

## Caravaggio

**Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio** (1571 – 1610) was an Italian painter active in Rome, Naples, Malta, and Sicily between 1592 (1595?) and 1610. His paintings combine a realistic observation of the human state, both physical and emotional, with a dramatic use of lighting, and they had a formative influence on Baroque painting.

Following his initial training under Simone Peterzano, in 1592 Caravaggio left Milan for Rome, in flight after "certain quarrels" and the wounding of a police officer. The young artist arrived in Rome "naked and extremely needy ... without fixed address and without provision ... short of money." A few months later he was performing hack-work for the highly successful Giuseppe Cesari, Pope Clement VIII's favourite artist, "painting flowers and fruit" in his factory-like workshop.

Caravaggio employed close physical observation with a dramatic use of chiaroscuro that came to be known as tenebrism. He made the technique a dominant stylistic element, darkening shadows and transfixing subjects in bright shafts of light. Caravaggio vividly expressed crucial moments and scenes, often featuring violent struggles, torture and death. He worked rapidly, with live models, preferring to forego drawings and work directly onto the canvas. His influence on the new Baroque style that emerged from Mannerism was profound. It can be seen directly or indirectly in the work of Peter Paul Rubens, Jusepe de Ribera, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, and Rembrandt, and artists in the following generation heavily under his influence were called the "Caravaggisti" or "Caravagesques", as well as tenebrists or tenebrosi ("shadowists") (the shift from light to dark with little intermediate value).

Caravaggio trained as a painter in Milan before moving in his twenties to Rome. He developed a considerable name as an artist, and as a violent, touchy and provocative man. A brawl led to a death sentence for murder and forced him to flee to Naples. There he again established himself as one of the most prominent Italian painters of his generation. He traveled in 1607 to Malta and on to Sicily, and pursued a papal pardon for his sentence. In 1609 he returned to Naples, where he was involved in a violent clash; his face was disfigured and rumours of his death circulated. Questions about his mental state arose from his erratic and bizarre behavior. He died in 1610 under uncertain circumstances while on his way from Naples to Rome. Reports stated that he died of a fever, but suggestions have been made that he was murdered or that he died of lead poisoning.

Caravaggio's innovations inspired Baroque painting, but the Baroque incorporated the drama of his chiaroscuro without the psychological realism. The style evolved and fashions changed, and Caravaggio fell out of favor. In the 20th century interest in his work revived, and his importance to the development of Western art was reevaluated. The 20th-century art historian André Berne-Joffroy stated, "What begins in the work of Caravaggio is, quite simply, modern painting."



**01** The *Young Sick Bacchus* is an early self-portrait dated between 1593 and 1594.

The painting dates from Caravaggio's first years in Rome following his arrival from his native Milan in mid-1592. Sources for this period are inconclusive and probably inaccurate, but they agree that at one point the artist fell extremely ill and spent six months in the hospital of Santa Maria della Consolazione. According to a 2009 article in the American medical publication *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, the painting indicates that Caravaggio's physical ailment likely involved malaria.



**02** *The Cardsharps* (painted around 1594)

The painting shows an expensively-dressed but unworldly boy playing cards with another boy. The second boy, a cardsharp, has extra cards tucked in his belt behind his back, out of sight of the mark but not the viewer, and a sinister older man is peering over the dupe's shoulder and signalling to his young accomplice. The second boy has a dagger handy at his side, and violence is not far away.

It was the second such painting Caravaggio created. The first, *The Fortune Teller*, had drawn attention, and this painting extended his reputation, small though it was at this stage. The subjects of *The Fortune Teller* and *Cardsharps* offered something new, realistic scenes of street life, especially with this beautifully rendered attention to little details such as the split fingers on the older man's gloves, or the teenage cheat's anxious glance at his master. The psychological insight is equally striking, the three figures bound together by the common drama, yet each with his own unique part within the larger play – for if the innocent is being duped, the other boy is no older, another innocent being corrupted even as he cheats his gull.

*Cardsharps*, with its mixture of brutal low-life realism and luminous Venetian delicacy, was much admired, and Orsi "went around acclaiming (Caravaggio's) new style and heightening the reputation of his work."



### **03 *The Fortune Teller* 1595**

The painting shows a foppishly-dressed boy (in the second version the model is believed to be Caravaggio's companion, the Sicilian painter Mario Minniti), having his palm read by a gypsy girl. The boy looks pleased as he gazes into her face, and she returns his gaze. Close inspection of the painting reveals what the young man has failed to notice: the girl is removing his ring as she gently strokes his hand.

Caravaggio's biographer Giovanni Pietro Bellori relates that the artist picked the gypsy girl out from passers-by on the street in order to demonstrate that he had no need to copy the works of the masters from antiquity:

"When he was shown the most famous statues of Phidias and Glykon in order that he might use them as models, his only answer was to point towards a crowd of people saying that nature had given him an abundance of masters."

This passage is often used to demonstrate that the classically trained Mannerist artists of Caravaggio's day disapproved of Caravaggio's insistence on painting from life instead of from copies and drawings made from older masterpieces. However, Bellori ends by saying, "and in these two half-figures [Caravaggio] translated reality so purely that it came to confirm what he said." The story is probably apocryphal - Bellori was writing more than half a century after Caravaggio's death, and it doesn't appear in Mancini's or in Giovanni Baglione, the two contemporary biographers who had known him - but it does indicate the essence of Caravaggio's revolutionary impact on his contemporaries - beginning with *The Fortune Teller* - which was to replace the Renaissance theory of art as a didactic fiction with art as the representation of real life.



### **04 *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* 1594–1596.**

The affected pose may have been the inevitable result of the experiment Caravaggio appears to have been undertaking here: observing and recording acute emotions – surprise and fear – in a

situation where real surprise was impossible and where the pose had to be held for a considerable period. Critics of Caravaggio's insistence on painting only from life would later point out this limitation of his method: it lent itself to marvelously realistic (if theatrical) static compositions, but not to scenes involving movement and violence. It would only be in his late period, when he seems to have worked more from imagination, that Caravaggio would be able to completely overcome this problem. Nevertheless, *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* is an important work in the artist's early oeuvre precisely because it shows a way out from the airless stillness of very early works such as *Boy Peeling a Fruit* and *Sick Bacchus*, and even the implied violence but actual stasis of pieces such as *Cardsharps*.



**05 *The Lute Player*** exists in three versions. All show a boy with soft facial features and thick brown hair, accompanying himself on the lute as he sings a madrigal about love.

A c 1596 Badminton House, Gloucestershire

B c 1596, Wildenstein Collection

C c 1600 Hermitage

All three versions demonstrate the innovative approach to light that Caravaggio adopted at this time. Caravaggio's method, as described by Caravaggio's contemporary Giulio Mancini, was to use "a strong light from above with a single window and the walls painted black, so that having the lights bright and the shadows dark, it gives depth to the painting, but with a method that is not natural nor done or thought of by any other century or older painters like Raphael, Titian, Correggio and others."

("He also painted [for Cardinal Del Monte] a young man, playing the Lute, who seemed altogether alive and real with a carafe of flowers full of water, in which you could see perfectly the reflection of a window and other reflections of that room inside the water, and on those flowers there was a lively dew depicted with every exquisite care. And this (he said) was the best piece that he ever painted.)"



**06 *Bacchus*** 1595



**07 *Basket of Fruit*** (c.1599) shows a wicker basket perched

on the edge of a ledge. The basket contains a selection of summer fruit:

Much has been made of the worm-eaten, insect-predated, and generally less than perfect condition of the fruit. In line with the culture of the age, the general theme appears to revolve about the fading beauty, and the natural decaying of all things. Scholars also describe the basket of fruit as a metaphor of the Church.

The basket seems to teeter on the edge of the picture-space, in danger of falling out of the painting and into the viewer's space instead. Trompe l'oeil seems to be almost the whole purpose of the painting, if we subtract the possible didactic element. But the single element that no doubt attracted its original owner, and still catches attention today, is the extraordinary quasi-photographic realism of the observation which underlies the illusionism.



**08 Penitent Magdalene** c 1594-5 portrays a repentant Mary Magdalene, bowed over in penitent sorrow as she leaves behind her dissolute life, its trappings abandoned beside her. At the time of its completion the painting was unconventional for its contemporary realism and departure from traditional Magdalene iconography. A single tear runs down one cheek to the side of her nose.

According to Hilary Spurling in *The New York Times Book Reviews* (2001), "contemporaries complained that his Mary Magdalene looked like the girl next door drying her hair alone at home on her night in."



**09 Medusa** c1597



**10 *Judith Beheading Holofernes*** 1599–1602. The widow Judith first charms the Assyrian general Holofernes, then decapitates him in his tent.



**11 *The Calling of Saint Matthew*** 1599-1600 depicts the moment at which Jesus Christ inspires Matthew to follow him.

In this painting, the gloom and the canvassed window appears to situate the table indoors. Christ brings the true light to the dark space of the sitting tax-collectors. This painting records the collision of two worlds — the ineluctable power of the immortal faith, and the mundane, foppish, world of Levi. Jesus spears him with a beam of light, with an apparent effortless hand gesture he exerts an inescapable sublime gravity, with no need for wrenching worldly muscularity. Jesus' bare feet are classical simplicity in contrast with the dandified accountants; being barefoot may also symbolize holiness, as if one is on holy ground. Similarly to his treatment of Paul in the Conversion on the Way to Damascus, Caravaggio chronicles the moment when a daily routine is interrupted by the miraculous. Around the man to become Matthew are either the unperceptive or unperturbed bystanders.

Caravaggio's audience would have seen the similarity between the gesture of Jesus as he points towards Matthew, and the gesture of God as he awakens Adam in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. Following the line of Christ's left arm, it seems that Matthew is being invited to follow him into the world at large. "This clear legibility, so different from many Mannerist paintings, ... accounted for the work's enormous popularity."<sup>[1]</sup> The position of Christ's hand, however, reflects that of Adam's in the Sistine Chapel; the Church considered Christ to be the second Adam.



**12 *The Crucifixion of Saint Peter*** 1601 depicts the martyrdom of St. Peter by crucifixion— Peter asked that his cross be inverted so as not to imitate his God, Jesus Christ, hence he is depicted upside down. The large canvas shows Ancient Romans, their faces shielded, struggling to erect the cross of the elderly but muscular apostle. Peter is heavier than his aged body would suggest, and his lifting requires the efforts of three men, as if the crime they perpetrate already weighs on them.



**13 *Supper at Emmaus*** 1601 depicts the moment when the resurrected but incognito Jesus, reveals himself to two of his disciples (presumed to be Luke and Cleopas) in the town of Emmaus, only to soon vanish from their sight (Gospel of Luke 24: 30-31). Cleopas wears the scallop shell of a pilgrim. The other apostle wears torn clothes. Cleopas gesticulates in a perspectively-challenging extension of arms in and out of the frame of reference. The standing groom, forehead smooth and face in darkness, appears oblivious to the event. The painting is unusual for the life-sized figures, the dark and blank background. The table lays out a still-life meal. Like the world these apostles knew, the basket of food teeters perilously over the edge.

Jesus is said to have appeared to them "in another form", which may be why he is depicted beardless here, as opposed to the bearded Christ in *Calling of St Matthew*, where a group of seated money counters is interrupted by the recruiting Christ. It is also a recurring theme in Caravaggio's paintings to find the sublime interrupting the daily routine. The unexalted humanity is apt for this scene, since the human Jesus has made himself unrecognizable to his disciples, and at once confirms and surmounts his humanity. Caravaggio seems to suggest that perhaps a Jesus could enter our daily encounters. The dark background envelops the tableau.



**14 *Incredulity of Saint Thomas* c1602**



**15 *Portrait of Pope Paul V* 1605** Many scholars have doubted the authenticity of this painting, considering the composition too uninspired for the artist's style. But the scholar John Gash in his authoritative (revised) 2003 catalogue of Caravaggio believes the work is genuine, pointing out that the pose would have been beyond the artist's control - Paul V was noted for his dignified and even taciturn demeanor, and would be unlikely to accept direction. "[H]is unostentatious bearing exemplifies the sober, cautious and, in fact, genuinely religious spirit of the man...". Gash also points out that Paul's narrowed eyes, far from conveying suspicion and malevolence as many writers assert, are the result of chronic myopia. Also note the startling similarities between this portrait and Velázquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*.



**16 *Burial of Saint Lucy* 1608** According to *The Golden Legend*, Saint Lucy had bestowed her wealth on the poor, in gratitude for the miraculous healing of her mother. Denounced as a Christian, she refused to recant, offered her chastity to Christ, and was sentenced to be dragged to a brothel. Miraculously, nothing could move her from the spot where she stood. She was pierced by a knife in the throat and, where she fell, the church of Santa Lucia al Sepolcro in Syracuse was built.

Caravaggio had escaped from prison on Malta in 1608, fleeing to Syracuse. There his Roman companion Mario Minniti helped him get a commission for the present altarpiece. Caravaggio

painted it in 1608, for the Franciscan church of Santa Lucia al Sepolcro. The choice of subject was driven by the fact that St. Lucy was the patron saint of Syracuse and had been interred below the church. The subject was unusual, but especially important to the local authorities, who were eager to reinforce the local cult of St. Lucy, which had sustained a setback with the theft of her remains during the Middle Ages.



**17 *Tooth Puller* 1609**



**18 *The Denial of Saint Peter* 1610** is generally thought to be one of the last two works by Caravaggio.

In October 1609, Caravaggio was attacked by assailants at the Osteria del Cerriglio tavern in Naples, led by Giovanni Rodomonte Roero, the Conte della Vezza. It seems he never fully recovered from the attack and this is evidenced by broad brushwork and an unfocused quality to the work.

