and atmosphere of the scene? Identify Caravaggesque techniques that each artist has adapted in differing ways.

Research why in a time of focus on religious themes in painting, the representation of 'common people' and 'street life' so popular? Was this exclusive to the visual arts? Examine expressions of the everyday in other artistic forms of the time. Are common characters, stories and themes apparent? Examine the influence different art forms may have had on each other.



Artemisia Gentileschi  
*Judith slaying Holofernes* 1612/13

oil on canvas 159 x 126 cm  
Museo di Capodimonte, Naples Foto n NS0297 © Luciano Pedicini/Archivio dell'Arte

## IV

# NEW SUBJECTS FOR ART AFTER CARAVAGGIO 1610s & 1620s

## Sensational images of violent death

### Artemisia Gentileschi

#### Judith slaying Holofernes 1612/13

oil on canvas 159 x 126 cm  
Museo di Capodimonte, Naples  
Foto n NS0297 © Luciano Pedicini/Archivio dell'Arte

The story of Judith is written in the Apocryphal Gospels (13:7–8). During the siege of the Jewish city of Bethulia, a beautiful widow named Judith saved her people by killing the Assyrian commander Holofernes while he was asleep. This biblical story was taken to signify the triumph of true faith, a concept that assumed great importance for the 17th-century Roman Church in its fight against Protestant reform, hence a topical subject in the art of the day.

Artemisia and her father Orazio Gentileschi both created paintings on this subject, and Artemisia returned to it several times. They responded to an earlier dramatic image by Caravaggio in which he depicted a beautiful young woman, her face a mixture of resolve and revulsion, her arm tensed as she steeled herself to cut Holofernes's throat with a large sword. The horror of spurting blood and claustrophobic darkness in Caravaggio's painting inspired numerous followers. Artemisia's *Judith slaying Holofernes* is among her most powerful and confronting images. The clarity of the composition, monumentality of the figures, fierce colours against a dark background and brilliantly theatrical lighting, distinguish it as a masterpiece in the Caravaggesque manner.

It was probably painted while Artemisia was still living in her father's house, under his training. Numerous revisions and corrections are revealed by radiographic analysis. A real-life parallel in the story of Artemisia's rape by a colleague of her father's and his subsequent trial are now well known. The drama represented in this scene has been explained as a psychological reaction: a kind of pictorial revenge fantasy. This narrowly focused interpretation has been challenged by recent scholarship. Regardless, the painting has become almost emblematic of the art and passion of Artemisia Gentileschi, who remains for many people the most significant female painter of all time.

#### K–6 LOOKING & MAKING

**Describe** the scene in *Judith slaying Holofernes*. **List** some words for the feelings and actions of the characters in the painting and your own experience of the scene. **Explain** how Artemisia's way of painting and setting the scene make this so dramatic?

**Describe** the expression on Holofernes' face.

**Compare** *Judith slaying Holofernes* to *David beheading Goliath* (also in the exhibition) by Artemisia's father Orazio Gentileschi. **Explain** the similarities between these works?

#### 7–10 FRAMING QUESTIONS

The artist has portrayed the main character just before the dramatic climax of this biblical story. What psychological impact does this have on your viewing of the painting?

How does Gentileschi structure the composition to focus our attention on both Holofernes's and Judith's faces? Compare to *David and Goliath* by Artemisia's father Orazio (also in the exhibition). Describe how the composition and lighting combine to heighten the dramatic moment.

Examine how Artemisia has painted the figures. Look at her use of brushstrokes, colours, painting techniques. Locate the Caravaggesque influences in her work. Research who was instrumental in developing her practice in this way.

Investigate the religious climate of Roman society at this time. Why and in what way did it affect the subject matter chosen by Caravaggio and the Caravaggisiti? How did Caravaggio in turn influence the way such subject matter was represented?

Artemisia Gentileschi was unusual as a female artist in 17th-century Europe. Research her life and story. Examine her difficulties as a professional artist during her time. Would she face similar circumstances today? Debate. Suggest contemporary female artists who might have been Gentileschi's peers.



Orazio Gentileschi

*David and Goliath* c1605/07

oil on canvas 185.5 x 136 cm

National Gallery of Ireland © Courtesy of the National Gallery of Ireland

## IV

### NEW SUBJECTS FOR ART AFTER CARAVAGGIO 1610s & 1620s

#### Sensational images of violent death

#### Orazio Gentileschi

#### David and Goliath c1605/07

oil on canvas 185.5 x 136 cm

National Gallery of Ireland © Courtesy of the National Gallery of Ireland

The biblical subject of the killing of Goliath by the young shepherd David was a popular subject in counter-reformation Rome. Like the subject of *Judith killing Holofernes*, it came to symbolise the triumph of true faith over heresy. Orazio Gentileschi approached this well-known theme in a sensational way. Choosing to represent the instant before the young hero strikes his fatal blow, he shows Goliath raising his hand to beg for mercy and ward off the heavy sword David swings above his head. Like Caravaggio's groundbreaking depiction of the Martyrdom of St Matthew in the church of San Luigi dei Francesi, which Orazio knew well, the figures seem frozen mid-action, just before the climactic moment.

Eight years older than Caravaggio, having arrived in Rome as an adolescent more than 20 years before, Orazio changed his style after 1600 to become one of Caravaggio's first followers in the city. Caravaggio's combative and reckless approach to life and art attracted feisty painters, young and old, and Orazio's arrogant, fiery temperament made him a natural recruit to this band of artistic roysterers.

Lit from above, the action in his image of David slaying Goliath takes place in a congested space that seems to thrust the protagonists forward into the viewer's space. For David's twisting pose, Gentileschi took inspiration from a famous Roman sarcophagus that may also have inspired Caravaggio's depiction of St Matthew's executioner in the Church of San Luigi altarpiece. Although no documentation has been discovered to prove the date and initial ownership of Gentileschi's picture of David, scholars consider this to be one of the earliest and most important examples of the artist's stylistic transformation.

#### K-6 LOOKING & MAKING

**Identify** the shepherd David and the giant Goliath. Who is holding the sword and why?

**Find** David's slingshot and stones. What were these used for?

**Deliver** an eye-witness report from this scene, detailing the background events, the scene and sounds. **Invent** a headline for a newspaper to accompany this picture.

**Read** the biblical story of David and Goliath. Which part of the story is Orazio highlighting for us in this painting and why?

**Make** a cartoon strip drawing of the full story of David and Goliath.

#### 7-10 FRAMING QUESTIONS

The action in David beheading Goliath takes place within a congested space, with David as the focal point of the composition. Consider how this magnifies the action and emphasises David's triumph.

Analyse the use and position of light in the work. What features of each of the characters does it highlight and why? Does such a particular use of light also have a symbolic meaning significant to the time it was painted in?

The work presents a frozen moment in the action and yet simultaneously conveys what has just occurred and what is about to happen. Locate the devices that suggest these other moments in time and thus a world of events beyond what we see in the locked in the frame.

Gentileschi's work can be read as theatrical and cinematic. List the formal elements of the work that contribute to such a reading. What qualities can be compared with our contemporary experience of the Hollywood action blockbuster at the local cinema? Would Gentileschi's and Caravaggio's painting have offered a similar experience for audiences of their day?

Examine Caravaggio's David with the head of Goliath (not in the exhibition). Compare to Orazio Gentileschi's interpretation of the same subject. Consider the emphasis each artist has given to the subject. What effect does this have on the reading of the story and its message? Which do you think is more successful?

Investigate the religious climate of Roman society at this time. Why and in what way did it affect the subject matter chosen by Caravaggio and the Caravaggisiti? How did Caravaggio in turn influence the way such subject matter was represented at this time?



Michelangelo Merisi Da Caravaggio  
*Crowning with thorns* c1602/05

oil on canvas 127 x 166 cm  
Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Gemäldegalerie (inv. 307)

## V

# CARAVAGGIO AND THE POWER OF RELIGIOUS PERSUASION

## Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio

### Crowning with thorns c1602/05

oil on canvas 127 x 166 cm  
Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Gemäldegalerie (inv. 307)

Recently discovered documents confirm that this painting is by Caravaggio and is identical with a work once recorded in the collection of his patron Vincenzo Giustiniani in Rome. For a long time its dating was disputed and its relevance to Caravaggio's development and to his influence on others was overlooked. With a date of around 1602/05 from his Roman period, the work would have been able to stimulate many of Caravaggio's early followers in that city, such as Manfredi, Orazio Gentileschi, Valentin or Baburen, who responded with their own variations of its arresting composition.

As in his depiction of St John the Baptist, Caravaggio used antique-style red drapery to create a magnet for the eye and a foil for the spotlighted skin tones of the bared torso and limbs it encircles. This composition was probably created for a specific room, intended to be hung high above a door. Its elevated location might explain the shifts in perspective and the minor inconsistencies of style that ensue. We seem to be viewing the Christ figure front-on but his executioners are seen obliquely from above or below, radiating out like the spokes of a wheel.

The following features are all consistent with Caravaggio's mature technique in Rome: the complex use of perspective and foreshortening; delicate brushstrokes to model the nude torso of Christ in contrast to those which register the coarser skin of his tormentors (and their even more broadly painted garments); and the numerous incisions (for example, fixing the position of the chin and throat of the right-hand jailer) and reworkings (perhaps done with the handle of a brush, to the feather and hat of the armed soldier in the left foreground).

## K-6 LOOKING & MAKING

**Describe** what you can see. Who is the central figure?

**Explain** what are the other people in the painting doing to Christ?

**Write** an account of the action from each person's perspective.

**Read** the biblical account of Jesus Christ's death.

**Examine** the use of light and dark. **Speak** about the feelings this evokes.

**Draw** or **paint** a picture about someone in pain in a present-day situation.

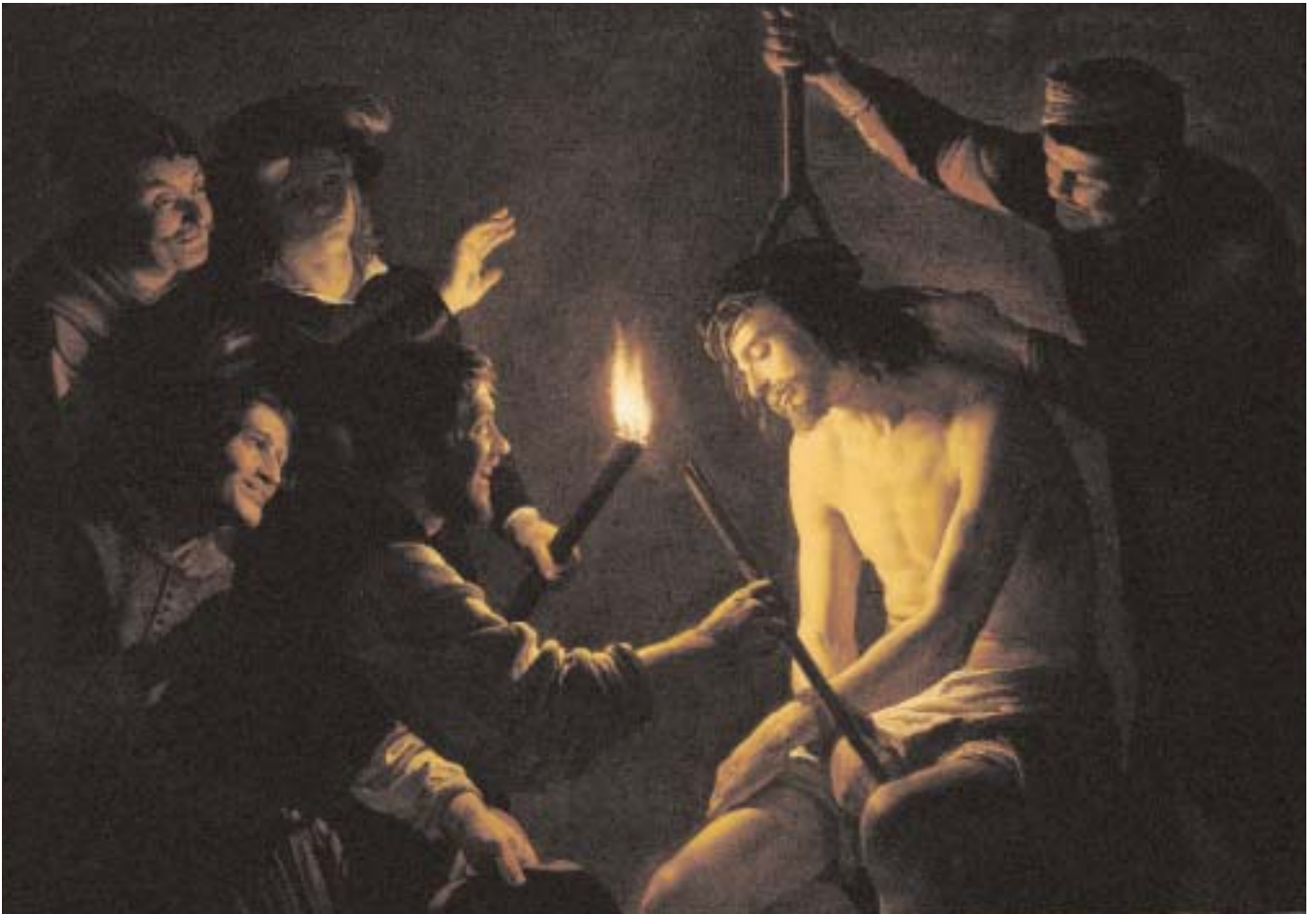
## 7-10 FRAMING QUESTIONS

Counter reformation artists painted Christian subjects encouraging the viewer to feel deeply involved with the story. Analyse *Crowning with thorns* and identify ways Caravaggio draws us intimately into the action. Investigate the counter reformation and its profound impact on 17th-century Italian life and art.

Caravaggio did not rely on preparatory drawings. What evidence of his working practices can you find in this painting? Is his direct and immediate process conveyed to the audience? How do his techniques contribute to the meaning of this painting? Discuss.

How is 'directional lighting' used in *Crowning with thorns*? Compare it to Gerrit von Honthorst's *Mocking of Christ* (also in the exhibition). Imagine each work with alternative light effects. How does this change the experience of the work and possible understandings of the subject? Why did both artists choose to use such specific lighting?

The *Mocking of Christ* refers to a biblical story. In his interpretation von Honthorst reveals insights into the psychology of a 'mob' victimising one person. What aspect of the scene does Caravaggio emphasise? Caravaggio's biblical paintings were controversial in their day for their use of models from the street life of Rome. In light of their subject and the climate of Rome at the time, why would this have unsettled the authorities and excited audiences?



Gerrit van Honthorst  
*Mocking of Christ* c1617

oil on canvas 146 x 207 cm  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art Los Angeles,  
purchased with funds provided by The Ahmanson Foundation  
Photograph © 2003 Museum Associates/LACMA

## V

# CARAVAGGIO AND THE POWER OF RELIGIOUS PERSUASION

## Gerrit van Honthorst

### The mocking of Christ c1617

oil on canvas 146 x 207 cm  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art Los Angeles,  
purchased with funds provided by The Ahmanson Foundation  
Photograph © 2003 Museum Associates/LACMA

Trained in Utrecht in the Netherlands, Gerrit van Honthorst is thought to have moved to Rome in 1610/12. His Italian nickname 'Gherardo delle Notti' (Gerard of the Night Scenes) refers to his fondness for depicting night scenes lit by candles or torches. There was a Dutch tradition of nocturnal images dating back to the late 15th century, already well known to him, but in Rome Caravaggio's dramatic directional lighting defined Honthorst's early style.

Honthorst's depiction of the biblical subject of the mocking of Christ is given added mystery and emotive resonance through its night setting. The sculptural, rounded, three-quarter length figures of Christ and his tormentors seem very close at hand, partly illuminated by flickering torchlight, partly submerged in the enveloping darkness. Realistic effects such as the shadow of the hand on the face of the soldier, trying to shield his eyes from the direct light of the torch are particularly effective. Honthorst's mastery of such illusionistic devices, exemplified by his rendering of artificial night lighting, serves to strengthen the significance of his religious imagery. For example, the figure on the left who is avoiding the light literally cuts himself off from 'the Light of Christ', remaining 'unenlightened', or in the dark.

This painting is among Honthorst's earliest documented works in the Caravaggesque manner. Having found success and wealthy patrons in Rome – some being earlier patrons and collectors of Caravaggio – Honthorst returned to the Netherlands in 1620. There he spread the influence of Caravaggio into the northern school. Rembrandt, for example, never went to Italy but learnt of Caravaggio's innovations from the Utrecht painters who had travelled to Rome and become Caravaggisti, especially Honthorst, ter Brugghen and Baburen.

## K–6 LOOKING & MAKING

**Describe** what is happening in this picture. **Find** the figure of Christ and those who are mocking him. What does mocking mean? How do you feel if you've been mocked? How does the Christ figure look? **Invent** a conversation between the mockers and Christ. How does the conversation end?

**Read** the biblical account of Christ's death and compare to your story ending.

## 7–10 FRAMING QUESTIONS

The *Mocking of Christ* refers to a biblical story. In his interpretation van Honthorst reveals an insight into the psychology of a 'mob' victimising one person. Could this work be characterised as a more intimate, subjective portrayal of the events than Caravaggio's *Crowning with thorns*? Discuss.

Outline how van Honthorst has achieved this through the formal elements of the work, particularly the cropping and framing of the composition. How do they differ from Caravaggio's use of formal elements? What aspect of the scene does Caravaggio emphasise in *Crowning with thorns*?

Examine the extreme use of chiaroscuro in the *Mocking of Christ*. Discuss the significance of the scene taking place at night and the open flame as both a compositional and symbolic device. Locate other works in the exhibition which occur at night and present an open flame. Assess if the artists' intentions are consistent.

Caravaggio's biblical paintings were controversial in their day because of his use of models from the street life of Rome. In light of his subject and the climate of Rome at the time, why would this have unsettled the authorities and excited the general audience? Discuss. Are Caravaggio's paintings still relevant to a contemporary audience?

Suggest contemporary arts or media forms that correlate to the experiences audiences may have had of Caravaggio's paintings in their day. Give examples.



## K–6 LINKS TO KEY LEARNING AREAS

### ENGLISH

*Reading:* Read some stories from the classics, ancient mythology, the Bible or even fairy tales to find the background relevant for some of the works in the exhibition. For example the story of Narcissus or the story of David and Goliath.

*Writing/producing texts:* Conduct class writing competitions.

Write narratives describing the stories depicted in the paintings.

Write descriptive paragraphs. List adjectives and make spelling lists on the themes of painting and baroque art.

### CREATIVE AND PERFORMING ARTS

*Drama – performance and improvisation:* Present performances, role-playing the scenes in selected paintings. Prepare props, costumes and lighting; explore gesture and posture to capture the pose of each figure. Use a camera to record each scene.

*Music – Listening and appreciating:* Listen to and explore baroque music. Try to locate instruments similar to those depicted in the paintings and listen to the sounds they make.

### HSIE

*Time and continuity and culture:* Calculate when and how long ago the baroque era took place. List some examples of how life would have been different in Caravaggio's day to life today.

Consider the importance of the church and religious beliefs in the baroque era.

Discuss the role that paintings such as those in this exhibition played in the past.

Locate on a map the places (countries and towns) where Caravaggio and his followers lived. What language would Caravaggio have spoken?

### MATHEMATICS

*Number, space, shape, direction, size:* Consider and discuss the impact of mathematical concepts in the composition of the paintings, for example the diagonal lines which carry the eye through the paintings and create energy and drama. Look for and count details such as instruments, books, swords, candles.

### SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

*Materials and processes:* Put yourself in the shoes of the artist and discuss the techniques and practice of the baroque artist. Discover what materials were used. For example pigments, oils and binders, brushes, canvases or boards? How were their paints prepared? What process was followed to complete a painting, from preparatory drawing to the final coat of varnish?

*Communication:* Baroque paintings were an important form of communication and helped share ideas and values in the community. Discuss the forms of media which are used for communication in society today.

above:

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio

*St Francis in meditation*

oil on canvas 128 x 94 cm

Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome  
(From Chiesa di San Pietro, Carpineto Romano)

© Archivio Fotografico, courtesy Soprintendenza Speciale per il Polo Museale Romano. Photo G Zecca

## 11–12 ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

Caravaggio had a provocative personality and a tempestuous life, which was punctuated by scandals and frequent disputes with patrons and other artists. Explore how Caravaggio's notorious lifestyle and anti-social behaviour informed his art. Today he is considered as an *outsider artist*. What do you understand this to mean? Research the art of contemporary artists who could be considered as outsider artists.

Consider the importance of patronage in the art of the 17th century. Think about who would have commissioned paintings in this time. Why were some of Caravaggio's paintings rejected by some of his patrons? Investigate how Caravaggio took advantage of the new and growing art market in his day. How have his practices in producing many works for the market hindered art historians and curators in identifying and studying his life, work and art?

Consider the role of art in Caravaggio's world of the 17th century. Does art play the same role in today's society as it did then? In your investigation consider the work of contemporary Australian artists such as Mike Parr, Tim Johnson, Ken Unsworth, Adam Cullen, Patricia Picinnini, Wendy Sharpe, Julie Rrap, Susan Norrie and Peter Booth.

Caravaggio had a major influence on European baroque art. Analyse the characteristics of his art that have contributed to his contemporary relevance and popularity. Trace how and through whom these characteristics have been transmitted over time?

Deeply influenced by Caravaggio's art, Artemisia Gentileschi's practice of painting adopted a dramatic and immediate presentation style. Why do you think Gentileschi, who was considered an outstanding female artist in her own time, has enjoyed renewed fame in the 20th century?

## 11–12 IN-DEPTH RESEARCH

### Fact or fiction?

Biographers, art historians and art critics document their subjects and contribute to what is accepted as 'fact' about an artist. Often though, personal opinion, characterisations or moralising messages can become the subtext of such writing. An artist's history is written to 'conform' with their art, already accepted views of the times or personal biases. For an audience, this can bring into question what is fact and what is fiction. Examine the critical and historical accounts of Caravaggio and who wrote them. Compare these to accounts of other of significant artists in history. Account for the position these writers have taken in relation to their subject. Explore the role of critics and art historians and the influence of time and fashion on their ideas and audiences.

### Cultural experience: art and science

Artists are often interested in science and technology, its methods and concepts. Art can be a pioneer in its use and enthusiasm for advancements in these areas. Caravaggio, within baroque artistic practice, is noted for utilising mirrors and complex techniques in perspective and composition. Investigate Caravaggio's art practice and identify his signature techniques. Research the scientific discoveries, theories and techniques of 17th-century Italy. Identify relationships between the baroque master's dramatic naturalism and the science of the day.

### Religion and spirituality

Research a variety of art works that present literal depictions of religious narratives or gods and explore a sense of the spiritual or the transcendent. Is there a difference? Investigate. Compare representations from the baroque era, particularly those by Caravaggio and the Caravaggisti, with other cultures through history. Examine why Caravaggio (and his work) was considered to be simultaneously sacred and profane by audiences in his time. Would this assessment still hold true with a contemporary audience? Explore.

### Vehicles of violence

Art can be a vehicle of violence, communicated with an intensity and turbulence that can be either overt or subtle. Investigate how and why such a powerful theme has been adopted. Explore the personal or public forces that motivate artists to confront the darker side of human experience. Profile Caravaggio the man and chronicle his life and exploits. Is there a relationship between an artist's character, actions and approach to their art practice?

### Duality: darkness and light

Examine the formal, symbolic and psychological applications of darkness and light in Western culture. Mind map and research a key word list of meanings and associations. Investigate Eastern culture and locate points of convergence and divergence from a variety of points in history. Drawing on works in the exhibition, investigate the chiaroscuro technique embraced by Caravaggio and its adoption and adaptation by the Caravaggisti throughout Europe. Has there been a lasting influence of chiaroscuro and its symbolic power on contemporary artists in either Western or Eastern cultures?

### Naturalism and realism

Caravaggio was regarded as a radical in his shift away from classicism to a bold and robust naturalism or realism. He is often credited with inventing the genre. His earlier works were relatively traditional, typical to the time. However when the artist began seeking his models from the raw street life of Roman society his work took on a gritty and lifelike tone and the public was often uncomfortable with his choices. Consider the paradox of naturalistic or realist representations in art often being interpreted by audiences as provocative, subversive or disturbing acts by the artist. Research the terms 'naturalism' and 'realism'. What do they mean in 17th-century Italy as compared to contemporary society?

### No fear: the individual versus society

Investigate the artist as dissenter and innovator. Art history is littered with artists who determinedly followed their own vision, outside the conventions of the society of the day. Starting with Caravaggio, compile a list of art history's greatest mavericks and mould breakers. Present a case for their inclusion. Examine viewpoints including: the artist's vision, society's values, conformity and rebellion, the price to be paid, locating in the centre or on the fringe, does time heal all wounds?

### Cult of personality

Influential and significant figures in art are, with time, elevated to hero status and often associated with the idea of the artist as 'genius'. The practice of isolating an artwork in the exalted confines of a gallery space further contributes to the deifying of the artist. In his day Caravaggio was regarded as an infamous rabble-rouser. Today he is canonised as one of the greatest artists in Western Art history. In the 17th century he was one of the most famous artists in Europe. By the end of that century his fame had declined and he was forgotten for centuries. Explore the processes and relationships in the art world that can elevate a sinner to a saint or villain to a hero. Are there other artists who are forgotten or lost to art history and later rediscovered? Are there those who disappear forever? How might this occur for some but not others?

### Point of view: curatorial practice

Curators weave stories through the selection and placement of works of art. As with all forms of art practice, curatorial practice is affected by fashion, values and theories of their time. Investigate the role of the gallery or museum and its relationships with agents of the art world through the exhibition. Is there a point of view on Caravaggio the exhibition is attempting to communicate to the audience? Define how the design and layout of the exhibition supports this. Research the historical and original context of display for individual works and compare with their contemporary display in the exhibition. Debate how this would affect an audience's experience and understanding of Caravaggio's work.

# CARAVAGGIO: FOR THE RECORD

## NOTICE OF CARAVAGGIO'S ARREST

Yesterday, between the hours of two and three in the night making the rounds through Rome, when I was between Piazza Navona and Piazza Madama, I ran into Michelangelo da Caravaggio who was carrying a sword without permission, and a pair of compasses, and so I seized him and imprisoned him in the Tor di Nona.

Bartolomeo, deputy chief constable of Rome, 4 May 1598  
Source: Puglisi 1998

I was seized yesterday ... because I was carrying the sword I usually carry, being the Painter to Cardinal del Monte, and getting a salary for myself and my servant, and lodging in his house as well, I am registered in his service.

Caravaggio's testimony before the judge  
Source: Puglisi 1998

## Libel suit brought by Giovanni Baglione

I was seized the other day in Piazza Navona, I do not know why. I am a painter.

I think I know nearly all the painters in Rome, and beginning with good artists I know Giuseppe [Cesari], [Annibale] Carracci, [Federico] Zuccari, Pomerancio [Cristoforo Roncalli], [Orazio] Gentileschi, Prospero [Orsi], Giovanni Andrea [Galli], Giovanni Baglione, Gismondo and Giorgio the German, [Antonio] Tempesta, and others. Nearly all the painters I have mentioned above are my friends, but not all of them are good men.

By a good man I mean someone who can perform well in his art, and by a good painter a man who can paint well and imitate natural things well.

... I do not know anything about there being any painter who praises Giovanni Baglione as a good painter

... I do not like his painting because it is clumsy and I regard it as the worst he has ever done ...

... No sir, I do not amuse myself composing verses, either in Italian or Latin, I have never heard of the existence of rhymes or prose against Baglione

Caravaggio's deposition, 13 September 1603  
Source: Puglisi 1998

I am a friend of all these painters, however, there is a certain rivalry among us; for instance, when I placed a picture of Saint Michael the Archangel in San Giovanni dei Fiorentini, Baglione showed his rivalry and placed another picture opposite it, which was a Divine Love he had painted to rival an Earthly Love by Michelangelo da Caravaggio; he had dedicated his Divine Love to Cardinal Giustiniani and, although the picture was not appreciated as much as Michelangelo's, none the less, it was reported that the Cardinal presented him with a gold chain.

This picture had many imperfections, as I told him, as he made an armed, full-grown man, while it should have been a nude child, and so later he made another, which was entirely nude. I never spoke to Baglione again after the matter of that St. Michael, and seldom even before because when walking about Rome he waits for me to lift my cap to him, and I wait for him to lift his cap to me, and Caravaggio, too, although we are friends; but it must be six or eight months since I last spoke to Caravaggio, although he sent to my house for a Capuchin habit, which I lent him, and a pair of wings, which he sent back to me about ten days ago...

Orazio Gentileschi's deposition, 14 September 1603  
Source: Puglisi 1998

## CARAVAGGIO'S DEATH

### *Most Reverend Respectable Patron*

I deny what had been reported in the letter of the Most Illustrious Lanfranco of the 24th of the present month to Your Most Illustrious Lordship about Caravaggio the painter: which being to me unknown, I immediately tried to get information about it, and I find out that poor Caravaggio has not died in Procida, but at Porto Ercole, because, having arrived at Palo abroad the felucca on which he sailed, he was there put in prison by that captain, and heard that the felucca set sail and returned to Naples; Caravaggio having remained in prison, got his freedom by paying a large amount of money, and by land and perhaps walking, he went as far as Porto Ercole where, having fallen ill, he lost his life; the felucca, on its return voyage, brought back, the remaining belongings to the house of Signora Marchesa of Caravaggio, who lives in Chiaia, from where Caravaggio had left: I have immediately made inquiries about to find out if the paintings are there, and discover that they are no longer there, except three, the two Saint Johns, and the Magdalen, and they are in the aforesaid house of the Signora Marchesa, whom I immediately begged to keep them well guarded, so that they are not ruined, without letting anyone see them, or be taken by anyone, because they were intended and must be kept for Your Most Illustrious Lordship, but until the heirs and creditors of the aforesaid Caravaggio will be dealt with in order to give them due satisfaction, as regards this some have already come, I will see and understand what can be done, and I will manage that in any way the paintings are preserved, and come into the possession of Your Most Illustrious Lordship, to whom I humbly bow in the end.

Naples, on the 29th July 1610

*Most Humble Devoted and Obligated Servant and creature  
Fra Deodato Gentile, Bishop of Caserta*

Letter of 29 July from Fra Deodata Gentile, Bishop of Caserta, Naples to cardinal Scipione Borghese, Rome  
Source: Puglisi 1998

## REVIEWS OF CARAVAGGIO AFTER HIS DEATH

Our times owe much to Michelangelo da Caravaggio for the method of painting he introduced, which is now quite widely followed ... A characteristic of this school is lighting from one source only, which beams down without reflections, as would occur in a very dark room with one window and the walls painted black, and thus with the light very strong and the shadows very deep, they give powerful relief to the painting, but in an unnatural way, something that was never thought of or done before by any other painter like Raphael, Titian, Correggio, or others.

Giulio Mancini, *On painting*, Rome c1617–21. Source: Hibbard 1983

Michelangelo, born in Caravaggio ... also painted a boy bitten by a lizard emerging from flowers and fruits; you could almost hear the boy scream, and it was all done meticulously.

If Michelangelo Merisi had not died so soon, the art world would have profited greatly from his beautiful style, which consisted of painting from nature... and he was paid more for his portraits than others obtained for their history pictures, such is the value of recognition by the people, who judge not with their eyes but look with their ears.

Giovanni Baglione, *Lives of the painters sculptors and architects*, Rome 1642  
Source: Hibbard 1983

Michelangelo Merisi ... recognised no other master than the model – and what is incredible, it seems that he imitated art without art.

Caravaggio (as he was called by everyone, with the name of his native town) was becoming more famous every day because the colouration he was introducing was not as sweet and delicate as before, but become boldly dark and black, which he used abundantly to give relief to his forms.

The painters then in Rome were greatly taken by this novelty, and the young ones particularly gathered around him, praised him as the unique imitator of nature, and looked on his work as miracles. They outdid each other in imitating his works, undressing their models and raising their lights. Without devoting themselves to study and instruction, each one easily found in the piazza and in the street their masters and the models for imitating nature.

The moment the model was taken from him, his hand and his mind became empty ... Caravaggio's style corresponded to his physiognomy and appearance; he had a dark complexion and dark eyes, and his eyebrows and hair were black; this colouring was naturally reflected in his paintings.

Giovanni Pietro Bellori, *Lives of the modern painters, sculptors and architects*, Rome 1672  
Source: Hibbard 1983

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