

Caravaggio in Rome – Part II: The Early Biblical Narratives



St Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy, c1598, oil on canvas, Hartford Atheneum, USA.

The Ecstasy of St Francis, is thought to have been commissioned by Ottavio Costa and given to Abbot Ruggero Tritonio of Udine c 1606 and then subsequently acquired from Tritonio's nephew by Cardinal del Monte, in whose 1627 inventory it was listed. It and *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* were almost certainly Caravaggio's first works with a biblical narrative and because of its modest size, 36x50 inches, undoubtedly the focus for personal devotion. For many Caravaggio scholars, this painting marks the advent of the Baroque, such is its importance. The scene takes place at night, with St Francis receiving the Stigmata in a state of mystical ecstasy, never before so convincingly depicted. His companions can just be made out in the middle distance near a fire. The features of St Francis are thought to be those of del Monte and he retained the painting until the end of his life. In its naturalism and intimacy, how different it is from Giovanni Bellini's renowned version of 1480, *Saint Francis in Ecstasy*, one of the most renowned Renaissance paintings in the Frick. Before Bernini's *'Ecstasy of St Theresa'* was completed in the Santa Maria Della Vittoria in 1652 this is the first artistic representation of the swoon.

In 1224, St Francis, like Jerome almost 900 years earlier, retired to the desert with a small number of his followers to contemplate God. At night on the slopes of Mount Alverna, Brother Leo saw a six-winged seraph, who descended in dazzling light, in response to the prayers of Francisco, so that he could know the sufferings of Christ and his love. Caravaggio's depiction is less dramatic, the six-winged seraph replaced by an angel, who gently supports the Saint as he swoons in response to the heavenly intervention. The only evidence of the stigmata, is the tare and wound on his right side, symbolising the gash in Christ's side at the crucifixion.

Under the protection of Cardinal Monte, Caravaggio, could give free rein to his talent, skill and vision, alternating religious and secular paintings. This was just the treatment of the narrative that would have

pleased the Papal authorities, who following the conclusions of the Council of Trent, were directing artists to treat such subjects in a manner both meaningful and appealing to their flock.



In essence the Council of Trent was a reaffirmation of the fundamentals of the Catholic faith and has subsequently been recognised as the embodiment of the Counter-Reformation.

Of most relevance to art, the Council provided specific advice as to how painters should portray biblical narratives in a manner more relevant to its Catholic flock, avoiding references to narratives from the *Golden Legend* and the *Apocrypha*, those collections of picturesque anecdotes and legends about the lives of Christ and the Saints so loved by the middle ages, providing a rich source for painters.

In 1590 Cardinal Paleotti, together with Cardinal Frederico Borromeo, director of the Academia di San Luca, wrote a treatise on biblical painting, which advised that images should imitate visible reality and create figures that appear real and tangible. These images should also convey historical reality, clearly defining time and place. The identities of the Saint and Christ blur insofar as the viewer is capable of grasping the deeper subject of this sacred narrative. As Francis appears to imitate Christ, so the viewer is invited to mediate upon and imitate Christ.



The Ecstasy of St Francis, 1601, Giovanni Baglione, oil on canvas, Art Institute of Chicago.

Allegory was condemned, for painters should express everything as it appears to the human eye. It should not idealise, but nonetheless naturalism should be tempered by classicism. Baglione's version of the Ecstasy, appears to be much influenced by that of Caravaggio, unsurprising as both painters were fiercely competing for the patronage of Del Monte and his wealthy friends. It reveals just how quickly and astutely painters such as Giovanni Baglione and Orazio Gentileschi realised that Caravaggio was 'the new painter about town.'

Nevertheless, in Baglione's case, the rather crowded composition, does betray his point of departure with rather more than a hint of both Classicism and High Renaissance Mannerism; the rather more naturalistic angel on the left with his classicising white cloth tied around his torso, pointing to the symbols of the passion, the cross and the crown of thorns, whilst the the angel supporting St Francis with his mask-like face

and crimped hair, recalls the Mannerism of Cavalier d'Arpino. The addition of the skull and the open bible are common memento-mori symbols, related to the transience of human life. Although one of the principal sources of Caravaggio's biography in Rome, he and Caravaggio were not on entirely friendly terms. Indeed, matters came to a head in 1603, when Baglione took Caravaggio to court for deformation of character. Nevertheless, his near copy of the Ecstasy, must surely be regarded as a grudging admission of his admiration of Caravaggio's skill. Imitation is indeed the sincerest form of flattery.



St Francis in Ecstasy, c1480, oil and tempera on panel, Giovanni Bellini, Frick, New York.

One of the many treasures of the Frick, this large panel painting by the Venetian master, is so full of the most mimetic detail, providing endless pleasure in seeking out details such as the hare poking its head out just under the Saint's right hand, the shepherd with his sheep in the middle-ground and the wonderfully depicted city with its towers reflecting the early morning sun. How different is this depiction of the Saint's revelation from that of Caravaggio?



Where Bellini's setting for the moment of receiving the stigmata is the early morning, as St Francis emerges bare-footed from his cave-like sanctuary, Caravaggio has decided upon the melodrama of the night. However, both are similar in that the Seraph, or crucifix emitting rays, the signs of divine intervention, are absent. Whereas Bellini has focussed his attention on man's harmony with Nature, divine providence and St Francis's love of animals, Caravaggio intention is much more specific; the intensity of the emotional and divine revelation experienced by St Francis.

The stigmata, the signs of Christ's crucifixion, are reputed to have miraculously appeared on the hands and feet of St Francis while fasting on Mount La Verna in 1224.



Rest on the Flight into Egypt, 1597-8, oil on canvas, Palazzo Doria Pamphilj

The Rest on the Flight into Egypt, in the Palazzo Doria Pamphilj, defies convention and is quite unlike other evocations of this popular New Testament narrative. Many scholars, specifically Helen Langdon and Peter Robb, believe that the nature of the composition with its musical theme, strongly suggest that Cardinal del Monte commissioned the work. The sophisticated treatment is appropriate for the Cardinal's intellectual's taste and interest. This was probably the first large scale, 135x167 cm painting by Caravaggio, compositionally more ambitious than *The Musicians*, but possibly less well received. It is also one of the very rare landscapes in the Caravaggio oeuvre. The pastoral background, the distant horizon and the décor of flowers are all reminiscent of Giorgione, or the young Titian as in the *Concert Champetre*.

The scene is set in a verdant Lombard dell, where the model for Mary is almost certainly the same as in the *Penitent Magdalene* and that of the angel, being the cheating boy in the *Cardsharps*. Joseph holds a musical score of a motet by Noel Bauldeweyn in honour of the Madonna, whilst the angel plays the violin. The figure of the angel, with a white robe draped around him, is like a charmingly shaped musical motif, providing the tone of the composition. It is an interesting contradiction, simultaneously an example of Caravaggio's naturalism and pure classical beauty, the direct descendant of Annibale Carracci's *Luxuria* from the painting, *The Choice of Heracles*, painted only a few years earlier, in 1596. It was commissioned by Cardinal Odoardo Farnese for the ceiling of his camerino in the Palazzo Farnese, but later moved to the Farnese Ducal seat in Parma. It is considered one of Carracci's masterpieces, influenced by Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescoes and in turn pre-empts the work of Nicholas Poussin.



Choice of Heracles, 1596, Annibale Carracci, oil on canvas, Capodimonte Gallery, Naples



Jupiter, Neptune and Pluto,

Although *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* received only a lukewarm reception, it pleased Cardinal del Monte sufficiently that he commissioned Caravaggio to paint the mural of '*Jupiter, Neptune and Pluto*', on the ceiling of the recently purchased Villa Aurora, the Cardinal's country estate, which later became known as the Villa Ludovisi. According to a contemporary biographer, one of Caravaggio's aims was to discredit critics, who claimed that he had no grasp of perspective. Completed c1597, the composition demonstrates the most remarkable foreshortening, lacking any architectural reference. The artist may have been assisted by the Cardinal's brother Guidobaldo, who wrote a distinguished treatise on perspective. And he must surely have referred to prints of Giulio Romano's *Fall of the Giants* in the Palazzo del Te in Mantua.

Depicted are the three mythological gods, together with their animal attributes, Pluto the God of the Underworld with his three-headed dog, Cerberus, Neptune, God of the Ocean with the Hippocamp and reigning above Jupiter with the eagle. The Cardinal believed all natural things to be derived from a triad of elements: sulphur-air (Jupiter), mercury-water (Neptune) and salt-earth (Pluto). In the composition, Jupiter is manipulating a celestial globe containing the earth, sun and the stars, in order to achieve the astrological conditions propitious for the processes that Paracelsus called the 'Great Work', whereby the three elements could be transformed into the philosopher's stone, the elixir of life.

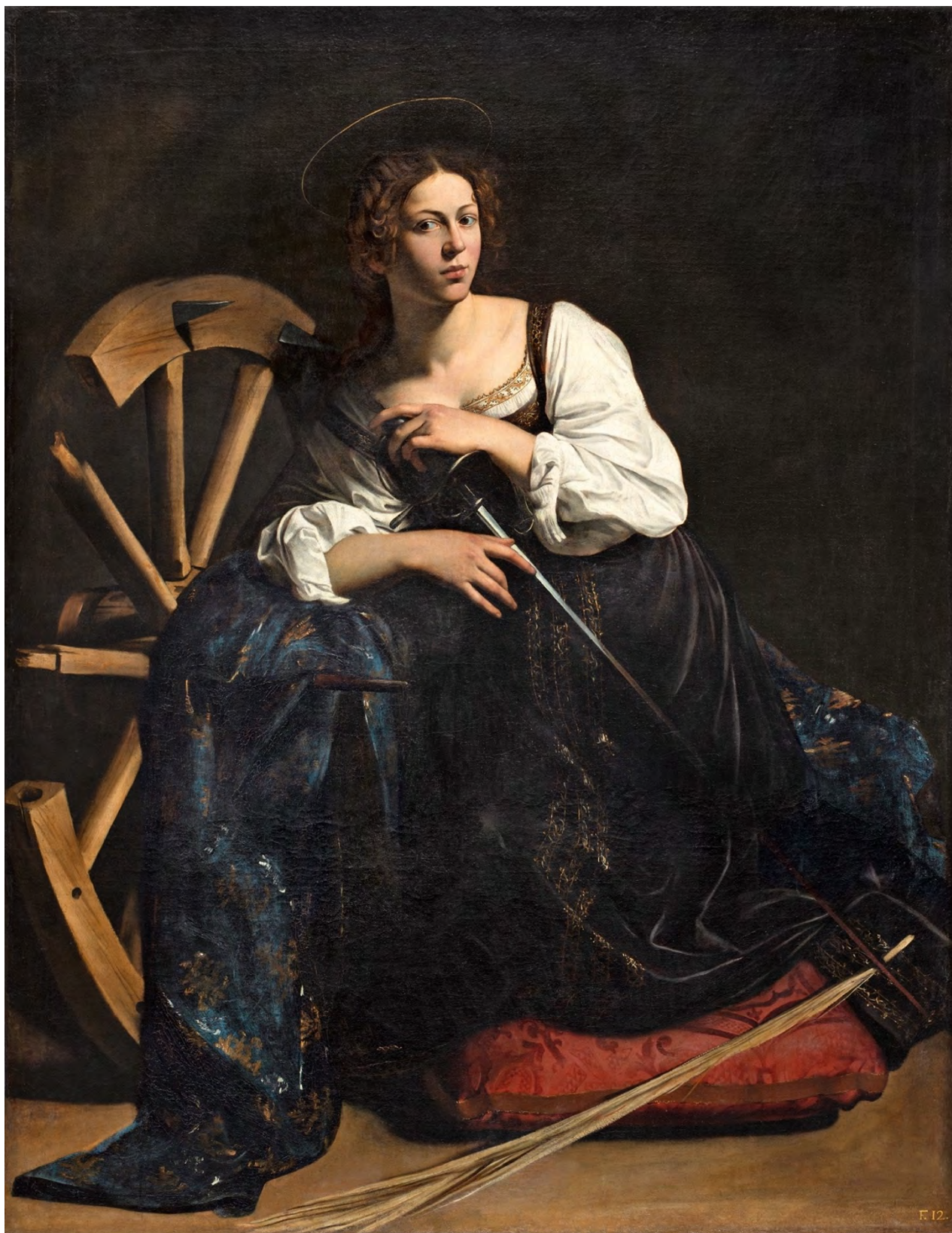
Caravaggio would appear to have used his own face for all three figures and for once its improbable that models were used. Unusually, the fresco was painted in oil on stucco and unlike Leonardo's *Last Supper*, which has deteriorated badly, Caravaggio's has withstood the test of time.



Martha and Mary, 1598, oil on canvas, Detroit Institute of Arts

The attribution to Caravaggio of *Martha and Mary* was doubted up until the mid 1970s, at which time the major world authorities considered it an autograph version. Although most likely painted whilst Caravaggio was still under the protection of Cardinal del Monte, it appears to have been commissioned by Ottavio Costa. The models Anna Bianchini and Fillide Melandroni, were well known courtesans, who frequented the Palazzo Madama, the Cardinal's residence. Fillide is perfectly suited to the dominant role as Mary, with Anna the mousier, but insistent presence as Martha. The writings of the Church Fathers established Mary and Martha as representatives of the active versus the contemplative aspects of the Christian faith.

Is it sunlight pouring through a hole in the roof, that is reflected in the large Venetian convex mirror, representing the light of divine revelation, that Mary Magdalene points to with her left hand; is this the same, or similar hole knocked through in the roof and complained about by one of Caravaggio's landlords. Martha is portrayed in the act of converting Mary from her life of pleasure to the life of virtue by following Christ: items such as the sponzorol, (alabaster bowl of face powder) and comb are there to emphasise Mary's former life. Martha, her face in shadow, leans forward passionately making her case, whilst Mary twirls an orange blossom between her fingers as she holds a mirror, symbolising the life of vanity she is about to give up. The impact of the moment of conversion is captured convincingly on Mary's face.



Saint Catherine of Alexandria, 1598, oil on canvas, Thyssen-Borenem Museum, Madrid

Saint Catherine of Alexandria, the patron saint of libraries, librarians and learning in the Thyssen Collection, was one of Cardinal del Monte's most prized possessions and remained in his collection until after his death in 1627. St Catherine was of Royal descent and Caravaggio conveys this through the richness and beauty of the draperies, of purple-blacks and blues shot through with gold and silver, using the butt end of his brush to create the rich patterns, allowing a red pigment below to shine through; rarely had the artist lavished such care on a dress. The symbols of worldly wealth are juxtaposed with the coarse wooden wheel, its primitive structure and rough textures meticulously detailed. Within this dazzling array of objects a young Roman woman, modelled by Fillide

Mellandroni rendered with intense naturalism, looks at the viewer with a direct and watchful gaze. Unusually for Caravaggio, the beam of light falls from the right of the picture. The sword, whose tip appears as if covered in blood, is the rapier of his own violent times and the martyr's palm lies at her feet. This St Catherine is a disturbingly contemporary woman, surrounded by darkness; she suggests that sense of despair and melancholy that lies beneath the surface of so much late 16th century splendour.



Judith Beheading Holofernes, 1598, oil on canvas, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte, Antica, Rome

Judith Beheading Holofernes, based on the narrative from the Apocrypha, depicts the terrible scene of Judith cutting off the head of the Assyrian Army, captain, Holofernes. As with the other paintings just mentioned, the model was Fillide Mellandroni. Radiographic examination reveals that originally she was bare-breasted. The determined, yet worried look on the executioner's face is more than matched by the old woman, with her vengeful expression and her sunken-in face, undoubtedly inspired by Leonardo's drawing of just such an individual. Caravaggio in turn inspired Artemesia, daughter of Orazio Gentileschi to paint her version. Having been raped as a young girl by Agostino Tassi, an associate of both Caravaggio and her father; she painted several versions, possibly in an attempt to exorcise her hatred of men. Her version, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, painted after Caravaggio had died, was painted c1612, depicts the artist as Judith, demonstrating a no nonsense steely determination.

In 1598, the same year as the completion of Caravaggio's painting, the Trial of the Cenci family commenced. Beatrice Cenci, the second wife of Francesco helped by her daughter Lucrezia and her brother Giacomo, murdered her tyrannical husband. The following year, having been found guilty, the Cenci family were executed in the most barbarous manner, the women beheaded and the son flayed alive. The execution, sanctioned, by Pope Clement VIII, who refused clemency, was attended by the Brothers of Mercy, the Brothers of John the Baptist together with many other confraternities and

crowds of onlookers. And two years later, in 1600 Giordano Bruno, Dominican monk, philosopher, mathematician, poet and Astrologer, one of the greatest intellectual minds of late 16th century Italy, widely travelled and admired throughout Europe, was tried by the Roman Inquisition and burnt at the stake for heresy. He has since gained considerable fame as an originator in the history of free thought and the emerging sciences. How well does this and the *David and Goliath*, complement the extreme violence of the times.



David and Goliath, 1599, oil on canvas, Prado

This gruesome portrayal of another favoured narrative from the Old Testament, *David and Goliath*, painted for an unknown patron, whilst still in the Household of the Cardinal, confirms Caravaggio's

ability to depict naturalistic drama and realism. It was a subject, he returned to again near the end of his life, producing a yet more riveting and grizzly prospect with his own features. On the decapitated head can be seen the wound caused by the stone flung from the catapult. To enable David to transport the head, he is portrayed in the act of fastening a thin rope to Goliath's hair.

This painting, with two others, the first version of *John the Baptist* and *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, were taken to Spain shortly after completion of all three, where they became the paintings that announced Caravaggism. Its thought that these paintings may have been brought from Rome by the Count of Villamediana, who was in Italy between 1611-15 and who according to Caravaggio's biographer Bellori, owned a *David* by Caravaggio; as such they may have been the first paintings to leave Italy. It is first listed in the inventory of the Buen Retiro Palace in Madrid in 1794.



The Martyrdom of St Matthew, 1599, oil on canvas, Contarelli Chapel, Chiesa San Luigi di Francesi.

The Calling of St Matthew and *The Martyrdom of St Matthew* commissioned for the Contarelli Chapel in the Chiesa San Luigi di Francesi heralded a new chapter in Caravaggio's career. It was the greatest ensemble he had yet created and the impact was considerable. The story of the commission is a complex one. Cardinal Contarelli had bought a chapel in the church and wanted it to be suitably decorated and dedicated to his favourite saint. However, he died before the work was completed and his estate proved difficult to administer. Several painters worked on the chapel including the Cavalier d'Arpino, who painted on the vault *The Resurrection of the Daughter of the Queen*. He had also wanted to fresco the sides of the chapel, but later withdrew and the commission fell into Caravaggio's hands. For

such a prestigious commission, there were other painters in Rome apparently better qualified for such a task, but the manoeuvres of his powerful patrons, Cardinal del Monte and Vincenzo Giustiniani won him the commission. Gratiated to receive the commission and bursting with enthusiasm to begin the work, he may also have been intimidated by the challenge.



The Calling of St Matthew, 1599-1600, oil on canvas, Contarelli Chapel, Chiesa San Luigi dei Francesi

In *The Calling of St Matthew*, the scene is set in the court of Ethiopia, whose King had the Saint assassinated during the course of a service. According to the *Legenda Aurea*, King Hirtacus ordered the apostle killed because St Matthew had converted his betrothed to Christianity, who consequently no longer then wished to marry the King. The dying Matthew appears to reject the martyr's palm, a young boy recoils in horror and Caravaggio watches on discretely from the left background. The realism and intensity of the composition was found overwhelming. The intense lighting and deep shadows and sense of chaos add to the drama and tension.

The Vocation or Calling of St Matthew, which stands opposite the Martyrdom, was delivered just a few months later. Caravaggio represented the mystery of the Vocation with a scene from contemporary Roman life, a tax office, in which an excise official is working at his accounts. The shaft of intense (divine) light from the top right of the canvas, enters through an unseen window, high up on the right of the image. The window with shutter open above the scene has been blanked out. Into this stage steps Christ, accompanied by St Peter, pointing imperiously to one of the figures, evoking the scene from the



creation of Adam in the Sistine Chapel, where God has just brought life to him. Yet it is the hand of Adam, not God that Caravaggio has chosen to give to his solemn figure of Christ. According to Andrew Graham-Dixon, this apparent homage to Michelangelo is actually a statement of the artist's independence of thought and the details adds a subtly appropriate layer of meaning to the composition. Caravaggio's Christ becomes a second Adam, made in God's image, but purged of sin, calling Matthew to his redemption: 'For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall be made alive' (1 Corinthians 15:22). The elderly figure with the beard, appearing puzzled as to the identity of who is being called, whether it is he, or his colleague to his right, points to him and looks questioningly at Christ, appearing to look for clarification.

This and the Martyrdom are in many scholar's opinions another milestone in the development of the Baroque. In these two paintings, Caravaggio had confidently demonstrated that the divine could be successfully represented by scenes from everyday life and had shown that a chapel could be decorated with scenes painted on canvas. There were of course objections, but the Contarelli executors were satisfied and the artist was chosen for the Trilogy and he delivered it to their satisfaction.

St Matthew and The Angel, The Inspiration of St Matthew

St Matthew and The Angel, also known as *The Inspiration of St Matthew*, the last altarpiece to be completed was not so straightforward and Caravaggio was required to produce a second version, completed 1601-2, which is now the one facing the viewer in the Contarelli Chapel. Unlike the first version, destroyed in allied bombing during the 2nd World War II, there is now no physical contact.

One can only speculate on how the contemporary viewer would have regarded these paintings, lit only by daylight and candlelight. How radically different they would have appeared in comparison with surrounding works in the Chiesa San Luigi. Here were biblical scenes within the everyday context, story-telling at its most compelling. And artists from Rubens to Bernini would have left the Chapel reinvigorated with what they had witnessed.

It was Caravaggio's ability to convey meaning by seducing the viewer into accepting a picture as the equivalent of a real experience, rather than as an abstracted statement, that lies at the heart of his art and although initially it placed him at odds with the art establishment of his day, his legacy became deeply embedded in much of the painting of the 17th century.

The Italian scholar, connoisseur, critic and art historian Roberto Longhi (1890-1970), compared by Bernard Berenson to none other than Giorgio Vasari with regard to his exceptional contribution to the understanding of Renaissance and Baroque painting, almost single-handedly revived the reputation of Caravaggio. The three seminal paintings of St Matthew in the Contarelli, were all but forgotten until Longhi rediscovered the Trilogy and firmly attributed them to Caravaggio. It was Longhi more than any other scholar, who brought Caravaggio out of the dark and into the light, re-establishing him in his rightful position as the principal instigator of a whole new way of picture making. The mega-exhibitions that Longhi curated in Milan in 1951 and 1953, further reinvigorated interest in Caravaggio's oeuvre and his influence and the more recent exhibitions at the National Gallery have further cemented Caravaggio's position as one of the most influential and best loved of the old masters.



Returning to *The Calling of St Matthew*, the scene of the figures around the table, the three younger and two older, is the basis of the picture-making of the so-called Caravaggisti genre, everyday scenes of men and women sat around a table playing cards, gambling, or carousing with young women.



Soldiers Playing Cards and Dice, The Cheats, 1620, oil on canvas, Valentine de Boulogne, N.G. Washington.

Boulogne was one of the first generation of painters to visit Rome not long after Caravaggio's death in 1610. This painting is typical of many such works. He was joined by other French-born painters, most notably Georges de la Tour and the Utrecht Caravaggisti, Hendrick ter Brugghen, Gerrit van Honthorst and Dirck van Baburen, who all 'saw the light.'