

## Caravaggio in Rome: Part III from Santa Maria del Popolo to Flight

Even before the paint had dried on the final painting of the St Matthew Trilogy for the Contarelli Chapel in the Chiesa Luigi di Francesi, Caravaggio's reputation had grown to the extent that he had become the most famous and sought after painter in Rome and as such attracted many new commissions. Around 1601-3 he was still in Cardinal del Monte's household, but with the approval of the Cardinal, also spent time in the Palazzo Mattei. He continued to arouse intense loyalty from rich and powerful would-be patrons, who never failed to support him when he was in trouble, which with his volatile personality, was an increasingly regular occurrence. The immense privileges offered by his patrons and protectors enraged his rivals and many years later, one of his biographers the painter Mancini, in his account, suggests both envy and malice in equal measure.

The Santa Maria del Popolo, is one of three renowned churches that are situated around the Piazza del Popolo, one of most beautiful squares in Rome. Located just inside the Northern Gate, it was the first church, which pilgrims came upon on entering the city. Such now was Caravaggio's status, that he was commissioned by Monsignor Tiberio Cerasi to paint two paintings for the Cerasi Chapel, designed by Carlo Maderno 1600-1; this much sought after commission was received even before Caravaggio had completed the St Matthew Trilogy in the Contarelli Chapel. At the time, Caravaggio had again descended into the Roman underworld of taverns, drinking, quarrelling and womanising, with his chums, Prospero Orsi and Orazio Gentileschi.



*The Conversion of St Paul*, 1601, oil on panel, Odescalchi Balbi Collection, Rome.

On 24<sup>th</sup> September 1600, Monsignor Cerasi contracted Caravaggio to paint two cypress side panels, ten palms high and eight palms wide, *The Conversion of St Paul* and *The Crucifixion of St Peter* and Annibale Carracci for the altarpiece, *The Assumption of the Virgin*; Caravaggio's payment was 400 scudi. As Cerasi did not rank amongst the Roman aristocracy, he was anxious to emphasise his proximity to Papal power; hence his choice of the Saints Peter and Paul, the Apostles central to the foundation of the Church of Rome, whose conversion and martyrdom were popular Counter-Reformation associated themes.

Only the biographer, Giovanni Baglione mentions that Caravaggio completed two sets of paintings. The first pair, including the Odescalchi version of *The Conversion of St Paul* did not find

favour with Cerasi and was rejected outright. Consequently, this first pair must have been completed before Cerasi's death in May 1601. **The contract, illustrated on page 4** for this and *The Crucifixion of*

*St Peter* was discovered in 1920 by the Caravaggio scholar, Denis Mahon. Payment for the commission enabled Caravaggio to settle his debts and live quite comfortably.

This first version is a very complex composition, a tangled mass of horse and human limbs, with a remarkably similar appearance to the left side of the final version of *The Martyrdom of St Matthew* in the Contarelli Chapel. The source of light from the right, as in the final version, is exceptional in Caravaggio's oeuvre, but entirely appropriate for their intended position on the right wall of the Chapel. It is likely that Annabile Carracci had already completed *The Assumption of the Virgin*, before Caravaggio had finished either of his two paintings.

The bearded Saul, a Roman soldier, who was on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians is lying prostrate on the ground, shielding his eyes from the intense divine light. From the right, Christ accompanied by the Angel acting as intercessor, reaches out beseechingly to the soldier Saul; by giving Christ visible form, Caravaggio has eloquently conveyed Christ's message, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me." Saul was blinded for three days, just as Christ was in the tomb for three days and in the Old Testament, Jonah was in the Whale for three days, all remaining in darkness before seeing again; being united with the Divine.



*The Conversion of St Paul on the Road to Damascus*, 1601, oil on canvas, 230x175 cms, Cerasi Chapel, Santa Maria del Popolo

*The Conversion of St Paul on the Road to Damascus*, is a very different composition. Here Caravaggio has stripped out everything immaterial and made the horse front and central, with the prostrate Saul in danger of being trampled. On viewing the painting for the first time, a prelate of Santa Maria is said to have asked in exasperation: "Why have you put a horse in the middle and St Paul on the ground." To which Caravaggio responded: "Because is the horse God. No, but he stands in God's light." It's only Saul that hears God's voice; the groom holding the horse's head appears to be totally ignorant of the divine event. Whilst there is a much more overtly complex narrative in the first version, it's this internalised narrative that would have fitted more precisely within the context of the Counter Reformation.

There is a profound sense of intended imbalance in the composition with Saul in a vulnerable position, his head and outstretched arms forming the apex of an upended pyramid, in contrast to the more

classical Renaissance pyramidal compositional structure, whilst his gaze also, is directed to the ascending Mary in Carracci's altarpiece, *The Assumption of the Virgin*.



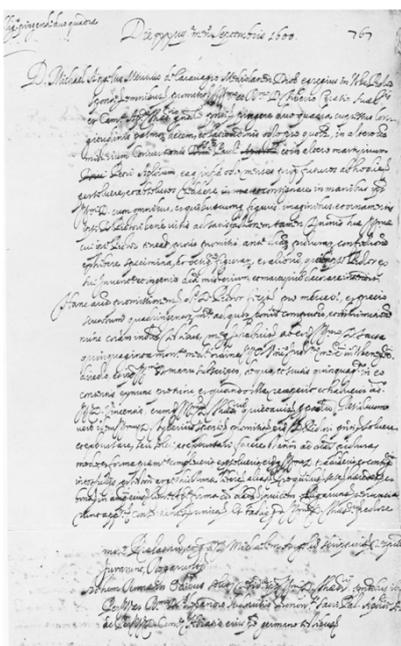
*The Crucifixion of St Peter*, 1601, oil on canvas, 230x175 cms, Cerasi Chapel

*The Crucifixion of St Peter*, is a very different composition from the *Martyrdom of St Matthew* in the Contarelli Chapel. Rather than the crowded scene of dramatic brutality in the former, it is the chilling, almost mundane actions of the men labouring to erect the cross that makes the scene so profoundly relatable and emotionally moving. Caravaggio feels no need to emphasise the brutality of the

executioners with everything proceeding unthinkingly, the three workers performing their task, as if it were nothing more than erecting a telegraph pole. He has eschewed sensationalism in favour of understated drama. The crucified St Peter, looks out of the picture, appearing quietly, but disturbingly resigned to his fate, with no visible evidence of pain and little show of emotion. How different then from the similar themes of Christ's descent from the cross, or the deposition.



*The Cerasi Chapel with Annibale Carracci's, The Assumption of the Virgin*



In the above image of the Chapel, the prostrate figure of Saul, (St Paul) looks up not only into the divine light, but towards Carracci's altarpiece figure of Mary, ascending into heaven. The Crucified St Peter, (his wish to be crucified upside down), the 'Father of the Church' also looks out of his picture, across and up towards the tomb of Tiberio Cerasi and the altarpiece. The apostles with exaggerated gestures in the *Assumption of the Virgin* also look up in wonder at the ascending Virgin. Thus are the three paintings united in a thematic and theological scheme, despite the very different styles of the two artists; Carracci's *Assumption of the Virgin* being a late High Renaissance painting in the Mannerist tradition, with strong 'acidic' colours, whereas Caravaggio's works are Naturalistic with a restrained palette, intensified by the strong lighting with associated shadows, a more intense Chiascuro, otherwise known as Tenebrism. With bright focused light comes dark shadows and it was this quality of Caravaggio's technique, with modification that would influence the further development of painting until the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century, from the Dutch, Spanish and French Caravaggisti to the

greatest 17<sup>th</sup> century masters Rembrandt, Velasquez and Vermeer. But above all the masters, it was Rembrandt, who most extensively explored the potential of more nuanced lighting effects to maximise the theatrical potential of his paintings.



*The Supper at Emmaus*, c1601, oil on canvas, 141x196 cms, N.G. London

The narrative of *The Supper at Emmaus* is from the Gospel of St Luke 24: 30-31. It was commissioned by the Roman nobleman Ciriaco Mattei and is especially notable for the dramatic examples of foreshortening. The depiction of Christ is unusual in that he is beardless and great emphasis is placed on the still life on the front of the table and the shadow behind Christ, appearing almost as a halo. He is shown in the act of breaking and blessing the bread. The disciples are Luke and Cleophas, the latter wearing the scallop shell of the pilgrim. The intensity of lighting mirrors the emotions as the disciples realise that their master has revealed himself and all of this theatre is wonderfully conveyed by their gestures and expression of apparent wonder and amazement. The basket of fruit appearing almost to be falling off the table into our space and Cleophas' hand appearing to project out of the picture plane, all add to the drama of the moment. The novelty of the composition is in stark contrast to the classical, rhythmic order in that of Leonardo's *Last Supper* and Titian's *The Supper at Emmaus*.



*The Supper at Emmaus*, 1530, Titian, oil on canvas, 169x244 cms, Louvre

Titian's monumental version of the Supper at Emmaus, has echoes of the *Last Supper*, by Leonardo da Vinci in Milan, the long horizontal table and the backdrop of a landscape, punctuated with vertical architectural elements, down to the posture of the pilgrim on the left reminiscent of that of Leonardo's Judas.



*Amor Vincit Omnia*, 1602, oil on canvas, 156x113 cms, Gemaldegalerie, Berlin.

*Amor Vincit Omnia, Love Conquers* depicts Amor, the Roman God Cupid, wearing dark eagle wings, which Caravaggio borrowed from Orazio Gentileschi. The model was a boy named Cecco, Caravaggio's servant and possibly his assistant/pupil. Scattered around him are the emblems of all human endeavours, violin, lute, armour, coronet, square and compasses, pen and manuscript etc. It was commissioned by the rich, powerful and cultivated Roman Vincenzo Giustiniani, who was famed for his military prowess and was in the process of building a new palace.

The subject was a common one for the age, but Caravaggio's treatment was utterly different from anything that had gone before, remarkable for its realism, charming, but not at all beautiful, all crooked teeth and grin, the type of street urchin that was commonplace in Rome at the time, so much so that the real life model seems to overwhelm the supposed subject.



*Sacred and Profane Love*, 1602, Giovanni Baglione, oil on canvas, 210x123 cms, Galleria Palazzo Barberini, Rome.

For Caravaggio, the intensely productive years between 1602-6, during which he painted many of his greatest paintings, were also marked by a series of disreputable escapades and brushes with the law. Contemporary documents suggest that he injured one man with a dagger, for commenting unfavourably on the San Luigi paintings and in 1605-6, there were several much more serious assaults. However, it was his rivalry with Giovanni Baglione, which is most reliably documented, reaching a head with the 1603 libel suit, where Baglione accused Caravaggio of writing sonnets defaming his reluctant future biographer.

Giovanni Baglione's *Sacred and Profane Love*, which was produced in two versions, the earlier in the Gemaldegalerie, Berlin, the later in the Palazzo Barberini, are the artist's two best known paintings. Both were a direct response to *Amor Vincit Omnia* and led to the famous suit for libel in 1603. Both depict Sacred Love as an angelic winged figure interrupting a meeting between Cupid, a smaller prostrate

naked winged figure and the devil. In the Barberini version, Baglione has given the devil the features of Caravaggio.

Giovanni Baglione was certainly a highly regarded painter and had a successful career, with a long involvement with the Accademia di San Luca, being its president three times. His association with the Papal court and the Roman aristocracy, combined with the evidence of his biographies suggest a painter obsessed with status. Indeed, the commissioning of this painting by Cardinal Benedetto Giustiniani, in response to his brother Vincenzo's purchase of Caravaggio's *Amor Vincit Omnia* was mischief-making on their part, reflecting the serious rivalry that had by this time grown up between the proud status driven Baglione and the hot-headed and mischievous Caravaggio. Baglione was inevitably influenced by Caravaggio's style and the latter's associates claimed, with some justification, that Baglione had plagiarised it in his two versions of *Sacred and Profane Love* and other paintings.

In late August 1603, Baglione filed the libel suit against Caravaggio, Orazio Gentileschi and Ottavio Leoni in connection with some unflattering poems, which had circulated around Rome about the merits, or otherwise of his paintings. At the time Baglione had just completed his large altarpiece of the *Resurrection of Jesus* for II Gesu, the principal church of the Jesuit Order. Caravaggio was subsequently arrested and interrogated. His testimony filled with contradictory remarks and impertinence was not likely to move the judges to mercy and it was only on the intervention of his patrons, the Marchese Giustiniani and Cardinal del Monte that he was pardoned, although he was still imprisoned for two weeks and informed that he had to mend his ways and apologise to Baglione. Amongst the quotes from the trial defence, Caravaggio stated: "I don't know of any painter who thinks that Giovanni Baglione is a good painter."



*The Taking of Christ*, 1602, oil on canvas, 134x170 cms, N.G. Ireland

*The Taking of Christ*, commissioned by the nobleman, Ciriaco Mattei, of the same year, in Dublin, is the only Caravaggio in Ireland and was exhibited in the National Gallery exhibition on the artist and his followers, *Beyond Caravaggio* held in 2017. In this painting, Caravaggio has employed several of the same models used in the *Supper at Emmaus*. Judas has just kissed Christ to identify him for the soldiers. The principal light source for this painting is not evident, but a lesser light source emanates from the lantern held by the figure on the furthest right of the image, presumably a self portrait of Caravaggio, who may well be representing Peter, who would first betray Christ by denying him three times before the cock crowed.

By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the painting was thought to have disappeared and its whereabouts was unknown for almost two hundred years. Only in 1990 was it recognised by the senior conservator of the National Gallery of Ireland as a long overlooked Caravaggio in the residence of the Society of Jesus in Dublin. The painting had been hanging in the dining room since the early 1930s, but had long been considered a copy of the lost original by the prominent Dutch member of the Caravaggisti, Gerard van Honthorst. It was donated to the Jesuits by an Irish Paediatrician, in gratitude for the help given by the Jesuits, following the shooting of her husband, a District Inspector in the Royal Irish Constabulary. As with most of the corpus of Caravaggio, it was only as a result of the intense research of scholars that its true attribution could be proven.



*The Crowning with Thorns*, 1602-4, oil on canvas, 128x166 cms, Kunsthistorisches, Vienna

*The Crowning with Thorns* was, according to Caravaggio's biographer Giovanni Bellori, commissioned by Vincenzo Giustiniani and is surely one of the most dramatic and emotive of all Caravaggio's paintings. It is one of fifteen works collected by the wealthy banker in his lifetime. It is mentioned in his inventory as a painting to be hung over a doorway in his Palazzo and indeed the half-length format

is composed with slight foreshortening, as would befit such a positioned painting. Caravaggio exploited the fact that Christ would be viewed from below, adding to the visual impact of the brutality inflicted upon him by the two bare-chested torturers. Seated nonchalantly to one side is a man in armour obviously overseeing this act.



*The Entombment*, 1603, oil on canvas, 300x203 cms, Vatican Museum

*The Entombment*, was originally commissioned as an altarpiece for the Pieta Chapel in the Chiesa Nuova. It is one of Caravaggio's most admired and copied paintings, by as diverse masters as Rubens, Fragonard, Gericault and even Cezanne. Models for the composition may well have been Michelangelo's *Pieta* in St Peter's Basilica and Raphael's *Deposition* in the Galleria Borghese. Unlike many of Caravaggio's earliest works, it received unanimous approval by the critics and Papal authorities. Within a composition where the figures appear almost impossibly close together and very much towards the frontal plane, the grieving Mary of Cleophas is seen standing behind the limp body of Christ held by the youthful John the Evangelist in a red cloak and the older Nicodemus, before the body is lowered into the tomb. In the centre is Mary Magdalene drying her tears; unlike Michelangelo's depiction of the Virgin Mary, here we see an old woman.

In many ways it is the quintessential Baroque painting, where diagonals predominate rather than the pyramidal compositional structure of the Renaissance; the descending diagonal formed by the tops of the protagonists' heads, the outstretched arms of the Virgin Mary and Mary of Cleophas, the limbs of Christ and the monumental form of the cover of the tomb directed into the viewer's space. Also typical of the Baroque are the exaggerated emotions and of course Caravaggio's trademark Tenebrism, further accentuating the theatre and naturalism of the scene. The dramatic impact is that much greater as the viewer is looking up at the unfolding scene and the body of Christ looks as if it is being lowered into the viewer's space, all adding to the personal emotional involvement. One can only speculate on the effect of such altar paintings on the contemporary viewer; surely overwhelming for the believer.



*The Entombment*, 1611, Rubens, oil on panel, 88x67 cms, N.G. Canada.

Rubens was so impressed by Caravaggio's depiction, that he painted his first *Entombment* version, a near copy, shortly after returning from his extended visit to Rome; knowing Rubens, he would have made extensive drawings in the Chiesa Nuova. His second *Entombment* in 1612, was possibly even more moving than either Caravaggio's, or his copy of the same.

It is interesting to note, how closely Rubens reproduced the Caravaggio composition, right down to the folds of the winding cloth and the appearance of Christ's body and yet he saw fit to omit the distraught Mary of Cleophas. Here he may have wished to give the completed composition a less crowded appearance, a criticism that one might level at the original. The chiaroscuro though pronounced is not of the same intensity, the lighting not so strong and the shadows not so dark as in the Caravaggio original. However, the sense of grief is just as intense.



*The Pieta*, 1489-99, Sculpture in Marble, Michelangelo, St Peter's Basilica, Rome.



*The Deposition*, 1507, Raphael, oil on panel, 184x176 cms, Galleria Borghese, Rome.

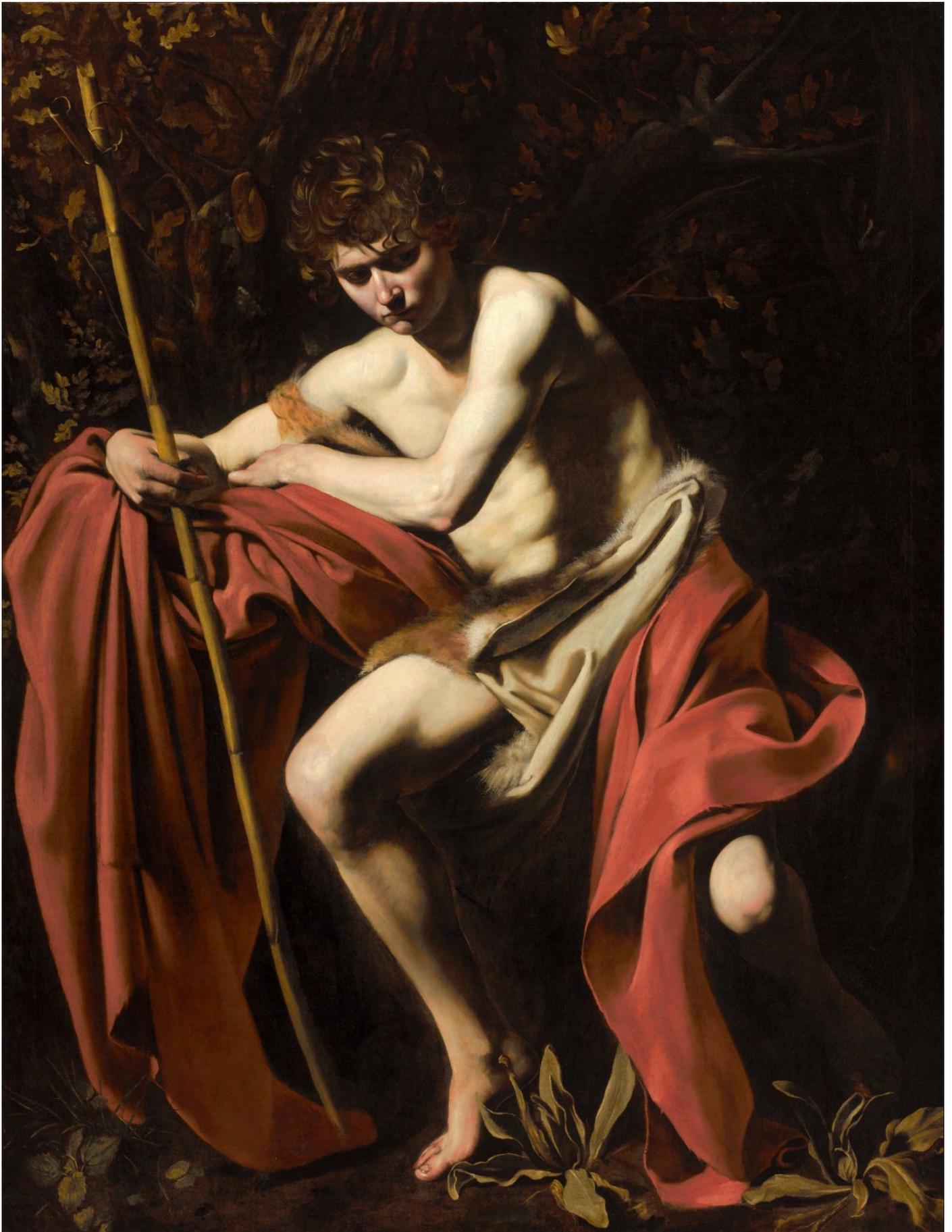


*The Sacrifice of Isaac*, 1603, oil on canvas, 104x135 cms, Uffizi, Florence.

*The Sacrifice of Isaac* is the second version of the Old Testament narrative, commissioned by Cardinal Maffeo Barberini, where Abraham, in blind obedience to God's command, is about to sacrifice his son Isaac, when an angel appears, demanding that he stays his hand and instead, sacrifices the ram. The model for Isaac and the angel have been identified as Cecco Boneri, who had appeared in previous paintings. In Christianity, the ram represents Christ, or Yeshua, as the lamb of God, or sometimes referred to as the ultimate sacrifice, foreshadowing Christ's crucifixion.

The landscape background is unusual, but not unique in Caravaggio's oeuvre, the other example being *The Flight into Egypt*. Here again there are echoes of the landscape of Lombardy and the Veneto regions of Northern Italy, suggestive of the influence of Giorgione and Titian. The work has been subject to a symbolic interpretation according to which the building on the hill is a church with a baptistery, a reference to the origins of the Roman Catholic Church, while the diffused light on the horizon, symbolises the light of divine grace. The act of the sacrifice of young Isaac serves therefore, to foreshadow the sacrifice of Christ. The biblical narrative was certainly chosen by the work's illustrious client, Maffeo Barberini, influential Cardinal and future Pope Urban VIII.

One of several versions of the narrative by Caravaggio, this *St John the Baptist in the Wilderness* is regarded by most critical opinion as the most appealing. It is a wonderful example, where the artist has combined his Naturalism with regard to the Classical past. It was commissioned by one of Caravaggio's earliest admirers and patrons, Ottavio Costa and on his death passed down the generations for 250 years, until bequeathed to the Congregation of the Works of the Divine Pieta, Rome. In 1907, it was purchased at auction by Rosana, Lady Clifford Constable and passed down that family line until in 1952, it was sold to the current museum by Thomas Agnew and Sons.

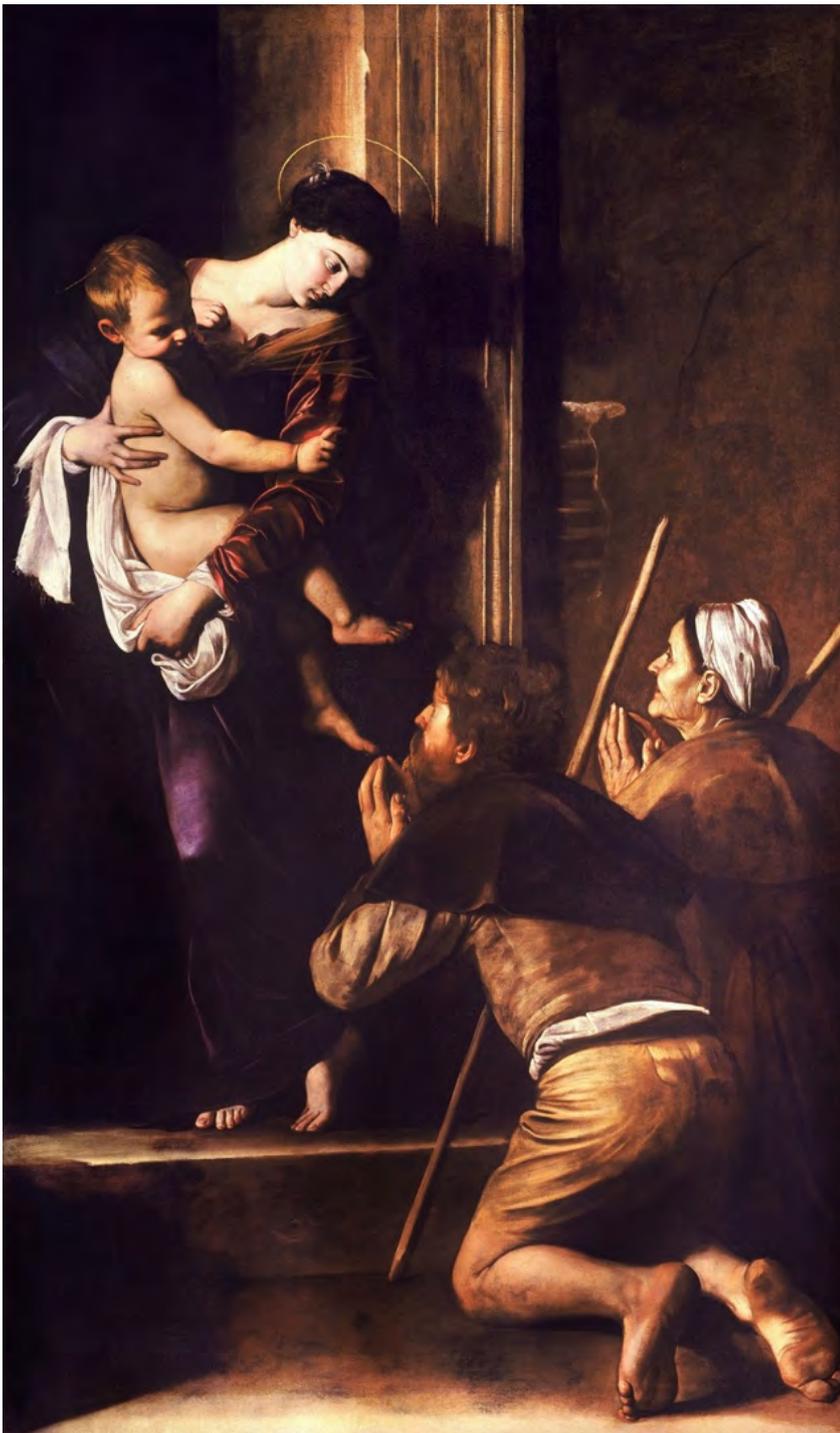


*St John the Baptist in the Wilderness*, c1604, oil on canvas, 173x133 cms, Nelson-Atkins Museum.

Thus was missed by the National Gallery, a wonderful opportunity to purchase one of Caravaggio's most sought after and copied works; Guido Reni's 1636 version in the Dulwich Picture Gallery is but one fine example.

Only identifiable as John the Baptist by his attributes, the simple reed cross and the camel skin across his loins, a brooding adolescent sits thoughtfully in a dark landscape, spot-lit against a thicket of oak trees. According to the Gospel of St Matthew, St John lived in the wilderness, clothed in nothing but a camel's hair tunic and nourished only on locusts and wild honey. Here he baptised the people of Judea and preached the coming of Christ. However, instead of portraying St John as an aesthete, Caravaggio has taken the opportunity to emphasise the beauty of a young man's body, in a manner that even the Renaissance Raphael would have complemented. Dramatically lit from above, the face cast largely in shadow, results in an image of extraordinary emotional intensity. The scarlet cloak in which the figure is partially draped further complements the beauty unfolding before the viewer.

Again, as an altarpiece the painting was originally designed to be viewed from below, in which position the congregant would have felt as if he, or she were in direct communication with the Saint. The work was considered the prize of Costa's collection and was the only work covered by a silk taffeta curtain.



*Madonna di Loreto*, c1604, oil on canvas, 260x150 cms, Sant'Agostino, Rome

In 1604 Caravaggio had a violent disagreement with one of the clients of a prostitute called Lena, who was the model for the *Madonna of Loreto*. Mariano Pasqualone, blood streaming down his face took shelter with the local police and there in front of the Palazzo of the Spanish Ambassador accused Caravaggio of trying to assassinate him. Caravaggio left Rome hurriedly for Genoa to take refuge with Prince Marzio Colonna, whose patronage he had earlier sought as an apprentice in Milan. Caravaggio subsequently returned to Rome as Pasqualone mysteriously dropped all charges, no doubt engineered by his powerful protective patrons.

He then went on to complete the astonishing, *Madonna of Loreto* now in the Church of Sant' Agostino, situated near the Piazza Navona in the middle of Caravaggio's Rome. It was commissioned by the Bolognese Cavalletti heirs of the Marquis Ermete Cavalletti, who died in 1602.

The town of Loreto, just south of Ancona in the region of the Marche, was the site of a famous shrine known as the Holy House of Loreto which, during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was encased in beautiful marble facades designed by Bramante and others. The ancient

wooden statue of the Madonna, which was housed inside was, however, the real attraction and pilgrims travelled barefoot in order to worship her. She is traditionally portrayed in mid-air above the Santa Casa, but Caravaggio chose to depict the Madonna as a bare-footed everyday woman, standing in the doorway of a humble dwelling, where she is receiving the fervent homage of two aged pilgrims with dirty feet. As usual the painting inspired praise and scorn in equal measure. Baglione thought it obscene and the priests of St Agostino were reluctant at first to accept it.

The appeal of the painting will also have been influenced by the completely unrelated long-standing popularity of the Church itself, which held a special place in the life of Renaissance Rome. Andrea Sansovino's sculpture of St Anne with the Virgin and Child of 1512, commissioned by one of the leading humanists in Rome, curate prelate Johann Goritz, would have been a further attraction. Goritz entertained literary and artistic friends on the feast of St Anne; as part of an altarpiece, it was intended to unite the arts of sculpture, painting and poetry.

There was a further brush with the authorities in 1605, in which during a hard drinking session Caravaggio hurled a plate of scalding artichokes in the face of a waiter, causing a fight which spread throughout the Inn. Again he was arrested and once more his patrons obtained his liberty.



*St Jerome Writing*, 1605-6, oil on canvas, 112x157 cms, Galleria Borghese

*St Jerome Writing*, was painted for the Capuchin Church at the behest of Cardinal Scipione Borghese as a form of contrition and to earn Caravaggio's pardon for his recent misdemeanours, specifically the aforementioned assault on the notary Mariano Pasqualone. The meeting between the two men took place in the antechamber of the Quirinale Palace, where the Cardinal was the Papal representative of judicial administration. A settlement was required for this consideration and Caravaggio demonstrated

his gratitude by waving the fee for the commission. The deal was so private that no record, or payment survives, but the painting does appear in the possession of Cardinal Scipione Borghese after the event.

Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend* was a rich source of hagiographies read widely in late Medieval Europe and still used as a source of narratives well into the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Jerome was one of the most prominent Saints mentioned and as such, with the focus on meditation in both Protestant and Catholic doctrine, he was an obvious choice for painters from as early as the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century. Most of the great masters painted depicted him in different guises at least once, most notably Giovanni Bellini, Antonella Messina, Leonardo da Vinci, Joachim Patinir and Albrecht Durer. This painting was long attributed to Jose Ribera, one of Caravaggio's earliest and closest followers. The light glints off the bald head of the saint to fall on the skull and open Bible, which he may be translating into the Vulgate. The white cloth hangs down from the table from beneath the skull, while the Saint's arm stretches out, almost absent-mindedly, as if to dip his quill. Caravaggio here is at the very height of his powers!



*The Madonna dei Palafranerie*, 1605-6, oil on canvas, 292x211 cms, Galleria Borghese.

*The Madonna with Child and St Anne*, otherwise known as *The Madonna dei Palafranieri*, was commissioned for the altar of the Arch-confraternity of the Papal Grooms in St Peters, to whom Pope Paul was especially attached. It was one of a flood of commissions which came Caravaggio's way whilst still under the protection of Prince Colonna. It was Cardinal Scipione Borghese, who persuaded his uncle Pope Paul V Borghese to commission a painting of the Virgin for St Peters. For the artist, this was the opportunity of a lifetime, indeed the dream of all his contemporaries to have one's name enshrined in St Peters with all the great past-masters.

Heedless of advice, he again conscripted Lena, the model for the Madonna of Loreto and painted *The Madonna with Serpent*, the painting's alternative title. The result was one of Caravaggio's great

masterpieces, but at the time, it was found to be utterly unacceptable. On completion, it was on show for only a few days, before the acquisitive Scipione Borghese purchased it at a much reduced sum for his ever expanding collection. The doors of St Peters were shut evermore to Caravaggio.

The Virgin with the aid of her son, whom she holds, tramples on a serpent, the emblem of original sin, as in, 'the serpent beguiled me and I did eat', whilst St Anne, the mother of Mary looks on. Caravaggio

adhering closely to a recent Papal Bull, has depicted Mary, as the necessary mediator for the remission of sins, by placing her foot on the serpent's head.



*The Death of the Virgin*, 1606, oil on canvas, 369x245 cms, Louvre

Almost certainly his last completed painting before his flight from Rome, *The Death of the Virgin*, was commissioned by the Papal lawyer, Laerzio Cherubini, for his chapel in the Carmelite church of Santa Maria della Scala in Trastevere, Rome; the contract may have been as early as 1601. The biographers Giovanni Baglione, Giulio Mancini and Pietro Bellori attributed the rejection of the painting to the dishevelled and 'common' appearance of Mary. This breach of decorum led to the rejection of the painting by the fathers of Santa Maria della Scala and its replacement by a picture of a close follower of Caravaggio, Carlo Saraceni.

Nevertheless, upon the recommendation of Rubens, who praised it as one of Caravaggio's best works, the painting was very soon after bought by Vincenzo Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua, Giulio Mancini, having brokered the deal. The Duke's collection was later sold to Charles I in 1626, after which, upon his execution, the Royal Collection was put up for sale in 1649 and it

was bought by Everhard Jabach, who sold it to Louis XVI in 1671.

The portrait format enabled Caravaggio to use almost life-sized representations of the Apostles. Caravaggio, freed from the burden of doctrine, presents the unrelieved sorrow of an ordinary mortal death. He has divested the scene of any of the iconography traditionally used to indicate the holiness of the Virgin. Notwithstanding, Caravaggio follows the tradition that the apostles, who were widely dispersed in preaching the gospel, were miraculously transported to her deathbed.

The composition is arranged tightly around the body of Mary, lying on a kind of litter with bare feet extended beyond it's end, a poor woman, plainly dressed, too weak to have crossed her hands in prayer and too worn out to welcome the release of death. The identification of individual apostles must be speculative, but that of St Peter standing on the extreme left, to his left St Andrew kneeling with hands to face, St Matthew, also kneeling, rubbing his eyes with his fists and to his left, standing, the younger

figure of St John the Evangelist, with left hand on his cheek looking reflective; these would all seem reasonable assumptions. And the figure whose right hand is raised may be St Paul, representing a call for silence, possibly indicating the moment of the Virgin's last breath. In the foreground is Mary Magdalene with a bowl of water in front, possibly a symbolic reference to her washing of Christ's feet, but more immediately, the washing of the Virgin's body. The theatrical drape of blood-red cloth further elevates the dramatic effect.

The Church of Santa Maria della Scala was in the impoverished district of Trastevere. The Church had been built in 1590 and was associated with the Casa Pia, a sort of refuge for women who were in danger of falling into prostitution. It was given to the 'barefoot', or Discalced Carmelites, who came to Rome from Spain in 1597. The brown cloth over the Virgin's knees may be an allusion to the Carmelite scapular, which promises mercy at the hour of death to those who wear it. The presence of Mary Magdalene might also be an allusion to the work of the 'Order', given that she was commonly associated with repentant prostitutes.

Once more Caravaggio was in disgrace and so reverted to life on the streets. Whilst his rivals, the Cavaliere d'Arpino and Giovanni Baglione had now entered the hallowed halls of the Academie di San Luca, Caravaggio never enjoyed such honours and rewards. Once more he was in prison, but this time for a murder. A Corte sergeant, who had been about to question him in the middle of the night had had his head smashed in by a fierce blow. Caravaggio testified that a stone had fallen from the rooftops at that very instant. Despite the testimony of his friends, the Corte found his version incredible and he remained in prison. In fact, worse was to follow as he was interrogated with the full force of the law, bound to the rack and lashed. His friends fearing for his life, with the complicity of Scipione Borghese bribed the guards and Caravaggio made his escape out of Rome.

But worse still was to follow. On the 29<sup>th</sup> May 1606 during a game of royal tennis, he accused his rival, Ranuccio Tomassoni de Teri of cheating. A fight followed in which Tomassoni received a fatal wound to his femoral artery, which resulted in him bleeding to death. The confrontation, rather as the plot in West Side Story, was apparently prearranged in advance by eight participants, whose names are recorded and include the painter Mario Minniti, Onorio Longhi, the hot-headed architect, who was known to patrol the streets of Rome on horseback, as if a knight and a captain from the Papal Army. They all met at a Pallacorda court in the Campo Marzio district, where Caravaggio was currently living. It appears that the quarrel broke out over a gambling debt, swords were drawn and Ranuccio killed.

Ranuccio Tomassoni had been the pimp, who controlled Caravaggio's favourite model and courtesan, Fillide Melandroni. From the outset, Tomassoni would have been dismayed to discover the relationship of Caravaggio, a mere painter, with his most beautiful courtesan. There is even a suggestion that Caravaggio may have been encroaching on Tomassoni's territory by becoming a part-time pimp himself. Andrew Graham-Dixon in his book, *A Life Sacred and Profane*, suggests that the duel may also have been as a result of a point of honour relating to Tomassoni's wife Lavinia, as archival documents reveal that she gave up their baby daughter for adoption, raising the possibility that Caravaggio may have fathered the child.

Caravaggio was condemned as a murderer and made subject to a capital sentence, which meant that anyone in the Papal States had the right to kill him with impunity. Indeed, there was a bounty, literally on his head, production of which was all that was required. This time his friends were powerless to help him. His most powerful patrons were away from Rome on business, or were tired of his escapades. He escaped from Rome in disguise, with a price on his head and found a refuge within the territory of Prince Colonna and then in late 1606 travelled to Naples, which was then under Spanish control.

Thus came to end, a period of little more than a decade in Rome in which Caravaggio had transformed the future development of 17<sup>th</sup> century art. His radically different way of story-telling, related to the

lives of the common people and his innovative and revolutionary manner of representing the figures within both secular and and biblical narratives, would lead to a redefining of what a picture should be. His were the paintings of the Counter-Revolution, that came to define the Baroque and he and his followers were the prevailing influence until the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when French Classicism, with the art of Claude Lorrain and Nicholas Poussin became ascendant.