

Excerpted from Gilles Lambert, *Caravaggio*. Koln: Taschen, 2000, 6-17, 92-94.

## The Artist as Outlaw



Michelangelo, *Ignudi*, 1509, Detail of the Sistine Chapel fresco, near the *Flood* and above the *Eritrean Sibyl* Like Caravaggio, his illustrious forebear Michelangelo frequently painted young men, his models and lovers. But his *Ignudi* are the expression of beauty born of God's hand, whereas those of Caravaggio are invariably somewhat equivocal.

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



*Saint John the Baptist*, 1599-1600, Oil on canvas, 129 x 94 cm, Rome, Musei Capitolini, Pinacoteca Capitolina.

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



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



*Boy with Basket of Fruit*, c. 1593-1594, Oil on canvas, 70 x 67 cm, Rome, Galleria Borghese



*Boy Peeling Fruit (copy?)*, c. 1593-1594, Oil on canvas, 75.5 x 64.4 cm, Rome, Private collection.

Not until 1596, in the *Repentant Magdalene*, did Caravaggio paint his first portrait of a woman.

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



*Bacchus*, c. 1596-1597, Oil on canvas, 95 x 85 cm, Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi.

The shockwaves produced by his work were powerful and long lasting, and his reputation did not survive them. His name was forgotten, and he had to wait three hundred years for his reputation to be vindicated. His name began to reappear in the late 19th century, but it was not until the 1920s that the work of the art critic Roberto Longhi again brought his name before the public. Only then did his true stature emerge. For Longhi, Caravaggio's influence extended throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century (notably in the work of Rembrandt) and well beyond, as far as Delacroix, Gericault (who copied Caravaggio's *Entombment* before painting the *Raft of the Medusa*; ill. p. 63), Courbet and Manet. "With the exception of Michelangelo, no other Italian



*Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, c. 1598, Oil on canvas, 173 x 133 cm, Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza.

painter exercised so great an influence," wrote that hostile witness, the American critic Bernard Berenson, who had little time for Caravaggio and deemed him "incongruous". "After him, painting could never be the same again. His revolution was a profound and irreversible modification of the emotional and intellectual relation between the artist and his subject," declared Giuliano Briganti. Andre Berne-Joffroy, Paul Valery's secretary, put it in a nutshell: "In the aftermath of the Renaissance, what begins in the work of Caravaggio is, quite simply, modern painting".

During his lifetime, Caravaggio was deemed unacceptably provocative, and death offered no reprieve. His body was never found, and there were those who claimed that he had organized his own disappearance, and simulated death in order to evade prosecution. His first biographer, Giovanni Baglione, detested him, and did not spare his memory. Rumors spread; he was accused of plagiarism and theft. His works were reattributed and assigned to his more reassuring rivals, respected academicians of high repute. They included Cavaliere d'Arpino, for whom Caravaggio worked when he arrived in Rome, Guido Reni, who resembled him so little (legend has it that Reni died a virgin), Guercino, Domenichino, Giuseppino, Albani, and even Ribera and Zurbaran. In return, works were falsely attributed to him. As Berenson describes it, "any work of strong chiaroscuro presenting huge, obese and vulgar protagonists, sacrilegiously posed as Christ or the Apostles, plumed heads, hordes



ABOVE: *Lute Player*, 1596-1597, Oil on canvas, 100 x 126.5 cm, New York, Private collection loaned to Metropolitan Museum of Art. BELOW RIGHT: detail of *Lute Player*

of men and women wearing an ignoble and drunken aspect, young scallywags playing dice or cheating" was "a Caravaggio".

The few historians who cite his name—one such as Joachim Winckelmann in 1750—gave no indication of his importance. He who had put the *oscuro* into *chiaroscuro* was himself wreathed in obscurity. He disappeared from lists, chronologies, in short, from the history of art. Luigi Lanzi, whose monumental *Storia pictorica dell'Italia* (1792), was much quarried by Stendhal, could not even spell his name. He appears there as Michelangelo Amerighi or Morigi, and occupies a total of two paragraphs. Stendhal, a great admirer of Guido Reni (whom he considered superior even to Raphael) cites Caravaggio's name just twice in his *Histoire de la Peinture en Italie*, and in his *Promenades dans Rome*, he recommends Domenichino's frescoes at San Luigi dei Francesi rather than Caravaggio's paintings, in which he perceived only "crude but energetic peasants".

Strange as it seems, the Romantics too gave Caravaggio a wide berth. Balzac does not mention him in the *Comedie humaine*, and Theophile Gautier confines himself to remarking, "He seems to have lived in caverns or gambling dens" (*Description du Louvre*, 1849). In his famous *Cicerone* (1855), the standard guidebook for the enlightened 19th-century traveler in Italy, Jacob Burckhardt deems the *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* "all but ridiculous" and speaks of "poverty and monotony". Zola, in his novel *Rome*, praises the Carracci frescoes in the Palazzo Farnese, but fails to mention Caravaggio. In his *Voyage en Italie*, Hippolyte Taine visits Santa Maria del Popolo, where he admires "a charming *Saint Michael* by Guido Reni, a consummately fine *Saint Francis* by Domenichino", and completely overlooks the *Vocation of Saint Paul*. He did not take the trouble to visit San Luigi dei Francesi, where Caravaggio's masterpieces hang (it is true that the lighting made appreciation all but impossible at that period).



*Victorious Cupid*, c. 1602-1603, Oil on canvas, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin -Stiftung

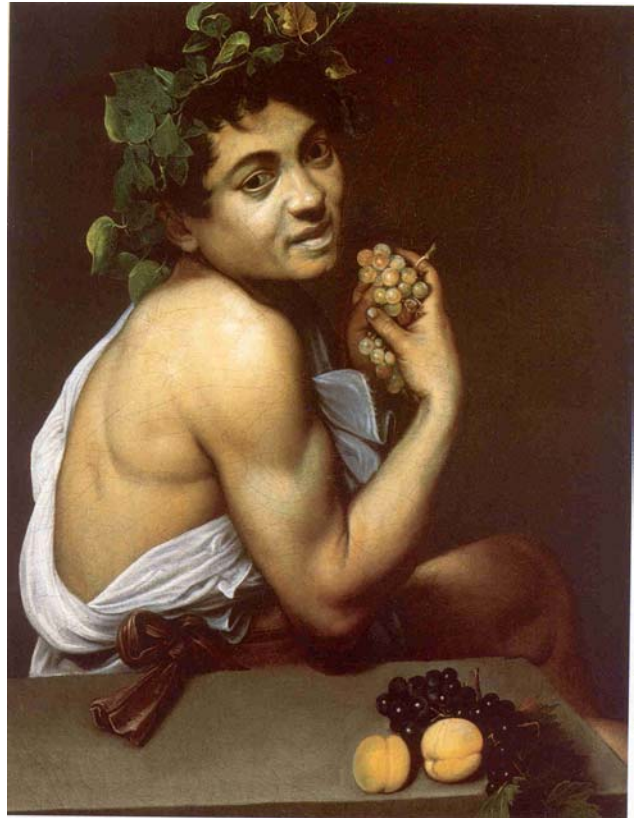
In the wake of this long and unjustified oblivion came spectacular rediscovery and increasingly rapturous approval. Around 1890, while working on the Catalogue of the Imperial Collections of Austria, Wolfgang Kallab detected a common style linking several early 17th-century works of controversial authorship. He concentrated on the treatment of light, the quality of brushwork, and on certain particularities that he studied in depth. He put forward the name of Michelangelo Merisi: Caravaggio. At the time, not a single signed painting was known; even today, only one is known. Little was known of this *peintre maudit*. But the hypothesis gradually came to be accepted. Specialists such as Hennann Voss, Denis Mahon, M. Marangoni, and Lionello Venturi began to define the corpus. The discovery of archive documents in Rome, Naples and Malta gave the work of scholars a new impetus. In 1920, Robert Longhi nailed his colors to the mast: "People speak of Michelangelo de Caravaggio, calling him now a master of shadow, now a master of light."

What has been forgotten is that Ribera, Vermeer, la Tour and Rembrandt could never have existed without him. And the art of Delacroix, Courbet, and Manet would have been utterly different". And thus Caravaggio began a second career as an old master.

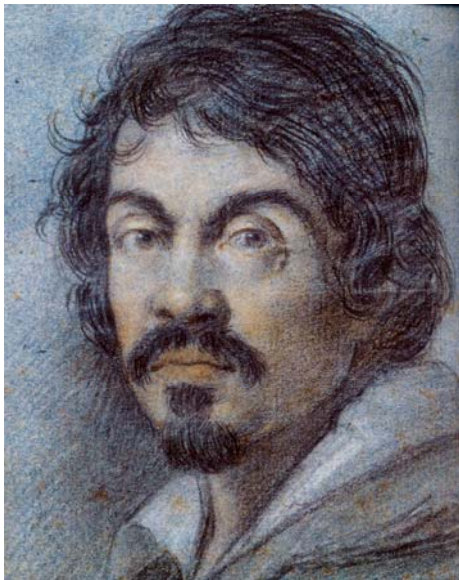
Since then, his reputation and influence have grown incessantly. Shortly after the Second World War, in the Palazzo Reale in Milan, an exhibition entitled "Mostra del Caravaggio e dei Caravaggeschi" (Caravaggio and the Caravaggesques) was held. It was conceived by Roberto Longhi, and was a first of its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

## Life and Works

**1571-1584** Michelangelo Merisi born 29 September 1571 in Caravaggio, a little market town in Bergamo, or perhaps in Milan. His mother, Lucia Aratori, is the second wife of Fermo, *magister* (architect-decorator and site overseer) to Francesco Sforza I, Marchese di Caravaggio. His brother Battista, who became a priest, is born a year later. Early childhood in Milan. Plague drives his family back to Caravaggio, where it claims his father and uncle. 1583: death of the Marchese di Caravaggio. Costanza Colonna inherits the Marquisate. Caravaggio's family suffers extreme poverty. 1576: death of Titian. 1581: Domenichino born. 1584: Frans Hals born.



*Self-Portrait as Ill Bacchus*, 1591, Oil on canvas, 67 x 53 cm, Rome, Galleria Borghese. Caravaggio was twenty at the time of this work.



Ottavio Leoni, *Portrait of Caravaggio* (detail), c. 1621-1625, Red and white chalk on blue paper, 23.4 x 16.3 cm, Florence, Biblioteca Marucelliana. This is probably the most faithful portrait of Caravaggio.

**1584-1595** At thirteen, Caravaggio returns to Milan and enters the studio of Simone Peterzano, an established painter and "pupil of Titian". The contract is approved by Prince Colonna. Peterzano, like the Campi brothers, is attracted to a more realistic style at odds with the prevailing Mannerism. A new style is born in Lombardy, whose influence the young apprentice feels. The great period of Renaissance painting is at an end. Pope Sixtus V is open to new trends in art. 1593: Georges de La Tour born. 1594: Nicolas Poussin born.

**1595-1598** Caravaggio, having acquired exceptional technical facility in Peterzano's studio, leaves for Rome, the cultural capital of the world. His itinerary is not known, but he no doubt sees Masaccio's frescoes, Lotto's paintings, the works of the great Venetians, such as Giorgione, and the frescoes of Niccolò dell'Abbate at Bologna. He also sees the drawings of Sofonisba Anguisciola at Cremona. He is given lodging by a Cardinal of doubtful morals. First works, all profane: *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*, *Boy Peeling Fruit*, *Boy with a Vase of Roses*, and the *Concert*, also called *The*



*Self-Portrait from The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew*, 1598-1600

*Musicians*, which includes a first self-portrait. Falls ill, recovers miraculously, and in his convalescence paints the *III Bacchus*, a second self-portrait. Acquires a powerful patron, Cardinal del Monte. He paints a woman for the first time, the *Repentant Magdalene*, followed by a *Fortune Teller*, and a second *Bacchus* in better health than the first. Has his first brushes with justice. Paints the famous *Basket of Fruit* (now in Milan).

**1598-1600** Religious subjects: the Sacrifice of Isaac, The Ecstasy of Saint Francis, and others. 1598: Zurbaran born. 1599: Velazquez born. 1600: Claude Lorrain born.

**1600-1604** Two great commissions in which Caravaggio's powers are revealed: San Luigi dei Francesi (the *Vocation* and *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew*) and Santa Maria del Popolo (the *Crucifixion of Saint Peter* and the *Vocation of Saint Paul*). Both are highly controversial, as is *The Death of the Virgin* (Louvre), modeled by a prostitute. A *Madonna* for Saint Peter's is refused. Caravaggio wounds a lawyer in a fight over a prostitute, and flees to Genoa. Major religious paintings. In April 1604, a melee at the Albergo del Moro caused by Caravaggio. He is accused of murdering a police sergeant. Arrested and tortured, he is helped to escape.

**1605-1607** *Madonna di Loreto*. 29 May 1606 (the police report has survived), Caravaggio kills one Tommasoni after accusing him of cheating at royal tennis. Wanted for murder, he escapes from Rome in disguise. He is banished: any representative of the law may kill him on the spot. Finds refuge in the territory of Prince Colonna. Late in 1606, goes to Naples. Welcomed there, he paints a *Resurrection*, a *Flagellation*, the *Seven Works of Mercy* and the *Madonna of the Rosary*; the latter alienates the Dominicans. He is an object of adulation. But the Pope's pardon is slow to come. Leaves Naples for Malta. 1606: Rembrandt born.

**1607-1608** He wants to become a knight, believing this will facilitate his pardon. In Malta, paints major works for Valetta Cathedral and two (?) portraits of the Master of the Order. He is made a Knight of Saint John. But a further indiscretion lands him in prison, he is expelled from the Order, and is again forced to flee.

**1608-1609** He disembarks in Syracuse (Sicily), and goes to Messina and Palermo. In the despair of exile, racked with illness, he paints intensely moving works: a *Resurrection of Lazarus*, a *Nativity*, and an *Ecce Homo*. In late 1609, he decides to return to Naples. 1609: A. Carracci dies.

**1609-1610** Still awaiting a papal pardon, he paints a *Denial of Saint Peter*, and a *David with the Head of Goliath*, which includes his final self-portrait. This second Naples period was one of superlative works, including a last *Saint John the Baptist*, and a *Martyrdom of Saint Ursula* in which death is depicted, as if Caravaggio knew that he was doomed. An attempt on his life. News of his death spreads; in fact, he has left Naples, though wounded. He disembarks near Rome, at Porto Ercole, then occupied by the Spanish army. His body is found on the beach. He was not yet forty.



Self-Portrait from *David with the Head of Goliath*, 1605-1606