

Caravaggio

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

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

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

He developed a considerable name as an artist, and as a violent, touchy and provocative man. A brawl led to a death sentence for murder and forced him to flee to Naples. There he again established himself as one of the most prominent Italian painters of his generation. He traveled in 1607 to Malta and on to Sicily, and pursued a papal pardon for his sentence. In 1609 he returned to Naples, where he was involved in a violent clash; his face was disfigured and rumours of his death circulated. Questions about his mental state arose from his erratic and bizarre behaviour. He died in 1610 under uncertain circumstances while on his way from Naples to Rome.

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



The **Young Sick Bacchus** is an early self-portrait dated between 1593 and 1594. The painting dates from Caravaggio's first years in Rome following his arrival from his native Milan in mid-1592. Sources for this period are inconclusive and probably inaccurate, but they agree that at one point the artist fell extremely ill and spent six months in the hospital of Santa Maria della Consolazione. According to a 2009 article in the American medical publication *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, the painting indicates that Caravaggio's physical ailment likely involved malaria.

The Fortune Teller (1595) shows a foppishly-dressed boy having his palm read by a gypsy girl. The boy looks pleased as he gazes into her face, and she returns his gaze. Close inspection of the painting reveals what the young man has failed to notice: the girl is removing his ring as she gently strokes his hand. (In the second version the model for the boy is believed to be Caravaggio's companion, the Sicilian painter Mario Minniti.)



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

"When he was shown the most famous statues of Phidias and Glykon in order that he might use them as models, his only answer was to point towards a crowd of people saying that nature had given him an abundance of masters." This passage is often used to demonstrate that the classically trained Mannerist artists of Caravaggio's day disapproved of Caravaggio's insistence on painting from life instead of from copies and drawings made from older masterpieces. However, Bellori ends by saying, "and in these two half-figures [Caravaggio] translated reality so purely that it came to confirm what he said."

The story is probably apocryphal - Bellori was writing more than half a century after Caravaggio's death, and it doesn't appear in Mancini's or in Giovanni Baglione, the two contemporary biographers who had known him - but it does indicate the essence of Caravaggio's revolutionary impact on his contemporaries - beginning with *The Fortune Teller* - which was to replace the Renaissance theory of art as a didactic fiction with art as the representation of real life. That is; his moralising 'storytelling' and Biblical paintings are depicted in contemporary settings, with real people drawn off the street, represented without idealisation, playing the parts.



The Cardsharps (c.1594) shows an expensively-dressed but unworldly boy playing cards with another boy. The second boy, a cardsharp, has extra cards tucked in his belt behind his back, out of sight of the mark but not the viewer, and a sinister older man is peering over the dupe's shoulder and signalling to his young accomplice. The second boy has a dagger handy at his side, and violence is not far away. It was the second such painting Caravaggio created. The first, *The Fortune Teller*, had drawn attention, and this painting extended his reputation, small though it was at this stage. The subjects of *The Fortune Teller* and *The Cardsharps* offered something new, realistic scenes of street life, especially with this

beautifully rendered attention to little details such as the split fingers on the older man's gloves, or the teenage cheat's anxious glance at his master. The psychological insight is equally striking, the three figures bound together by the common drama, yet each with his own unique part within the larger play – for if the innocent is being duped, the other boy is no older, another innocent being corrupted even as he cheats his gull. *Cardsharps*, with its mixture of brutal low-life realism and luminous Venetian delicacy, was much admired, and the painter Prospero Orsi "went around acclaiming (Caravaggio's) new style and heightening the reputation of his work."

The affected pose of **Boy Bitten by a Lizard** (1594–96) may have been the inevitable result of the experiment Caravaggio appears to have been undertaking: observing and recording acute emotions – surprise and fear – in a situation where real surprise was impossible and where the pose had to be held for a considerable period. Critics of Caravaggio's insistence on painting only from life would later point out this limitation of his method: it lent itself to marvellously realistic (if theatrical) static compositions, but not to scenes involving movement and violence. It would only be in his late period, when he seems to have worked more from imagination, that Caravaggio would be able to completely overcome this problem. Nevertheless, *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* is an important work in the artist's early oeuvre precisely because it shows a way out from the airless stillness of very early works such as *Boy Peeling a Fruit* and *Sick Bacchus*, and even the implied violence but actual stasis of pieces such as *The Cardsharps*.



The Lute Player exists in three versions: Badminton House, Gloucestershire, the Wildenstein Collection (both of c.1596) and a later version of c. 1600 in the Hermitage. All show a boy with soft facial features and thick brown hair, accompanying himself on the lute as he sings a madrigal about love. The pose of the boy is identical in all three versions; the differences being in some details, such as the inclusion of different instruments, and in the Badminton House and Hermitage versions of fruit and a vase of flowers, and the overall effect of the lighting.



Wildenstein



Hermitage

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

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



Although virtually identical slight changes in lighting and expression give to each of these feminised and eroticised portraits of a young boy lutenist a distinct emotional impact, from innocent playfulness in the earlier versions to a hint of wistful sadness in the later.

Bacchus of 1595 shows a youthful god reclining in classical fashion with grapes and vine leaves in his hair, fingering the drawstring of his loosely draped robe. On a stone table in front of him is a bowl of fruit and a large carafe of red wine. He holds out a shallow goblet of the same wine, inviting the viewer to join him.

Bacchus, also known as Dionysus was the Greek god of wine, inebriation, fertility and theatre. He is known to be joyous and kind to those who admire him, yet cruel and mischievous to those who cross him. Scenes from Greek mythology were often found in the homes of aristocrats, classical images being used to depict the patrons interests or triumphs. The patron may have valued the finer things in life and saw Bacchus as the perfect allegory for wealth and excess.

The model for *Bacchus* might have been Caravaggio's pupil and lover, Mario Minniti, although some critics, suggest that Caravaggio used himself as the model. Bacchus is offering the wine with his left hand, despite the obvious effort this is causing the model. This has led to speculation that Caravaggio used a mirror to assist himself while working from life, doing away with the need for drawing. It is believed that Caravaggio was unable to paint the human figure without a model in front of him. In this sensual scene Caravaggio is inviting the viewer to succumb to their carnal desires. Caravaggio was known for staging scenes, including the models and painting them in costume, doing away with the need to sketch the scene from his imagination before applying paint to canvas.



The boy is youthful and handsome, round yet muscular. He barely makes an attempt to keep his robes on as, with a suggestive look in his eye, he invites the viewer into the scene with a glass of wine and a basket of ripe fruits. In the basket there is a bursting pomegranate as well as a rotting apple. Caravaggio uses these elements together to hint at the Vanitas theme. Youth and pleasure are fleeting. Everything must succumb to death and rot. It is also possible that the rotting apple simply represents fermentation, suggesting not only that fermentation is literally rot, but also that improper methods of fermentation lead to the personification of rot.

Bacchus was painted shortly after Caravaggio joined the household of his first important patron, Cardinal Del Monte, and reflects the humanist interests of the Cardinal's educated circle. Caravaggio moved into the Palazzo Madama in 1596 and remained a guest of the cardinal for five years. Del Monte held a passion for the arts and requested multiple paintings from Caravaggio including *Medusa*. The cardinal was a fan of classical Greek mythology and used allegorical images to emphasize his knowledge of art, music, and theatre. Del Monte's early support and guidance brought wealth and recognition to Caravaggio, making him one his most important patrons.

The homoeroticism felt in the painting could be Caravaggio alluding to his own romantic feelings for the young model in the painting. In the sixteenth century, having homosexual relationships with young boys was not condemned. Many of Caravaggio's patrons and fellow artists turned a blind eye to his behaviour and continued to support his work. Art historian, Donald Posner, felt that the homoeroticism in the painting was actually alluding to Cardinal Del Monte's sexuality and his relationships with the young boys that ran in his inner circle.

Painter and rival of Caravaggio, Giovanni Baglione (1566 – 1643) believed that this image of Bacchus is actually a self portrait. He argues that Caravaggio positioned a mirror in front of himself while he painted the scene. Baglione is considered to be part of the Caravaggisti, a group of artists and art appreciators who followed Caravaggio and attempted to defend and even emulate his style. Though Baglione emulated Caravaggio's style, he hated him and wrote a scathing biography of him. The two artists loathed each other and constantly accused each other of inappropriate behaviour. It is thought that Baglione's hatred was a product of jealousy therefore leading him to accuse Caravaggio, in his book *The Lives of Painters, Sculptors, Architects and Engravers, active from 1572–1642* of being unable to paint portraits without a model. He claims that Caravaggio did not possess the talent to conjure up perfect beings in his mind and transfer them to canvas.



Basket of Fruit (c.1599) shows a wicker basket perched on the edge of a ledge. The basket contains a selection of summer fruit: Much has been made of the worm-eaten, insect-predated, and generally less than perfect condition of the fruit. In line with the culture of the age, the general theme appears to revolve about the fading beauty, and the natural decaying of all things. Scholars also describe the basket of fruit as a metaphor of the Church.

The basket seems to teeter on the edge of the picture-space, in danger of falling out of the painting and into the viewer's space instead. Trompe l'oeil seems to be almost the whole purpose of the painting, if we subtract the possible didactic element. But the single element that no

doubt attracted its original owner, and still catches attention today, is the extraordinary quasi-photographic realism of the observation which underlies the illusionism.

Penitent Magdalene c 1594-5 portrays a repentant Mary Magdalene, bowed over in penitent sorrow as she leaves behind her dissolute life, its trappings abandoned beside her. At the time of its completion the painting was unconventional for its contemporary realism and departure from traditional Magdalene iconography. The painting depicts a young brunette, squatting or kneeling on a low chair, with her hands cradled in her lap. By her side is a collection of jewellery and a stoppered bottle of liquid, nearly three-quarters full. Her gaze is averted from the viewer, her head turned downward in a position that has been compared to traditional portrayals of the crucified Jesus Christ. A single tear runs down one cheek to the side of her nose.

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



Caravaggio was known to have used several prostitutes as models for his works, and historians have speculated that the prostitute Anna Bianchini is featured in this and other paintings. In his controversial biography *M* (2001), Peter Robb suggested that the realism of the piece and the subtle hints of violence he perceived—broken pearls and the subject's swollen face and hands—might suggest a political

dimension, a commentary on the mistreatment of courtesans in Caravaggio's time by police in Rome. Based on records from Bianchini's life, Robb speculates that Bianchini might have been publicly whipped in the custom of the day. The ointment in the jar, a traditional attribute of the Magdalene, here used to treat her injury.

Decades after the painting's completion, 17th-century art biographer Gian Pietro Bellori suggested that Caravaggio had feigned religious imagery by adding items associated with Mary Magdalene—a carafe of oil and discarded jewellery—to an otherwise modern genre scene. However, jesuit poet Giuseppe Silos evidently did not regard the work as feigned spirituality. Rather, in his *Pinacotheca sive Romana pictura et sculptura*, published in 1673, he praised it and its painter elaborately:

We can see the silent remorse hidden in her conscience, and in the depths of her heart she is burned by a secret flame. Certainly Caravaggio's colours are so lively as to reveal even her most intimate sentiments. A rare bird is that painter who can so clearly expose in a mere image that which is hidden in the blind darkness of the conscience.



The second version of the **Medusa** (c.1597), commissioned as a commemoration shield by Cardinal Francesco Maria Del Monte, depicts the exact moment when she was decapitated by Perseus, using a shield given to him by Athena.

Medusa, along with her two sisters was a Gorgon, a powerful mythical creature in ancient Greek mythology. She was cursed and turned into a venomous monster by the Greek goddess Athena; and described as a female woman with bronze hands and golden wings, with countless venomous snakes in place of her hair. Anyone who looked or even so much as glanced at her, would be instantly turned to stone. Perseus avoided this fate by using the shield as a mirror.

Caravaggio plays with the concept by replacing Medusa's face with his own, as an indication of his immunity to her dreadful gaze. Due to its bizarre and intricate design, the painting is said to complement

Caravaggio's fascination with violence and realism. The decapitated head still appears conscious as the painting captures its final moments in silence before being defeated. portraying an appalling visage as blood pours down in streaks, the mouth hangs wide open baring teeth and with brows creased and bulging eyes.

The idea of Caravaggio to use a convex panel to imitate a shield, and to paint the image as a reflection of Medusa appearing in the shield, as if from Perseus' point of view – at the moment before he kills her – introduces a heightened level of tenebrism and realism – creating a three-dimensional appearance. Medusa's cheeks and jawline are elongated to complement the nature of the painting.

Tenebrism, from Italian *tenebroso* ("dark, gloomy, mysterious"), also occasionally called **dramatic illumination**, is a style of painting using especially pronounced chiaroscuro, where there are violent contrasts of light and dark, and where darkness becomes a dominating feature of the image. The technique was developed to add drama to an image through a spotlight effect, and is common in Baroque painting's. Tenebrism is used only to obtain a dramatic impact while chiaroscuro is a broader term, also covering the use of less extreme contrasts of light to enhance the illusion of three-dimensionality. Caravaggio is generally credited with the invention of the style, although this technique was used by earlier artists such as Albrecht Dürer, Tintoretto and El Greco. The term is usually applied to artists from the seventeenth century onward. Artemisia Gentileschi, a rare female artist of the Baroque and a follower of Caravaggio, was an outstanding exponent of tenebrism.

Tenebrism is sometimes applied to other seventeenth-century painters in what has been called the "candlelight tradition". These include such as Georges de La Tour, who painted many works illuminated with a single candle,

The term is somewhat vague, and tends to be avoided by modern art historians.



Caravaggio,
*Saint John the Baptist
in the Wilderness*

1604



Judith Beheading Holofernes 1599–1602 depicts a Biblical scene from the Book of Judith, which tells how Judith served her people by charming and seducing the Assyrian General, Holofernes in his tent, as he was about to destroy her city of Bethulia, by getting him drunk, seizing his sword, and decapitating him.

Caravaggio's approach was, typically, to choose the moment of greatest dramatic impact: the instant of decapitation itself. The figures are set out in a shallow stage, theatrically lit from the side, isolated against the inky black background. Judith's maid Abra stands beside her mistress to the right as Judith extends her arm to hold a blade against Holofernes's neck; lying on his stomach,

neck contorted as he turns his head towards his assassin, he is vulnerable. X-rays have revealed that Caravaggio adjusted the placement of Holofernes' head as he proceeded, separating it slightly from the torso and moving it minutely to the right. The faces of the three characters demonstrate the artist's mastery of emotion, Judith's countenance in particular showing a mix of determination and repulsion. Artemisia Gentileschi and others were deeply influenced by this work; while they even surpassed Caravaggio's physical realism, it has been argued that none matched his capture of Judith's psychological ambivalence.

Judith, young, beautiful, and physically weak, draws back distastefully as she seizes Holofernes's hair and cleaves through his neck with his own sword. Holofernes, on his bed, powerful but drunk, nude, and bellowing helplessly, has frozen in the futile struggle of his last instant of consciousness. The bloodthirsty old servant, popeyed as she strains forward, clutches the bag in readiness for the disembodied head. It is a ghastly image, with primary interest in the protagonists' states of mind: the old woman's grim satisfaction, Holofernes's shock, and Judith's sense of determination. Caravaggio intensifies the body language not only in the poses, gestures, and facial expressions but also in the clenched hands.

If the figures have become static, they continue to be made of convincingly solid flesh, displacing space. But the voids around them are at least as black and two-dimensional as they are empty and three-dimensional.

The Calling of Saint Matthew (1599-1600) depicts the moment at which Jesus Christ calls Matthew to follow him. Similar to his treatment of Paul in the *Conversion on the Way to Damascus*, Caravaggio chronicles the moment when a daily routine is interrupted by the miraculous. Matthew the tax collector is seated at a table with four other men. Jesus Christ and Saint Peter have entered the room, and Jesus is pointing at Matthew. A beam of light illuminates the faces of the men at the table who are looking at Jesus Christ.



There is some debate over which man in the picture is Saint Matthew, as the surprised gesture of the bearded man at the table can be read in two ways, either as pointing at himself, as if to ask "Me?" in response to Christ's summons; or as in a more recent interpretation that the bearded man is in fact pointing at the young man at the end of the table, whose head is slumped. In this reading, the bearded man is asking "Him?" in response to Christ's summons, and the painting is depicting the moment immediately before a young Matthew raises his head to see Christ. Other writers describe the painting as deliberately ambiguous.

In this painting, the gloom and the canvassed window appears to situate the table indoors. Christ brings the true light to the dark space of the sitting tax-collectors. This painting records the collision of two worlds — the ineluctable power of the immortal faith, and the mundane, foppish, world of Levi. Jesus spears him with a beam of light, with an apparent effortless hand gesture he exerts an inescapable sublime gravity. Jesus' bare feet are classical simplicity in contrast with the dandified accountants; being barefoot may also symbolize holiness, as if one is on holy ground. The unperceptive or unperturbed bystanders surround the man, Levi, who is to become Matthew the disciple.

Caravaggio's audience would have seen the similarity between the gesture of Jesus as he points towards Matthew, and the gesture of God as he awakens Adam in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. Following the line of Christ's left arm, it seems that Matthew is being invited to follow him into the world at large. The position of Christ's hand reflects that of Adam's in the Sistine Chapel; the Church considered Christ to be the second Adam.



Amor Vincit Omnia (1601-02) shows Amor, the Roman Cupid, wearing dark eagle wings, half-sitting on or perhaps climbing down from what appears to be a table. Scattered around are the emblems of all human endeavours – violin and lute, armour, coronet, square and compasses, pen and manuscript, bay leaves, and flower, tangled and trampled under Cupid's foot. The painting illustrates the line from Virgil's *Eclogues*, *Omnia Vincit Amor et nos cedamus amori* ("Love conquers all; let us all yield to love!").

The subject was common for the age. Caravaggio's treatment is remarkable for the realism of his Cupid – where other depictions show an idealized, almost generic, beautiful boy, Caravaggio's Cupid is highly individual, charming but not at all beautiful, all crooked teeth and crooked grin: one feels that one would recognize him in the street. The shock of the Caravaggio, quite apart from the dramatic chiaroscuro lighting and the photographic clarity, is the mingling of the allegorical and the real, this sense it gives of a child who is having a thoroughly good time dressing up in stage-prop wings with a bunch of arrows and having his picture painted.

The painter Orazio Gentileschi lent Caravaggio the wings as props to be used in the painting, and this allows fairly precise dating of 1602–03. It was an immediate success in the circles of Rome's intellectual and cultural elite. A poet immediately wrote three madrigals about it, and another wrote a Latin epigram in which it was first coupled with the Virgilian phrase *Omnia Vincit Amor*. Inevitably, much scholarly and non-scholarly ink has been spilled over the alleged eroticism of the painting. Yet the homoerotic content was perhaps not so apparent to Giustiniani's generation as it has become today. Naked boys could be seen on any riverbank or seashore, and the eroticization of children is very much a cultural artefact of the present-day rather than Caravaggio's. The German historian Joachim von Sandrart (1606-88) described *Amor* as "A life-size Cupid after a boy of about twelve...[who] has large brown eagle's wings, drawn so correctly and with such strong coloring, clarity and relief that it all comes to life." Richard Symonds, an English visitor to Rome about 1649/51, recorded the Cupid as being "ye body and face of his (Caravaggio's) own boy or servant that (sic) laid with him".



In 1602, a painting **Divine and Profane Love** was commissioned from **Giovanni Baglione**, showing Divine Love separating a juvenile Cupid on the ground in the lower right corner (profane love) from a Lucifer in the left corner. Its style was thoroughly derivative of Caravaggio (who had recently emerged as a rival for Church commissions) and a clear challenge to the recent *Amor*, and the younger painter, Caravaggio, bitterly protested at what he saw as plagiarism. Taunted by one of Caravaggio's friends, Baglione responded with a second version, in which the devil was given Caravaggio's face. Thus began a long and vicious quarrel which was to have unforeseeable ramifications for Caravaggio decades after his death when the unforgiving Baglione became his first biographer.

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

hands and feet are bleeding. The apostle is practically naked, which emphasizes his vulnerability. He is an old man, with a grey beard and a bald head, but his ageing body is still muscular, suggesting considerable strength. His eyes do not look at the executioners but with a forlorn expression he makes an effort to rise from the cross turning his whole body, as if he wants to look towards something that is in the future and outside of the picture; maybe the angel of death which will take him up to Heaven.



The lifting of the cross requires the efforts of three men. One is pulling it up with ropes while his helpers try to raise the heavy equipment with their arms and shoulders. The yellow-breeched workman, who is crouching under the cross, grabs a shovel that was used to dig a hole into the rocky ground for the stake. The whole process seems disorganized and chaotic as if the sudden heaviness of the cross caught the executioners off-guard. Their faces are largely shielded from the viewer making them characterless executors of an unjust act ordered by an invisible authority. The background of the scene looks like a wall of impenetrable darkness but it is in fact a cliff of rock. This is an allusion to the meaning of Peter's name in the gospel of Saint Matthew: the "rock" upon which Christ declared his Church to be built.

The most striking feature of the painting is its pronounced realism: the saint is "very much the poor fisherman from Bethsaida, and the executioners, their hands heavily veined and reddened, their feet dusty, are toiling workmen", says historian Helen Langdon. This was

the beginning of a new phase in Caravaggio's art where he concentrated on the Christian ethos of humility and salvation through suffering.

The ***Conversion of Saint Paul on the Road to Damascus*** (1601) is a companion piece to the *Crucifixion of Saint Peter*, the two paintings hanging on opposite sides of an altarpiece by Annibale Carracci.

The conversion of Paul from persecutor to apostle is a well-known biblical story: Saul of Tarsus was a zealous Pharisee, who intensely persecuted the followers of Jesus, participating in the stoning of Stephen. He was on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus to arrest the Christians of the city.

"As he went he drew near Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?' He said, 'Who are You, Lord?' The Lord said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.'"



The painting depicts this moment recounted in the Acts of the Apostles, except that Caravaggio has Saul falling off a horse (which is not mentioned in the story) on the road to Damascus, seeing a blinding light and hearing the voice of Jesus. For Saul this is a moment of intense religious ecstasy: he is lying on the ground, supine, eyes shut, with his legs spread and his arms raised upward as if embracing his vision. The saint is a muscular young man, his garment looking like a Renaissance version of a Roman soldier's attire: with armour, tunic and boots. His plumed helmet falls off his head and his sword is lying by his side. The red cape almost looks like a blanket under his body. The horse is passing over him led by an old groom, who points his finger at the ground. He has calmed down the animal, and now prevents it treading upon Saul. The huge steed has a mottled brown and cream fur. Still foaming at the mouth its hoof is hanging in the air.

The scene is lit by a strong light but the three figures are engulfed by an almost impenetrable darkness. A few faint rays on the right evoke Jesus' epiphany but these are not the real source of the lighting, and the groom remains seemingly oblivious to the presence of the divine. Because the skewbald horse is unsaddled, it is suggested that the scene takes place in a stable instead of an open landscape.

Although some details and motifs may have been borrowed or inspired by other artworks, it is important to note that the pared-down composition and the intense spiritual drama of the *Conversion* was a novelty without any direct iconographic precedent at the time. It represented a break with the tradition that even Caravaggio's own previous version more or less followed.

Caravaggio's style of tenebrism, where forms in paintings emerge from a dark background with usually

one source of stark light, creates dramatic effects with its strong contrasts, evoking heightened spiritual drama. The brighter areas are juxtaposed with "heavy dark patches, especially deep beneath the horse's belly and extending into impenetrable darkness that lies outside and beyond the circular grouping of the three figures". The usual landscape background was dismissed entirely and replaced with an intense concentration on the three figures who compose the scene. The strong light and the enveloping darkness makes this focus even more intense.

The unusual placement of the characters also served to convey the intensity of the moment. Although Saul gets the most light, the attention is given to him in a strange way. Lying on the ground, he is much smaller than the horse, which is also at the centre of the painting. Paul's body is foreshortened, and is not facing the viewer, and yet his presence is the most powerful because of his body is pushing into the viewer's space. The position of the horse and especially the front leg, which is hanging in the air, serves to increase the visual tension. The relative absence of drawings by Caravaggio indicates that he worked directly on the canvas or panel without the use of preliminary sketches. The first compositional draft of the painting, revealed by the X-ray examination, was a more traditional composition with a visible source of divine radiance coming from the left.



Supper at Emmaus (1601) depicts the moment in the Gospel of Luke 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. Cleopas wears the scallop shell of a pilgrim, while Luke wears torn clothes. In a bravura exercise of perspective Cleopas gesticulates wildly at the moment of recognition, extending his right arm into deep space; the other, in an echo of Christ's outstretched arm in blessing of the repast, 'perforates' the picture surface, as if reaching out of the frame and into the space of the viewer. Luke is about to rise in amazement out of his seat. The standing groom, forehead smooth and face in shadow, appears oblivious to the event. The painting is unusual for the life-sized

figures, and the dark and blank background. On the table is a meal laid out as a still-life. Like the world these apostles knew, the basket of food teeters perilously over the edge.

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

The **Incredulity of Saint Thomas** (c.1602) shows the episode that gave rise to the term "Doubting Thomas" which had been frequently represented in Christian art since at least the 5th century, and used to make a variety of theological points. Thomas the Apostle having been told of Jesus's re-appearance said "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." A week later Jesus appeared and told Thomas to touch Him and stop doubting. Then Jesus said, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."



The painting is theatrical in its enveloping darkness, with light from an external source streaming into the image from the left hand side, and leading the viewer in a circular motion to Jesus exposed chest, spotlighting the action then to Thomas, who's face shows surprise as Jesus holds his hand and guides it into the wound. Where other artists would have bathed Jesus's face in the light of his newly divine status Caravaggio chooses to leave it shadow, in a mysterious darkness. All three apostles are portrayed as rustic materialists without imagination or tact.

Caravaggio was painstaking in his attention to veristic detail, for example, the ripped seam on the

shoulder of Thomas's garment (indicating his poor faith rather than his poverty, and the tussle between his doubt and his desire to believe), the depiction of marks on Jesus' chest and Thomas's clearly shown dirty fingernails. Although this was a popular subject throughout the Renaissance and Baroque, Caravaggio's gory emphasis on Thomas's ruddy fingers sticking into Christ's wound and displacing the surrounding skin is original.



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

Caravaggio led a tumultuous life. He was notorious for brawling, even in a time and place when such behaviour was commonplace, and the transcripts of his police records and trial proceedings fill many pages and he was often arrested and jailed, once for beating a nobleman with a club and 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. Bellori claims that around 1590–1592, Caravaggio, already well known for brawling with gangs of young men, committed a murder which forced him to flee from Milan, first to Venice and then to Rome. Caravaggio's gravest problem began on 29 May 1606, when he killed Ranuccio Tommasoni, a gangster from a wealthy family, in a duel with swords. The two had argued many times, often ending in blows. The circumstances are unclear: one theory being that Tommasoni was pimping a well known prostitute and a favourite model of Caravaggio's, and that the killing may have been an unintentional consequence of castration by the artist with his sword.

This time Caravaggio's patrons were unable to protect him and he was sentenced to beheading for murder, and an open bounty was decreed enabling anyone who recognized him to legally carry the sentence out. He was forced to flee Rome, moving out of the city, then to Naples, Malta and Sicily. From this time Caravaggio's paintings were done virtually on the run as he fled from further accusations and threats of imprisonment. In his paintings he began to obsessively depict severed heads.

Caravaggio had escaped from prison on Malta in 1608, fleeing to Syracuse. There his Roman companion Mario Minniti helped him get a commission for an altarpiece, the *Burial of Saint Lucy* painted for the Franciscan church of Santa Lucia al Sepolcro. The choice of subject was driven by the fact that St. Lucy was the patron saint of Syracuse and had been interred below the church. The subject was unusual, but especially important to the local authorities, who were eager to reinforce the local cult of St. Lucy, which had sustained a setback with the theft of her remains during the Middle Ages.

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



In a composition which broke new ground, Caravaggio managed to convey her proverbial gentleness by a variety of means: the soft, generalized and still features of her pale face seem in tune with the restrained but reverential sadness of the background mourners but also generate an added poignancy by contrast with the urgent movements of the colossal gravediggers, whose rhythmic activity threatens to efface her image in a matter of seconds. As Walter Friedlaender in his groundbreaking monograph, *Caravaggio Studies* (1955) has noted the subject of her burial is an extremely unusual one; artists more frequently used the explicitly sensational image of the saint holding her gouged-out eyes on a platter.

But the choice of the burial as Caravaggio's theme enabled him to construct a composition in which movement and stillness, physical power and spiritual presence interact with effective precision.



The greatly increased space within which the figures are located has a similar effect to that produced by *The Beheading of St. John the Baptist*, the void acting as an echo chamber to the strained emotions and brutal deeds of the protagonists.



In this unidealised painting of dentistry, the *Tooth Puller* (1609), the patient is caught in an unflattering position grabbing the chair with one hand, reinforcing the pain he's feeling, and the dentist's concentration is visible in his brow and clenched jaw. The imperfections of the onlookers' skin and the dirt on their clothes is shown in detail giving them a very ordinary appearance. The attribution to Caravaggio has been questioned but it is typical of his late style, specifically of his Maltese stay in 1607-08 and it is now generally accepted as by him.



The immediate inspiration for Caravaggio's *David with the Head of Goliath* (1609 or 10) 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 dripping 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").

The decision to depict David as pensive, "his expression mingling sadness and compassion," rather than jubilant creates an unusual psychological bond between him and Goliath, further complicated by the fact that Caravaggio has depicted himself as Goliath, while the model for David is possibly *il suo Caravaggino* ("his own little Caravaggio"), the artist's studio assistant in Rome some years previously, recorded as the boy "who lay with him."

Another reading is that David represents the artist in the innocence of his youth, slaying the older Caravaggio. The biographical interest of the painting adds another layer of meaning to an already complex work, David and Goliath standing for Christ and Satan and the triumph of good over evil in orthodox Christian iconography of the period, and also as the cold-hearted beloved who "kills" his lover according to contemporary literary conceit.

The Denial of Saint Peter (1610) is generally thought to be one of the last two works by Caravaggio, the other being the *Martyrdom of Saint Ursula*. According to the gospels he was accused at three separate confrontations of being a disciple of Jesus. Peter denied each and thus fulfilled Christ's prophecy that before the cock crowed he would deny him thrice.

The head and hands of Peter are lit by an external source. The soldier turns away from the light, thereby casting a shadow on the face of his other accuser. Even



so Peter's hand gesture and the tilt of his head communicate his denial, while his agitated expression indicates the profound anxiety and apprehension of his troubled mind.

Death

In October 1609, Caravaggio was attacked by assailants at the Osteria del Cerriglio tavern in Naples, led by Giovanni Rodomonte Roero, the Conte della Vezza. It seems he never fully recovered from the attack and this is evidenced by broad brushwork and an unfocused quality to the work. Caravaggio crops the figures closely and smothers large areas in shadow in order to avoid any awkward depictions of human physicality. His paintings also represented a psychological intensity which was common in his later work.

The *David With the Head of Goliath* may have been sent to his patron, the unscrupulous art-loving Cardinal Scipione Borghese, nephew of the pope, who had the power to grant or withhold pardons. Caravaggio hoped Borghese could mediate a pardon, in exchange for works by the artist.

News from Rome encouraged Caravaggio, and in the summer of 1610 he took a boat northwards to receive the pardon, which seemed imminent thanks to his powerful Roman friends. With him were three last paintings, the gifts for Cardinal Scipione. What happened next is the subject of much confusion and conjecture, shrouded in much mystery; what seems most certain is that he had died of fever on his way from Naples to Rome. However, rumours abounded at the time and has been a matter of historical debate and study since. Some held that either the Tommasoni 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 food. Some scholars have argued that Caravaggio was actually attacked and killed by the same "enemies" that had been pursuing him since he fled Malta, possibly Wignacourt and/or factions of the Knights.

Human remains found in a church in Porto Ercole in 2010 are believed to almost certainly belong to Caravaggio. The findings come after a year-long investigation using DNA, carbon dating and other analyses. Initial tests suggested Caravaggio might have died of lead poisoning—paints used at the time contained high amounts of lead salts—and may have been the cause of his violent behaviour. Later research concluded he died as the result of a wound sustained in a brawl in Naples, specifically from sepsis.

Sexuality

Caravaggio never married and had no known children. His sexuality has been the subject of much speculation: due largely to the absence of even a single female nude in his oeuvre, and the predominance of feminised male nudes it has generally been assumed that he was homosexual. The cabinet-pieces from the Del Monte period are replete with "full-lipped, languorous boys ... who seem to solicit the onlooker with their offers of fruit, wine, flowers—and themselves" suggesting an erotic interest in the male form. His friend, collaborator and model for his earlier works, Mario Minniti, may have been



a lover; also another of his models, Cecco di Caravaggio, lived with the artist in Rome and stayed with him even after he was obliged to leave the city in 1606. On the other hand a connection with a certain Lena is mentioned in a 1605 court deposition by Pasqualone, where she is described as "Michelangelo's girl". According to G.B. Passeri, this 'Lena' was Caravaggio's model for the *Madonna di Loreto*; and according to Catherine Puglisi, 'Lena' may have been the same person as the courtesan Maddalena di Paolo Antognetti, who named Caravaggio as an "intimate friend" by her own testimony in 1604. Caravaggio was also rumoured to be madly in love with Fillide Melandroni, a well known Roman courtesan who rose amongst the ranks of prostitutes to become one of the most sought-after women in Rome. She modelled for him in several important paintings, including Judith in *Judith Beheading Holofernes*. She was allegedly (by some authorities) the subject of the quarrel between Caravaggio and Ranuccio Tomassoni, which led to the latter's death and Caravaggio's flight from Rome.

Reputation

Although in demand during his lifetime Caravaggio's reputation suffered early on from negative criticism, from Bellori's 1672 reference to the *Conversion of Saint Paul* as "completely bereft of action" to the art historian Jacob Burckhardt in his traveller's guide to painting in Italy (1855) which gives as example the *Conversion of Saint Paul* on how "coarse" the compositions of Caravaggio were "when he did not care for expression", criticising that "the horse nearly fills the whole of the picture".

His reputation reached its lowest point in the second half of the 19th century. The most popular travel guides of the period, published Karl Baedeker, in their very detailed descriptions of Santa Maria del Popolo, failed to mention the *Crucifixion of Saint Peter* and the *Conversion of Saint Paul*.

The English art critic, Roger Fry in his *Transformations* (1927) says that the *Conversion of Saint Paul on the Road to Damascus* is a combination of melodrama and photographic realism which is typical of the religious paintings of Caravaggio. "The original design of man and horse is not without merit, despite the triviality of observation and insistence on details for their illusive effect, but the whole design comes to pieces when St. Paul is thus wilfully pushed into the scene and the parts have no longer any significance in relation to the whole." Even Bernard Berenson, probably the greatest authority on Italian Renaissance painting in the first half of the 20th century, in 1953 called the painting a charade:

"Nothing more incongruous than the importance given to horse over rider, to dumb beast over saint. Surely more picaresque than holy."

Opinions changed again fundamentally in the middle of the 20th century when Caravaggio was recognized as one of the greatest painters in the history of Western art. Roberto Longhi, who brought his name forward in the 1950s, wrote in 1952 that completely sweeping away the iconographical tradition of the time, Caravaggio offered for public view "what is perhaps the most revolutionary painting in the history of religious art. [...] Were it not for the fact that the painting was placed on a side wall, we might wonder how Caravaggio could have had it put on public exhibition without encountering severe criticism, or even an outright rejection."

Another leading scholar at the time, Walter Friedlaender in his groundbreaking monograph, *Caravaggio Studies* (1955) used the analysis of the *Conversion of Saint Paul* as an introduction to the art of Caravaggio. He emphasized that both paintings of the Cerasi Chapel "were, in spite of their radically new and unaccustomed conceptions, perfectly fit objects for devotional meditation", because the scenes "are not remote spectacles, far separated from the spectator. They speak directly to him, on his own level. He can understand and share their experiences: the awakening of faith, and the martyrdom of faith."

The English poet Thom Gunn (highly regarded by British critics in the 1950s) in a poem titled *In Santa Maria del Popolo ('The Conversion of St. Paul')* gave an entirely secular reading of the painting, devoid of anything sacred, interpreting it as "the defeat of a yearning for the Absolute which is inevitably denied to man [...], as a sort of defeated Faust."

Further reading:

Many articles and essays, artworks and video talks are available via links on the Wikipedia Caravaggio page.