



CARAVAGGIO (1571–1610)

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Caravaggio (1571–1610), *Self-Portrait as Bacchus*, 1593, Galleria Borghese

- **Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio**, known as Caravaggio, is known today for his turbulent life and his **deep, dark and passionate paintings** and his **intense realism and dramatic lighting** influenced future generations of artists.
- There are only about 64 authenticated Caravaggio paintings and I have selected 29 to talk about today.

NOTES

- **BIO:CARAVAGGIO**

- **Summary**

- Caravaggio is one of the leading Baroque painters and his personal life was as dramatic and tumultuous as his paintings.
- **Early Tragedy:** He was born in 1571 and orphaned by the age of 11 due to the plague.
- **Brawls and Violence:** Known for a fiery temper, he was frequently involved in fights and violence, even fleeing Milan after allegedly wounding a police officer.
- **Roman Success and Trouble:** Finding fame in Rome for his innovative and realistic style, his success was marred by his temper. He got into legal trouble for assaults, including throwing a plate of artichokes at a waiter!
- **Murder and Escape:** In 1606, things escalated when he killed a man in a brawl. Forced to flee Rome, he spent his remaining years on the run, fleeing to Naples and then Malta and Sicily.
- **Death on the Move:** Caravaggio died a young man in 1610 under mysterious

circumstances, possibly from poisoning or illness, while still seeking a pardon for his murder.

- **Personality.** Caravaggio was quick tempered, prone to violence, rebellious, outspoken, passionate, intense, unconventional. He walked around in clothes until they wore out and was often dishevelled. He lived at a time with a few powerful, wealthy families that acted like today's mafia. Honour was everything and the slightest perceived insult led to violence which in turn led to vendettas.
- **Legacy.** Despite his personal struggles, Caravaggio's artistic genius left a lasting impact. His use of chiaroscuro (light and shadow), along with his focus on realism and emotion, revolutionised Baroque art. Every picture he paints seems to be about his own life unlike, for example, Titian. This is seen to make him the first modern painter.
- **Biography**
- Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was born in Milan in 1571. His father was a household administrator and architect-decorator to the marquess of Caravaggio. His family moved to Caravaggio in 1576 because the plague hit Milan but his father and grandfather died the following year. His family maintained their connections with the powerful Sforzas and Colonna families. His mother raised all five children in poverty and died in 1584 the year he started his apprenticeship. Leonardo's *Last Supper* is in Milan and he may have visited Venice and seen the work of Giorgione and Titian.
- Caravaggio led a tumultuous life and was notorious for his brawling, even in a time when such behaviour was commonplace. The transcripts of his police records and trial proceedings fill many pages. In 1592 he left for Rome in hurry after "certain quarrels" and the wounding of a police officer. His biographer (Bellori) claims that around 1590–1592, Caravaggio, committed a murder which forced him to flee from Milan, first to Venice and then to Rome.
- He arrived "**naked and extremely needy... without fixed address and without provision... short of money**". He stayed with the miserly Pandolfo Pucci, known as 'Mr Salad' as that is all he served. Caravaggio painted 'flowers and fruit' for Giuseppe Cesari, Pope Clement VIII's favourite artist.
- Many churches were being built and the church was seeking to counter Protestantism and Caravaggio's radical naturalism and theatrical use of chiaroscuro provided the means.

- *Boy Peeling a Fruit* (his earliest known painting), *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, and *Young Sick Bacchus* were all painted at this time.
- Caravaggio argued with Cesari and left to find his own way. He made friends with the painter Prospero Orsi who introduced him to important collectors, the architect Onorio Longhi who involved him in street brawls, and the sixteen-year-old Sicilian artist Mario Minniti who often acted as his model and later introduced him to important patrons in Sicily.
- *The Fortune Teller* is his first work with more than one figure. *The Cardsharps* is perhaps his first true masterpiece. Both were immensely popular and over 50 copies survive and more importantly, it attracted the patronage of Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte, one of the leading connoisseurs in Rome, who commissioned many works. Del Monte was also patron to Galileo.
- In 1594 he produced his first religious work—*Penitent Magdalene*, followed by many others. His fame grew substantially at this time but he needed a substantial commission from the Church.
- His intense realism showing natural flaws and defects and his Venetian method of painting directly on the canvas without a preliminary sketch produced masterpieces such as *Supper at Emmaus* (c. 1600-01).
- In 1599 he was commissioned to decorate the Conarelli Chapel in the church of San Luigi dei Francesi. The two works making up the commission, *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* and *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, delivered in 1600, were an immediate sensation. Thereafter he never lacked commissions or patrons. Some artist criticised his style but most regarded him as a new artistic visionary. Young artist flocked to his work which they regarded as miracles.
- He received a string of prestigious commissions for religious work featuring violent struggles, grotesque decapitations, torture, and death. A few were rejected and had to be repainted as his style, although popular, bordered on the unacceptably vulgar.
- The two versions of *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* are the most famous paintings by Caravaggio around this time (c.1601–1602).
- In 1601, *Death of the Virgin*, was commissioned for the new Carmelite church of Santa Maria della Scala but was rejected by the Carmelites. There are a number of reasons, it was believed he had used a well-known prostitute as his model for the Virgin and Mary was shown with bare legs, a

matter of decorum in either case. It may also have been rejected as the Virgin Mary was believed to have ascended directly to heaven and so did not die in the ordinary sense. As soon as it was rejected it was purchased by the Duke of Mantua, on the advice of Rubens, and later acquired by Charles I of England before entering the French royal collection in 1671.

- In 1600 he hit a nobleman, the guest of his patron Cardinal del Monte, with a club and the police were called. Episodes of fighting grew more and more frequent and Caravaggio was often arrested and jailed at Tor di Nona. He was released in 1601 and rearrested in 1603 for defaming another painter (Giovanni Baglione) and after **a month in jail** was sentenced to house arrest.
- In 1604, Caravaggio was arrested several times for possession of **illegal weapons** and for insulting the city guards. He was also sued by a tavern waiter for having thrown a **plate of artichokes** in his face.
- A published notice recounts that "**after a fortnight's work he will swagger about for a month or two with a sword at his side and a servant following him, from one ball-court to the next, ever ready to engage in a fight or an argument, so that it is most awkward to get along with him.**"
- In 1605 he fled Genoa for seriously injuring a notary over an argument about Lena, Caravaggio's model and lover but his patron managed to cover up the incident.
- Back in Rome his landlady sued him for not paying the rent so he threw rocks through her window and was sued again. He was hospitalised for an injury which he claimed was an accident resulting in him falling on his own sword.
- In 1606, Caravaggio killed a young man and fled Rome with a death sentence hanging over him. The young man was Ranuccio Tomassoni, a gangster from a wealthy family. The two had argued many times, often ending in blows. The circumstances are unclear, whether a brawl or a duel with swords at Campo Marzio, but the killing may have been unintentional. There are many rumours about the event it may have been a quarrel over a gambling debt, a pallacorda game, a sort of tennis, a duel based over Fillide Melandroni, a well-known Roman prostitute who had modeled for him, as Tomassoni was her pimp. According to rumours, Caravaggio castrated Tomassoni with his sword before deliberately killing him or he died as a result of the castration. The duel may also have had a political dimension, as Tomassoni's family was notoriously pro-Spanish, whereas

Caravaggio was a client of the French ambassador.

- Tomassoni's wealthy family was outraged by his death and demanded justice and Caravaggio's patrons were unable to protect him. He was sentenced to beheading for murder, and an open bounty that enabled anyone who recognised him to legally carry the sentence out. Caravaggio's paintings began to obsessively depict severed heads, often his own, at this time.
- He first travelled south of Rome to the home of the Colonna family. Then Naples where Costanza Colonna Sforza had a palace outside the jurisdiction of Rome. There he became the most famous painter in Naples and he received a stream of church commissions including *The Seven Works of Mercy*.
- In 1607, after only a few months in Naples he left for Malta and the headquarters of the Knights of Malta. Fabrizio Sforza Colonna, Costanza's son, was a Knight of Malta and may have helped him. The Grand Master was so pleased to have such a famous artist he made him a Knight. He produced many paintings and what has been called "one of the most important works in Western painting", *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*. Despite all these commissions in August 1608 he was arrested and imprisoned probably for fighting and injuring another Knight. He managed to escape but was expelled from the Order "as a foul and rotten member".
- He travelled to Sicily where he met his old friend Mario Minniti who was now married and living in Syracuse. They set off on a triumphal tour and Caravaggio received many commissions. His style continued to evolve and he now figures isolated against vast empty backgrounds. Contemporary reports depict a man whose behaviour was becoming increasingly bizarre, which included sleeping fully armed and in his clothes, ripping up a painting at a slight word of criticism, and mocking local painters. His behaviour had always been erratic but it became increasingly bizarre and he felt no longer safe in Sicily and travelled back to Naples and the safety of the Colonnas until he could receive a pardon from the new Pope (Paul V). In Naples he painted three works including his final painting *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula*.
- In 1609 he was attacked, perhaps by friends of the Knight he had seriously injured in Malta. He face was disfigured and rumours spread that he had died. He sent a painting to Cardinal Scipione Borghese, nephew of the Pope, in the hope of a pardon. News from Rome encouraged him and in

1610 he took a boat northwards on his way to Rome to receive a pardon along with three paintings for Cardinal Borghese as thanks.

- What happened next is very unclear. On 28 July an anonymous newsletter reported him dead and three days later another newsletter said he had died of fever while travelling from Naples to Rome. A friend and recent research claims he died of a fever on 18 July in Porto Ercole in Tuscany.
- Contemporary rumours were that either the Tomassoni family or the Knights had him killed in revenge. Traditionally historians have long thought he died of syphilis. Some have said he had malaria, or possibly brucellosis from unpasteurised dairy. Some scholars have argued that Caravaggio was actually attacked and killed by the same enemies that had been pursuing him since he fled Malta, if there were in fact any such enemies.
- Recent analysis of his body suggest he may have died of lead poisoning which is known to result in violent behaviour. Later research concluded he died as the result of a wound sustained in a brawl in Naples from sepsis (caused by *Staphylococcus aureus*). Vatican documents released in 2002 support the theory that the wealthy Tomassoni family had him hunted down and killed.
- **Sexuality.** He never married and never had any children. He never painted a female nude and his many paintings of young boys suggest an erotic interest. However, he was reported as intimate with and madly in love with a number of female prostitutes and models. He was accused of consorting with a boy prostitute by Giovanni Baglione but this was denied by Caravaggio. Andrew Graham-Dixon summarises it as follows "**The balance of probability suggests that Caravaggio did indeed have sexual relations with men. But he certainly had female lovers.**"
- **Models.** Male models include Caravaggio himself, Mario Minniti and Francesco Boneri, both fellow artists. His female models include Fillide Melandroni, Anna Bianchini, and Maddalena Antoinette (the "Lena" mentioned in court documents of the "artichoke" case as Caravaggio's concubine), all well-known prostitutes.
- **Caravaggisti.** The St. Matthew paintings in the Contarelli Chapel had an immediate impact among the younger artists in Rome, and Caravaggism became the cutting edge for every ambitious young painter. These included **Orazio Gentileschi** and **Giovanni Baglione**. Caravaggio later accused Baglione of plagiarism and the two were involved in a long feud but Baglione went on to write the first biography of Caravaggio in which his

unstable and violent character and his alleged inability to draw was established.

- Orazio Gentileschi became court painter to Charles I of England and his daughter **Artemisia Gentileschi** was also stylistically close to Caravaggio and one of the most gifted of the movement. However, in Rome and Italy, it was not Caravaggio, but his rival **Annibale Carracci**, with his large workshop, that ultimately triumphed.

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Caravaggio, *Boy Peeling Fruit*,
1592-93, 75.5 × 64.4 cm, Longhi
Collection, Florence



Caravaggio (1571–1610), *Boy Peeling Fruit*, 1592-93, 75.5 × 64.4 cm, Longhi Collection, Florence

- This is **Boy Peeling Fruit**, his **earliest known work**, painted **soon after his arrival in Rome** in mid 1592. But let me start at the beginning.

His Life

- He was born in Milan although his family came from a small town nearby called Caravaggio. Plague swept Milan when he was five and the family fled to Caravaggio but both his **father and grandfather died** and he was brought up in poverty by his mother who died when he was 13. His father had been an architect-decorator to the Duke of Milan, who was also the Marquis of Caravaggio and when he died the Marquisate fell to Prince Colonna who recognised Caravaggio's talent and negotiated a four-year apprenticeship with a local artist, Simone Peterzano. Through all his ups and downs Caravaggio received the protection of the powerful Colonna family throughout his life. He needed it as he was quick tempered and violent and had to flee Milan for injuring a police officer; one biographer says he killed a man.
- When he arrived in Rome he was described as "**naked and extremely needy... without fixed address and without provision... short of money**". He stayed with the miserly Pandolfo Pucci (pronounced 'poo-chi'). Caravaggio called him 'Mr Salad' as that is all he served for dinner. Caravaggio copied religious painting, although none survive and a few pieces of his own for personal sale, of which this, *Boy Peeling a Fruit* is the only known example from that period. Legend has it that Caravaggio used a local street urchin as his model for this

painting, capturing the boy's innocence and vulnerability. We will see later that he often used people from the streets as models.

- He left Pucci and entered the workshop of Giuseppe Cesari (pronounced 'chay-zur-ee'), Pope Clement VIII's favourite artist painting flowers and fruit around Cheri's paintings, hack work that he hated.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boy_Peeling_Fruit

Caravaggio (1571–1610), *Self-Portrait as Bacchus*, 1593, 67 × 53 cm, Galleria Borghese



Caravaggio (1571–1610), *Self-Portrait as Bacchus*, 1593, 67 × 53 cm, Galleria Borghese

- This is a self-portrait painted during a period of illness using a mirror. It portrays Caravaggio as Bacchus, the Roman god of wine, looking frail and vulnerable.
- It dates from his first years in Rome when he fell extremely ill and spent six months in the hospital of **Santa Maria della Consolazione** (pronounced 'con-sol-atz-ee-ownee'). According to a 2009 article in the American medical publication *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, the painting shows he could have suffered from **malaria** and others say **brucellosis** from unpasteurised dairy products because of the jaundiced appearance of the skin and eyes. Whatever the illness, it seems he never fully recovered, and all his life he complained of **head and stomach pains**.
- Artistically his use of chiaroscuro, that is the strong contrast between light and dark, adds depth to Bacchus' melancholic expression and dark backgrounds against spot lit faces **became a trademark feature** of all of his later paintings.

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Caravaggio (1571–1610), *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, c. 1593-95, 70 × 67 cm, Galleria Borghese



Caravaggio (1571–1610), *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, c. 1593-95, 70 × 67 cm, Galleria Borghese

- He was slowly making his way in the competitive Roman art world. In Rome alone there were some 2,000 artists all over stating their position in society and their skill.
- The model here was his friend and companion, the Sicilian painter **Mario Minniti** (pronounced 'meen-EE-tee'), who was about sixteen at the time.
- The work was in the **collection of Giuseppe Cesari** (pronounced 'CHAY-zuree'), and was **seized by Cardinal Scipione Borghese** in 1607, and we think therefore it dates from the period when Caravaggio worked for Cesari painting flowers and fruits; but it may date from a slightly later period when Caravaggio and Minniti had left his workshop (January 1594) to **make their own way selling paintings through the shop owner and art dealer Costantino**. Caravaggio's paintings are very hard to date and authenticate as he only ever signed one and dated none of them and many were extensively copied.
- Horticulturists have analysed the fruit in detail and it is painted with remarkable precision, again typical of Caravaggio, down to the prominent grape leaf with fungal spots and the white insect egg mass resembling that of the oblique banded leaf roller.

His Life

- **I should address Caravaggio's sexuality at this point.** He never married, never had any children and never painted a female nude and his many

paintings of young boys suggest an erotic interest. However, he was reported as intimate with and madly in love with a number of female prostitutes and models. The art critic Andrew Graham-Dixon summarises it as follows "**The balance of probability suggests that Caravaggio did indeed have sexual relations with men. But he certainly had female lovers.**"

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Caravaggio (1571–1610), *Good Luck or The Fortune Teller*, 1594-95, 115 × 150 cm, Capitoline Museums

Caravaggio (1571–1610), *Good Luck or The Fortune Teller*, 1594-95, 115 × 150 cm, Capitoline Museums

- The painting shows a foppishly-dressed boy **having his palm read** by a Romani 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. It is his first work with more than one figure and it became a very popular painter at the time.
- His biographer (Giovanni Pietro Bellori, 1613-1696) tells us that he picked a Romani girl out from passers-by in the street to demonstrate he had no need to copy the works of others. This may be an invention but it is true that he painted from life rather than create an idealised fiction.
- The painting was so popular that in 1603, the poet Gaspare Murtola (pronounced 'mur-tola') dedicated a madrigal to it in which he compares the deceit of the sensuous Romani woman with the illusionistic manner of Caravaggio, therefore implying that the viewer, like the young man, is the victim of duplicity. We are looking at pigment on canvas but believe we are looking at two people.

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The Cardsharps, c. 1595,
94.2 × 130.9 cm, Kimbell
Art Museum, Fort Worth,
Texas

Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Cardsharps*, c. 1595, 94.2 × 130.9 cm, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

- The work represents an important milestone for Caravaggio and is perhaps his first true masterpiece. This work and the previous work, the *Fortune Teller*, were immensely popular and over 50 copies survive and more importantly, it attracted the **patronage of Cardinal Francesco Maria Del Monte** (1549-1627), one of the leading connoisseurs in Rome.
- Caravaggio painted this when he was attempting an independent career after leaving the workshop of Giuseppe Cesari, known as Cavaliere d'Arpino (1568-1640), for whom he had been painting "**flowers and fruit**", finishing the details for the Cavaliere's mass-produced and massive output. Caravaggio left Cesari's workshop in January 1594 and began selling works through **the dealer Costantino**, with the assistance of **Prospero Orsi**, an established painter of Mannerist grotesques (masks, monsters, etc.). Orsi introduced Caravaggio to his extensive network of contacts in the world of **collectors and patrons**.
- Caravaggio's portrayal of a card game reveals the darker side of human nature. The cheating card players and their expressions evoke suspicion and cunning.

His Life

- Caravaggio was known for his **fiery temper, brawling and confrontations**, which adds an ironic layer to this scene of deceit. We often hear of his fights

and the murder he committed but we should remember that it was **a time of extreme violence**. Homicide rates in Italy were higher than in other parts of Europe (see Colin Rose, *A Renaissance of Violence: Homicide in Early Modern Italy*). Travelling between towns was dangerous and robbery and murder were common. Walking through the streets was required care as many were quick to take offence and street fighting often broke out.

- The city-states were run by powerful competing families which resulted in blood feuds, street fights, hired thugs and assassination attempts. The concept of honour was paramount and insults or perceived wrongs could easily lead to a cycle of revenge killings (see Edward Muir, *Mad Blood Stirring: Vendetta in Renaissance Italy*). Mercenaries roamed the countryside and towns looking to sell their services to the highest bidder and they were notorious for their brutality. The history of powerful families tells of beheadings, castration, burying alive, cutting off limbs and raping men, women and children.
- Poverty in late sixteenth-century Italy was a significant issue, with a large segment of the population struggling to meet basic needs. Many resorted to begging and some turned to crime to survive.

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The Musicians, c. 1595, 92.1
× 118.4 cm, Metropolitan
Museum of Art

Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Musicians*, c. 1595, 92.1 × 118.4 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art

- Caravaggio entered the household of Cardinal Del Monte sometime in 1595, and ***The Musicians* is thought to have been his first painting done expressly for the Cardinal**. Musical instruments were expensive and music was associated with the rich and powerful. Music was regarded as an important attribute for the high social-status Italian noblemen.
- It is a complex composition with four boys squeezed into a small space. The central figure with the lute has been identified as Caravaggio's companion Mario Minniti (pronounced 'min-ee-tee'), and the individual next to him and facing the viewer is possibly a self-portrait of the artist. Cupid at the back left is reaching for some grapes and is traditionally a symbol of love so the work as a whole can be seen as an allegory describing music as feeding the soul in the same way as food (the grapes) feed love (Cupid).
- After Cardinal Del Monte's death the painting changed hands a number of times and disappeared in the late seventeenth century to reappear in a house sale in 1952 from where it was purchased by a benefactor of the Met.

His Life

- About this time, 1595 he ended up in the **hospital Ospedale di Santa Maria della Consolazione** (pronounced 'con-sol-atz-ee-ownee') in Rome either as a result of a fight or some say he was kicked by a horse. He left the workshop of Cesari and lodged with another priest. About this time he met **Prospero Orsi**,

a painter of grotesques, who encouraged Caravaggio set up on his own and paint directly for the market. Caravaggio painted a number of self-portraits at that time—now presumed lost—and “a boy bitten by a lizard” we shall soon see.

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Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy, 1594, 92.4 ×
127.5 cm, Wadsworth
Atheneum Museum of
Art, Hartford, Connecticut



Caravaggio (1571–1610), *Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy*, 1594, 92.4 × 127.5 cm, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut

- The painting was **the first of Caravaggio's religious canvasses**, and is thought to date from 1595, when he had recently entered the household of Cardinal Del Monte. It was presumably painted for Del Monte, and is thought to be one of the first paintings done by the artist as "**Del Monte's painter**", as he is believed to have described himself over the next few years while living in Palazzo Madama, now the seat of the Italian Senate, next to Piazza Navona.
- It shows Saint Francis of Assisi (the Cardinal's name-saint) at the moment of receiving the signs of the Stigmata, the wounds left in Christ's body by the Crucifixion.

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Caravaggio (1571–1610), *Boy Bitten By a Lizard*, 1593-94, 65 × 52 cm, Longhi Gallery, Florence



Caravaggio (1571–1610), *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*, 1594-95, 66 × 49.5 cm, National Gallery, London

Caravaggio (1571–1610), *Boy Bitten By a Lizard*, 1593-94, 65 × 52 cm, Longhi Gallery, Florence

Caravaggio (1571–1610), *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*, 1594-95, 66 × 49.5 cm, National Gallery, London

- As with all of Caravaggio's early output, much remains conjecture, and the identity of this model has been debated. One theory is that the model was Mario Minniti, another is that it is a disguised self-portrait of Caravaggio.
- Caravaggio may have borrowed the motif of biting a finger from a *Child Bitten by a Lobster* (c. 1554), a drawing by the prominent female artist Sofonisba Anguissola (c. 1532-1625)
- We see a boy recoiling in pain as a lizard hidden amongst the fruit bites his finger. Caravaggio's realism and emotional intensity shine through. Some interpret this painting as a metaphor for the artist's own inner turmoil and vulnerability.
- The boy's bare shoulder and the flower behind his ear identify him as a prostitute. Some see the painting as a parable of the punishments that attend the lascivious, with the snapping lizard symbolising the pains of venereal disease.

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Bacchus, c. 1598, 95 × 85 cm,
Uffizi Gallery, Florence

Caravaggio (1571–1610), *Bacchus*, c. 1598, 95 × 85 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence

- Another painting commissioned by Cardinal Del Monte. Caravaggio's portrayal of the god of wine is both sensual and mysterious. Bacchus holds a goblet, inviting viewers to indulge in earthly pleasures. The figure is both the Greek god and a boy dressed up as Bacchus. The boy has a suggestive look but the basket contains a bursting pomegranate and a rotting apple suggesting a vanitas theme. That is, it reminds us that youth and pleasure are fleeting and everything succumbs to death and decay.

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Penitent Magdalene, c. 1594–
1595, 122.5 cm × 98.5 cm,
Doria Pamphilj Gallery, Rome



Caravaggio (1571–1610), Penitent Magdalene, c. 1594–1595, 122.5 cm × 98.5 cm, Doria Pamphilj Gallery, Rome

- The painting was completed around 1594 to 95, during which time Caravaggio may have used a room as a studio in the palace of Fantin Petrucci (pronounced 'pet-rin-are-ni'). The painting was almost certainly commissioned by Pietro Vittrice (pronounced 'vee-tree-chay'), butler and later wardrobe person of Pope Gregory XIII. Caravaggio was known to have used several prostitutes as models for his works, and historians have speculated that **Anna Bianchini** (pronounced 'be-an-keen-y') is featured in this painting.
- Anna Bianchini lived a marginal existence and suffered the humiliation of a public whipping. She was about fifteen when this was painted and died when she was about 25.
- She is shown as the prostitute Mary Magdalene at the moment she repents. She is surrounded by her expensive jewellery that she now rejects and she is searching for a new life. Caravaggio's use of light draws attention to her tearful face. Caravaggio's own violent life may have created a sense of guilt and the theme of redemption may have resonated with his own life.

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Caravaggio (1571–1610), *Judith beheading Holofernes*, c. 1598–1599 or 1602, 145 cm × 195 cm, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica at Palazzo Barberini, Rome

- The biblical story of how Judith, a widow, beheads the Assyrian general Holofernes has been painted by many artists including Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510), Giorgione (1477-1510) and Tintoretto (Jacopo Robusti, 1518-1594).
- Caravaggio's intense depiction of the beheading brings the horror, blood and drama to life while Judith's expression shows her commitment to the necessary deed that she carried out to save her tribe from destruction.
- His biographer, the artist Giovanni Baglione's (pronounced 'bah-lee-own-ay') account that the work tells us that it was commissioned by a Genoan banker, Ottavio Costa.
- At the time some thought the painting scandalous because its extreme realism lacked decorum and Judith's strong features and determination were considered inappropriate behaviour for a woman who was expected to be maidenly, beautiful and domesticated.
- The painting was **rediscovered in 1950** and is now part of the collection of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica (pronounced 'dart-ay an-tee-ka') in Rome. A date of 1602 has been suggested on account of the use of light underlying sketches not seen in Caravaggio's early work but characteristic of his later works. Artists from Florence made meticulous sketches and underdrawing before painting. Artists from Venice, like Titian, painted directly onto the canvas without a great deal of underdrawing and this was the way that

Caravaggio worked, directly from life and directly onto the canvas. However, recent Infra-red analysis of Giorgione, Titian and Caravaggio show some underdrawing particularly in Caravaggio's later work. Curiously no sketches by Caravaggio remain but they may have all been destroyed.

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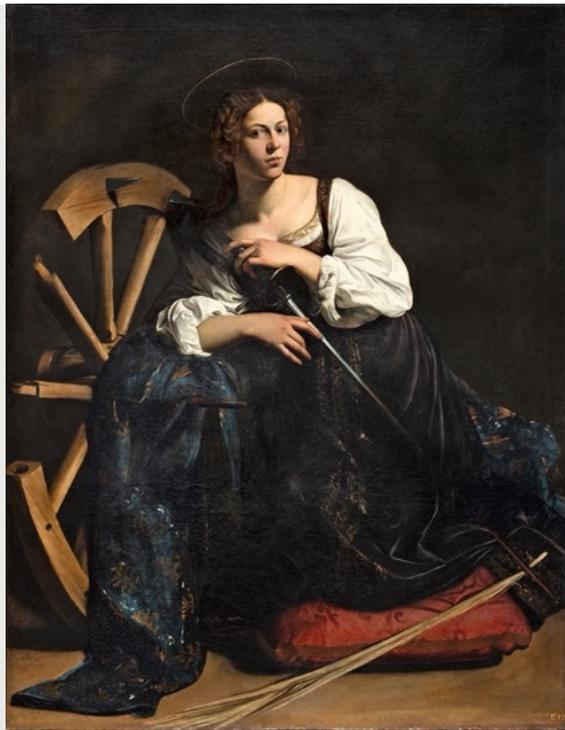
Caravaggio (1571–1610),
Narcissus, 1597–1599, 110 cm ×
92 cm, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte
Antica

Caravaggio (1571–1610), *Narcissus*, 1597–1599, 110 cm × 92 cm, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica

- This is one of only two known Caravaggios on a theme from Classical mythology, although this may be due more to the accidents of survival.
- Narcissus, according to the poet Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, is a handsome youth who falls in love with his own reflection. Unable to tear himself away, he dies of his passion, and even as he crosses the river Styx continues to gaze at his reflection (*Metamorphoses* 3:339–510).
- The story of Narcissus was particularly appealing to artists according to the Renaissance artist and writer Leon Battista Alberti, "**the inventor of painting ... was Narcissus ... What is painting but the act of embracing by means of art the surface of the pool?**"
- The painting was attributed to Caravaggio by Roberto Longhi in 1916.

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Caravaggio (1571–1610), Saint Catherine of Alexandria, c. 1598, 173 × 133 cm, Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Madrid

Caravaggio (1571–1610), Saint Catherine of Alexandria, c. 1598, 173 × 133 cm, Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Madrid

- Saint Catherine of Alexandria was a popular figure for artists. Her qualities are beauty, fearlessness, virginity, and intelligence. She was of noble origins, and dedicated herself to Christianity after having a vision.
- At the age of 18 she confronted the Roman Emperor Maximus, debated with his pagan philosophers, and converted many of them to Christianity. She was imprisoned by the emperor but she then converted his empress and the leader of his armies. Maximus executed all her converts including his wife, the empress, and ordered that Catherine herself be put to death on a spiked wheel. The wheel reportedly shattered the moment Catherine touched it. Maximus then had her beheaded.
- You will have noticed that many of Caravaggio's paintings include strong women in powerful or decisive roles which challenged the conventional representations of women at the time when women were expected to conform to ideals of beauty and domesticity.

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Caravaggio (1571–1610),
Supper at Emmaus,
1601, 141 cm × 196.2
cm, National Gallery,
London



Caravaggio (1571–1610), Supper at Emmaus, 1601, 141 cm × 196.2 cm,
National Gallery, London

- The painting 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 and the dark and blank background. The table lays out a still-life meal with the basket of food teetering over the edge with the basket and its shadow creating the image of a fish, one of the earliest symbols for Christ. Each letter of the word fish in Greek (Ichthus, ἰχθύς) is the first letter in the phrase "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour" in Greek and the fish was used as a secret symbol by the early Christians in Rome.

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Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, 1599–1600, 322 cm × 340 cm, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome

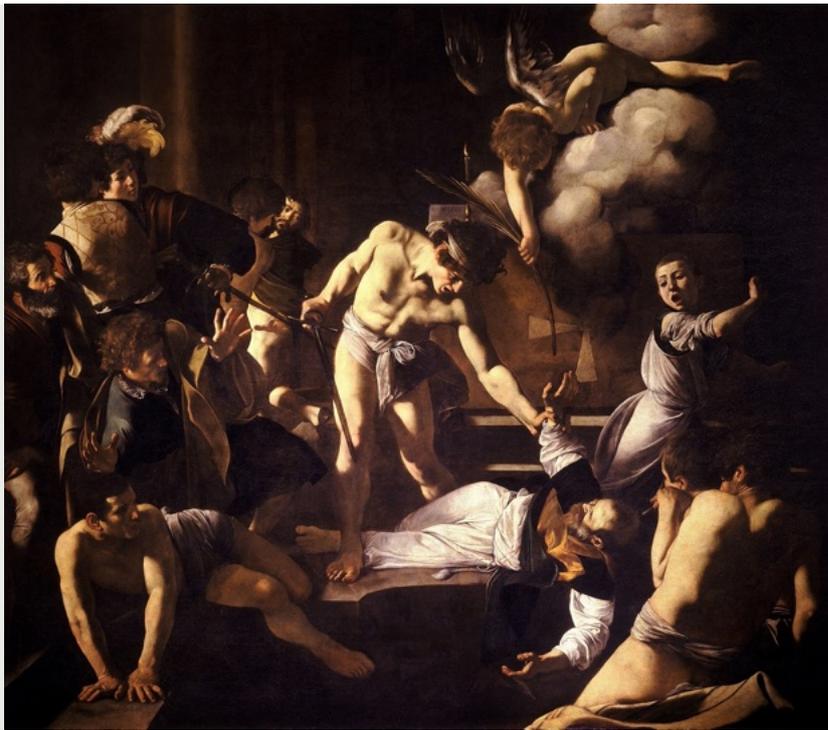
Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, 1599–1600, 322 cm × 340 cm, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome

- In 1599 he was commissioned to produce *The Calling of Saint Matthew* depicting the moment Jesus Christ calls on the tax collector Matthew to follow him. It was completed in 1599–1600 for the Contarelli Chapel in the church of San Luigi dei Francesi (pronounced 'dee fran-chay-see') in Rome, where it remains. It hangs alongside two other paintings of Matthew by Caravaggio, *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* (painted around the same time as the Calling and which I will show you next) and *The Inspiration of Saint Matthew* (1602)
- More than a decade earlier, Cardinal Matteo Contarelli had left funds and specific instructions in his will for the decoration of a chapel based on themes related to his namesake, Saint Matthew. Cardinal Francesco Del Monte, Caravaggio's patron intervened to obtain for Caravaggio his first major church commission and his first painting with more than a handful of figures.
- The inclusion of **contemporary figures** in a biblical scene was groundbreaking. This work and *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* were delivered in 1600 and were an immediate sensation. **From this point on he never lacked commissions or patrons.**

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Caravaggio (1571–1610),
*The Martyrdom of Saint
Matthew*, 1599–1600, 323
cm × 343 cm, San Luigi
dei Francesi, Rome



Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew*, 1599–1600, 323 cm × 343 cm, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome

- This is one of the other St Matthew works from the chapel. Here Saint Matthew is martyred by assassins. Caravaggio's use of chiaroscuro heightens the drama and captures the saint's sacrifice.
- The commission caused Caravaggio considerable difficulty, as he had never painted so large a canvas, nor one with so many figures. X-rays reveal two separate attempts at the composition before the one we see today, with a general movement towards simplification through reduction in the number of figures, and reduction – ultimately elimination – of the architectural element.
- It is located opposite the previous painting *The Calling of Saint Matthew* and beside the altarpiece *The Inspiration of Saint Matthew*, both by Caravaggio. This one was the first of the three to be installed in the chapel, in July 1600.

His Life

- Caravaggio was a fast worker and liked to play as hard as he worked.
- In 1600 he **hit a nobleman**, the guest of his patron Cardinal del Monte, with a club and the police were called. Episodes of fighting grew more and more frequent and Caravaggio was often arrested and jailed at Tor di Nona. He was released in 1601 and rearrested in 1603 for defaming another painter (Giovanni Baglione) and after a month in jail was sentenced to house arrest.
- In 1604, Caravaggio was arrested several times for possession of illegal weapons and for insulting the city guards. He was also sued by a tavern waiter

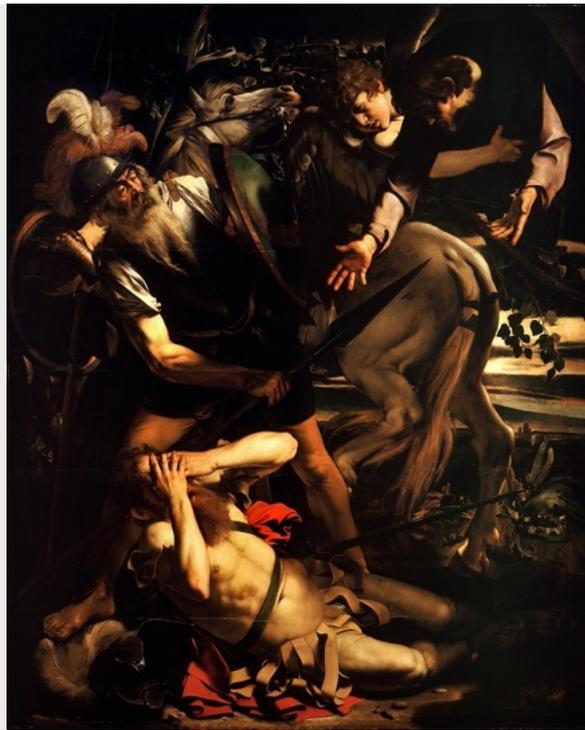
for having thrown a plate of artichokes in his face.

- According to one of his biographers: "**after a fortnight's work he will swagger about for a month or two with his sword at his side and with a servant following him, from one ball-court to the next, ever ready to engage in a fight or argument, with the result that it is most awkward to get along with him**". The sword was illegal unless you had a licence.

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Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Conversion of Saint Paul*, 1600/1601, 237 cm × 189 cm, Odescalchi Balbi Collection, Rome



Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Conversion of Saint Paul*, 1600/1601, 237 cm × 189 cm, Odescalchi Balbi Collection, Rome

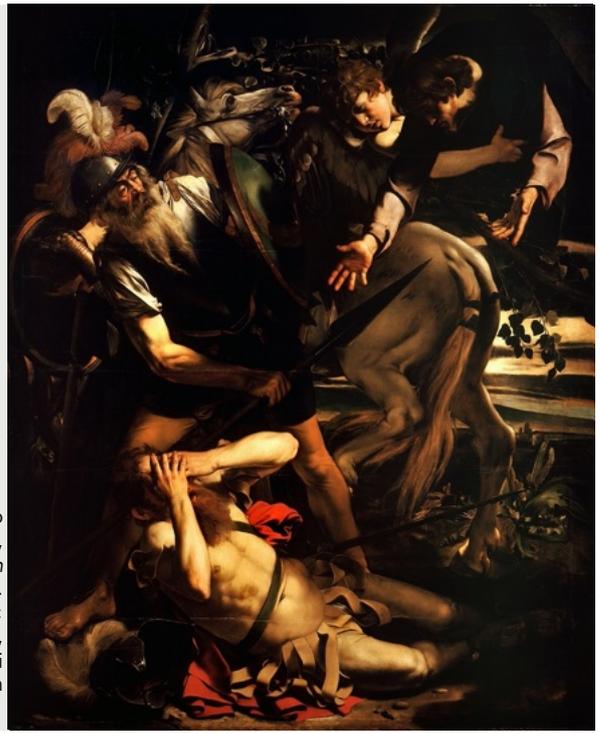
- The painting, together with a *Crucifixion of Saint Peter*, was commissioned by Monsignor (later Cardinal) Tiberio Cerasi, Treasurer-General to Pope Clement VIII, in September 1600. According to Caravaggio's early biographer Giovanni Baglione, both paintings were rejected by Cerasi, and replaced by the second versions which hang in the chapel today. The dates of completion and rejection are determined from the death of Cerasi in May 1601.
- *The Conversion of Saint Paul* (or *Conversion of Saul*) is now in the Odescalchi Balbi (pronounced 'oh-des-cal-ki bal-bee') Collection of Rome. It is one of at least two paintings by Caravaggio of the same subject, the *Conversion of Paul*. Another is *The Conversion of Saint Paul on the Road to Damascus*, in the Cerasi Chapel of Santa Maria del Popolo.
- On the altar between the two is the *Assumption of the Virgin Mary* by Annibale Carracci.
- Caravaggio portrays the moment when Saul (later Saint Paul) is struck blind by a divine light. The horse rears up in fear.

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Caravaggio
(1571–1610),
*The Conversion
on the Way to
Damascus*,
1601, 230 ×
175 cm, Santa
Maria del
Popolo, Rome



Caravaggio
(1571–1610),
*The Conversion
of Saint Paul*, c.
1600, 189 ×
237 cm,
Odescalchi
Balbi Collection

Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Conversion on the Way to Damascus*, 1601, 230 × 175 cm, Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome

Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Conversion of Saint Paul*, c. 1600, 189 × 237 cm, Odescalchi Balbi Collection

- This and the next work are in chapels either side of the altarpiece by Annabel Carracci. Although a lot has been written about their rivalry there is no evidence about any serious tensions over this commission. Both artists were successful and much sought after in Rome.
- The first version of both of Caravaggio's paintings were rejected. The story is often told that this one was rejected because they did not want the backside of a horse to be the main focus but this is the second version that was accepted.
- (CLICK) This is the painting that was rejected, the one we have just seen in the Odescalchi Balbi Collection. An angel holds Jesus reaching down towards a blinded Paul. Historians have looked for reasons the painting on the right was rejected. The simplest proposed by Peter Robb in his book *M* is that Cerasi had just died (in May 1601) and the renowned art collector Giacomo Sannesio (c. 1557/60-1621, pronounced 'jack-e-mo san-ay-si-o') wanted the paintings and in the confusion following the death bought them and got Caravaggio to paint two more. This was the cut throat world of art collecting which was a way to gain prestige. Sannesio went from a very humble upbringing to Cardinal in 1604 and Bishop of Orvieto in 1605.

- X-ray examination revealed another, almost complete version of the scene under the present painting, in which the saint is shown fallen to the ground, on the right of the canvas, his eyes open, his forehead lined, and his right hand raised

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Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Crucifixion of Saint Peter*, 1601, 230 cm × 175 cm, Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome



Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Crucifixion of Saint Peter*, 1601, 230 cm × 175 cm, Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome

- The other painting in the Cerasi Chapel is *The Crucifixion of Saint Peter* painted in 1601.
- The two lateral paintings were commissioned in September 1600 by Monsignor Tiberio Cerasi, Treasurer-General to Pope Clement VIII, who purchased the chapel from the Augustinian friars on 8 July 1600 and commissioned Carlo Maderno to rebuild the small edifice in Baroque style.
- Saint Peter is crucified upside down, as he requested, to avoid imitating Christ's death. Caravaggio's raw emotion and stark realism are evident.

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Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Entombment of Christ*, 1603–1604, 300 cm × 203 cm, Pinacoteca Vaticana, Vatican City



Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Entombment of Christ*, 1603–1604, 300 cm × 203 cm, Pinacoteca Vaticana, Vatican City

- One of his most admired altarpieces, *The Entombment of Christ*, was painted in 1603–1604 for the second chapel on the right in Santa Maria in Vallicella (the Chiesa Nuova), a church built for the Oratory of Saint Philip Neri. A copy of the painting is now in the chapel, and the original is in the Vatican Pinacoteca. The painting has been copied by artists as diverse as Rubens, Fragonard, Géricault and Cézanne.
- The chapel, placed in the right nave of the Chiesa Nuova, was conceded to Vittrice in June 1577, and the foundation of the chapel ratified in September 1580. Some time after his death in March 1600, a legacy of 1,000 scudi became available for the maintenance of the chapel, and it was built in 1602, which is then held to be the earliest date for the commission of Caravaggio's painting
- Caravaggio's emotional portrayal of Christ's entombment captures the grief of those who loved him. The figures are both tender and anguished.

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Caravaggio (1571–1610),
Supper at Emmaus, 1606,
141 × 175 cm, Pinacoteca
di Brera



Caravaggio (1571–1610), *Supper at Emmaus*, 1606, 141 × 175 cm, Pinacoteca di Brera

- This is his second version of the *Supper at Emmaus* painted in 1606. By comparison, the gestures here are far more restrained, making presence more important than performance. Both versions employ a trompe-l'œil style which seems to bring the figures to life as a means to grab the attention of the observers.
- This difference possibly reflects the circumstances of Caravaggio's life at that point as he had just fled Rome as an outlaw following the death of Ranuccio Tomassoni, or possibly, recognising the ongoing evolution of his art, in the intervening five years **he had come to recognise the value of understatement.**

His Life

- **In 1606, Caravaggio killed a young man and fled Rome with a death sentence hanging over him.** The young man was Ranuccio Tomassoni, a gangster from a wealthy family. The two had argued many times, often ending in blows. The circumstances are unclear, whether a brawl or a duel with swords at Campo de' Fiori, but the killing may have been unintentional. There are many rumours about the event it may have been a quarrel over a gambling debt, a pallacorda game, a sort of tennis, a duel based over Fillide Melandroni, a well-known Roman prostitute who had modeled for him, as Tomassoni was her pimp. According to rumours, Caravaggio castrated Tomassoni with his sword before deliberately killing him or he died as a result

of the castration. The duel may also have had a political dimension, as Tomassoni's family was notoriously pro-Spanish, whereas Caravaggio was a client of the French ambassador.

- Tomassoni's wealthy family was outraged by his death and demanded justice and Caravaggio's patrons were unable to protect him. He was sentenced to beheading for murder, and an open bounty that enabled anyone who recognised him to legally carry the sentence out. Caravaggio's paintings began to obsessively depict severed heads, often his own, at this time.
- Following the brawl or duel Caravaggio sustained serious injuries including a head wound and a broken arm. He spent time in the **hospital Ospedale di Santa Maria della Consolazione** (pronounced 'con-sol-atz-ee-ownee') in Rome. It was the hospital he was treated in shortly after his arrival in Rome in 1596-97 when he had a serious injury to his leg.
- He painted while in the hospital which afforded him some protection but in September he fled Rome, never to publicly return.

NOTES

- Caravaggio was admitted to the hospital's "wound ward," which was reserved for patients with serious injuries. He stayed at the hospital for about two months, during which time he was treated by the hospital's doctors and nurses, who used a variety of treatments, including bloodletting, cauterization, and herbal remedies. He is also said to have been visited by a number of friends and admirers, including the painter Peter Paul Rubens.
- Caravaggio's time at the hospital was a difficult one, both physically and emotionally. He was in a great deal of pain, and he was also struggling with the psychological effects of the brawl. However, he eventually recovered from his injuries and was discharged from the hospital in late July 1606.
- The experience of being hospitalized is thought to have had a profound impact on Caravaggio. It is believed that it may have contributed to his later development as a painter, as he began to explore darker and more introspective themes in his work.
- The hospital was founded in the 15th century and was one of the largest and most well-respected hospitals in Rome at the time. Caravaggio's stay at the hospital was documented in the hospital's records, which have since been translated and published.

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Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Death of the Virgin*, 1604–1606, 1602, 369 × 245 cm, Louvre, Paris



Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Death of the Virgin*, 1604–1606, 1602, 369 × 245 cm, Louvre, Paris

- When he painted *The Death of the Virgin* (c. 1601–06), he had been working in Rome for fifteen years. The painting was commissioned by Laerzio Cherubini, a papal lawyer, for his chapel in the Carmelite church of Santa Maria della Scala in Trastevere, Rome; the painting could not have been finished before 1605–06.
- The depiction of the Death of the Virgin caused a contemporary stir, and was rejected as unfit by the parish.
- Peter Paul Rubens praised it as one of Caravaggio's best works and on this recommendation it was bought by Vincenzo Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua.
- The duke's collection was sold to Charles I of England in 1627. After his execution the English Commonwealth put his collection up for sale in 1649, and the painting was bought by Everhard Jabach, who in 1671 sold it to Louis XIV for the French Royal Collection, which after the French Revolution became the property of the state. Today it hangs in the Louvre.

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Caravaggio (1571–1610), *Madonna with Serpent* or *Madonna and Child with St Anne*, 1605–1606, 292 × 211 cm, Galleria Borghese, Rome

- In 1605 Cardinal Scipione Borghese persuaded his uncle, Pope Paul V to commission Caravaggio to paint the Virgin for Saint Peter's. This was the ultimate commission every artist dreamt about, the chance of a lifetime. He was known to be controversial and his friends and patrons advised him to be careful for this commission. He immediately and recklessly asked his lover Lena to pose and the result was a complete disaster.
- Caravaggio painted this work showing the Virgin Mary with the aid of Christ crushing a serpent the represents evil or original sin. The Virgin Mary's mother Saint Anne stands on the right observing the act.
- The work was displayed for eight days and removed and the doors of Saint Peter's were permanently closed to him. One Cardinal wrote, "**We find nothing in this picture but vulgarity, sacrilege, impiety and disgust. It would seem to be the work of a painter who knows his craft, but whose spirit lies in darkness, who has long been far removed from God and adorations of God, and from all good thoughts.**"
- There could be many reasons for this reaction, art historians have speculated that it was the model he used. Although Lena (Maddalena Antonietti) may not have been a prostitute she came from a poor family and worked as a model to support herself. It appears Caravaggio had a serious relationship with her.
- Another reason might be that Saint Anne is shown as an old, lined, poor

woman rather than as was normal as a symbol of Grace. The Virgin Mary has her outer skirt hitched up like a washerwoman and is revealing too much of her breasts. The Virgin Mary and Saint Anne have halos but Christ, who would normally have the biggest halo, has none. It could also be the Christ is shown naked although this was a considered representation to show he was free from original sin and the contagion of shame associated with Adam.

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Caravaggio (1571–1610), *Seven Works of Mercy*, 1607, 390 × 260 cm, Naples, Pio Monte della Misericordia

Caravaggio (1571–1610), *Seven Works of Mercy*, 1607, 390 × 260 cm, Naples, Pio Monte della Misericordia

- The painting was made for, and is still housed in, the church of Pio Monte della Misericordia in Naples. Originally, it was meant to be seven separate panels around the church; however, Caravaggio combined all seven works of mercy in one composition which became the church's altarpiece.
- The titular seven works/acts of mercy are represented in the painting as follows:
 - **Bury the dead.** In the background, two men carry a dead man (of whom only the feet are visible).
 - **Visit the imprisoned, and feed the hungry.** On the right, a woman visits an imprisoned deputy and gives him milk from her breast. This image alludes to the classical story of Roman Charity.
 - **Shelter the homeless.** A pilgrim (third from left, as identified by the shell in his hat) asks an innkeeper (at far left) for shelter.
 - **Clothe the naked.** St. Martin of Tours, fourth from the left, has torn his robe in half and given it to the naked beggar in the foreground, recalling the saint's popular legend.
 - **Visit the sick.** St. Martin greets and comforts the beggar who is a cripple.
 - **Refresh the thirsty.** Samson (second from the left) drinks water from the jawbone of an ass.

His Life

- In 1607, after only a few months in Naples he left for Malta and the headquarters of the Knights of Malta. Fabrizio Sforza Colonna, Costanza's son, was a Knight of Malta and may have helped him. The Grand Master was so pleased to have such a famous artist he made him a Knight. He produced many paintings and what has been called "one of the most important works in Western painting", The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist. Despite all these commissions in August 1608 he was arrested and imprisoned probably for fighting and injuring another Knight. He managed to escape but was expelled from the Order "as a foul and rotten member".

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Caravaggio (1571–1610), John the Baptist, c. 1610, 159 cm × 124 cm, Galleria Borghese, Rome

Caravaggio (1571–1610), Saint John the Baptist, c. 1610, 159 cm × 124 cm, Galleria Borghese, Rome



Caravaggio (1571–1610), John the Baptist (John in the Wilderness), c. 1604, 173 × 133 cm, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City

Caravaggio (1571–1610), John the Baptist, c. 1610, 159 cm × 124 cm, Galleria Borghese, Rome

Caravaggio (1571–1610), *John the Baptist (Youth with a Ram)*, 1602, 129 × 94 cm, Musei Capitolini, Rome

Caravaggio (1571–1610), *John the Baptist (John in the Wilderness)*, c. 1604, 173 × 133 cm, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City

- **Saint John the Baptist** (sometimes called *John in the Wilderness*) was the subject of **at least eight paintings** by the Italian Baroque artist Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610)
- In this version Caravaggio's depicts John the Baptist as both enigmatic and sensual. The young saint gazes directly at the viewer, inviting contemplation.
- (CLICK) These are two other representations of John the Baptist from 1602 and 1604.
- Ciriaco Mattei' commissioned a John the Baptist in 1602. It has the same sense of being a real-life model. There is almost nothing to signify that this is the prophet—no cross, no leather belt, just a scrap of camel's skin lost in the voluminous folds of the red cloak, and the ram. John the Baptist's animal is supposed to be a lamb. The ram is as often a symbol of lust so it is not clear what these semi-naked young boy is doing with a ram.
- The Mattei John the Baptist on the left was immensely popular – eleven known copies were made, including one by Caravaggio. It is today in the Doria Pamphilj Gallery.

- In 1604 Caravaggio was commissioned to paint a John the Baptist for the papal banker and art patron **Ottavio Costa**, who already owned the artist's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* and *Martha and Mary Magdalene*. He is still shown as a youth but this time holding a cross and without a ram.

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Caravaggio (1571–1610), *David with the Head of Goliath*, c. 1610, 125 cm × 101 cm, Galleria Borghese

Caravaggio (1571–1610), *David with the Head of Goliath*, c. 1610, 125 cm × 101 cm, Galleria Borghese

- *David with the Head of Goliath* was painted around 1610, and is held in the Galleria Borghese.
- There is an earlier 1599 *David and Goliath* in the Prado, Madrid, a *David with the Head of Goliath* from 1607 in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, and this 1610 version in the **Galleria Borghese, Rome**.
- The painting, which was in the collection of Cardinal Scipione Borghese[a] in 1650, has been dated as early as 1605 and as late as 1609–1610, with more recent scholars tending towards the former.
- Caravaggio also treated this subject in a work dated c. 1607 in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, and in an early work dated c. 1600 in the Prado in Madrid.
- The immediate inspiration for Caravaggio was a work by a follower of Giorgione, c.1510, but Caravaggio captures the drama more effectively by having the head dangling from David's hand and dripped out blood, rather than resting on a ledge. The sword in David's hand carries an abbreviated inscription H-AS OS; this has been interpreted as an abbreviation of the Latin phrase *humilitas occidit superbiam* ("humility kills pride").
- David's expression mingles sadness and compassion. The decision to depict him as **pensive rather than jubilant** creates an unusual psychological bond between him and Goliath.

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Caravaggio (1571–1610),
The Denial of Saint Peter,
1610, 94 cm × 125.4 cm,
Metropolitan Museum of
Art, New York



Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Denial of Saint Peter*, 1610, 94 cm × 125.4 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

- Peter denies knowing Jesus three times, as prophesied. Caravaggio's use of light and shadow heightens the tension and Peter's anguish.
- *The Denial of Saint Peter* was finished around 1610. It depicts Peter denying Jesus after Jesus was arrested. The painting is housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.
- The Denial of Saint Peter is generally thought to be one of the last two works by Caravaggio, the other being *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula*. It was probably finished at Naples in the summer of 1610.
- The pointing finger of the soldier and two fingers of the woman allude to the three accusations and to Peter's three denials. The first two denials were to a servant girl and the final detail was a number of people or one of the high priest's servants.
- In 1613 this painting belonged to the artist Guido Reni, who received it from the engraver Luca Ciamberlano as compensation for debts.

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Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Beheading of St John the Baptist*, 1608, 370 × 520 cm, St. John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta



Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Beheading of St John the Baptist*, 1608, 370 × 520 cm, St. John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta, Malta

- I have left as second to the end as it is perhaps his best know painting.
- When he arrived in Malta he was already a renowned artist and he painted this while on the island where it can still be seen.
- This work is considered to be Caravaggio's masterpiece as well as "**one of the most important works in Western painting.**" Jonathan Jones has described *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* as one of the ten greatest works of art of all time. He said, "**Death and human cruelty are laid bare by this masterpiece, as its scale and shadow daunt and possess the mind.**"
- This is the only canvas signed by Caravaggio and it is signed Fra Michelangelo. It became famous almost immediately and visitors came from all over Europe to see it in Malta. The signature is written in the blood gushing from Saint John's neck. At the time the flow of holy blood was seen as a river of salvation.
- Today it is considered the first great modern tragedy in painting. The figures are arranged in a much larger space than in most of his paintings giving a contemplative air.

His Life

- In 1609 he was attacked, perhaps by friends of the Knight he had seriously injured in Malta. He face was disfigured and rumours spread that he had died. He sent a painting to Cardinal Scipione Borghese, nephew of the Pope, in the

hope of a pardon. News from Rome encouraged him and in 1610 he took a boat northwards on his way to Rome to receive a pardon along with three paintings for Cardinal Borghese as thanks.

REFERENCES

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Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula*, 1610, 143 × 180 cm, Palazzo Zevallos Stigliano, Naples, Naples

Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula*, 1610, 143 × 180 cm, Palazzo Zevallos Stigliano, Naples, Naples

- ***The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula*** dates from his final weeks in Naples, before his ill-fated sea-trip back towards Rome and the pardon which he believed awaited him there.
- Saint Ursula was a popular Christian saint, remembered for her refusal to marry a pagan Hun and Caravaggio has picked on the exact moment of her martyrdom when her frustrated suitor has just fired an arrow at her at point-blank range. It has just pierced her breast and she looks down almost astonished but also at peace. One attendant looks at his hand and another, modelled on Caravaggio himself, peering from the back.
- It was painted for **Marcantonio Doria**, a 25-year-old nobleman from Genoa. Doria had become **an ardent collector** of Caravaggio's work, and he commissioned the painting to mark the entry of his stepdaughter into a religious order as Sister Ursula.
- The painting dates from May 1610, when Doria's legal agent in Naples, Lanfranco Massa, wrote to his master that the painting was finished. The agent wrote that there had been a slight accident when Caravaggio had tried to hasten the drying by leaving it out in the sun the day before, softening the varnish. The agent told Doria not to worry as he would take it back to Caravaggio to be fixed and, in fact, Doria should commission more works from the artist as "**people are fighting over him and this is a good chance.**"

- The painting was received in Genoa on 18 June and Doria was delighted, placing it with his Raphaels and Leonardos and his vial of the "authentic" blood of John the Baptist.

His Life

- What happened next is very unclear. On 28 July an anonymous newsletter reported him dead and three days later another newsletter said he had died of fever while travelling from Naples to Rome. A friend and recent research claims he died of a fever on 18 July in Porto Ercole in Tuscany.
- Contemporary rumours were that either the Tomassoni family or the Knights of Malta had him killed in revenge. Traditionally historians have long thought he died of syphilis. Some have said he had malaria, or possibly brucellosis from unpasteurised dairy products. Some scholars have argued that Caravaggio was actually attacked and killed by the same enemies that had been pursuing him since he fled Malta, if there were in fact any such enemies.
- Recent analysis of his body suggest he may have died of lead poisoning which is known to result in violent behaviour. Later research concluded he died as the result of a wound sustained in a brawl in Naples from sepsis (caused by *Staphylococcus aureus*). Vatican documents released in 2002 support the theory that the wealthy Tomassoni family had him hunted down and killed.

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CARAVAGGIO (1571–1610)

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Caravaggio (1571–1610), *Self-Portrait as Bacchus*, 1593, Galleria Borghese

- Caravaggio died aged 38. He was a **famous and popular artist** in his lifetime but always embroiled in **controversy** and disputes either about he painting or his life. He inspired the next generation of artists who became known as **Caravaggisti** as well as many later artists such as **Rembrandt and Velázquez**.
- His fame and reputation **faded after his death** but in the late 19th century art historians started to reevaluate his work and in the 20th century his work experienced a **resurgence in popularity**.
- Now his works **command high prices** driven by their mastery of light, their realism and their scarcity.
- Thank you for watching and I look forward to bringing you the next episode in the History of Western art.