

Caravaggio

1573-1610

The first modern painter

Michelangelo Merisi

- Born in Caravaggio near Bergamo in 1573, the son of Fermo, (died 1584) court architect to the Duke of Bergamo. His brother Battista acted as his guardian.
- Apprenticed to **Simone Peterzano**, perhaps a pupil of Titian, and was possibly in Rome between 1585 and 1590, and discovered the Lombard masters, in turn influenced by Venetian, and in particular, Brescian ‘luminism’
- The bright light emanating from ‘outside’ the picture is a Northern invention, which creates form and the illusion of space.
- He eventually rebelled and moved to Milan for possibly four or five years before arriving in Rome to work independently at about the age of 18-20..
- His first 10 years in Rome were difficult - he produced three portrait heads a day for a few silver coins for a hack painter **Lorenzo Siciliano**, the **Cavalier d’Arpino**, and performed menial tasks for a variety of priests, priors and a picture dealer, **Valentino**.
- Through him, he met **Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monti**, who was impressed by the boy and took him to his household in Palazzo Madama, around 1594, where he remained until 1600.

Michelangelo Merisi

- For **Pandolfo Pucci da Recanati**, a beneficed priest at St Peters' he produced a number of paintings, including the "Boy Bitten by a Lizard". 'The Bacchus with a bunch of Grapes' (the so called 'Sick Bacchus'), and the 'Boy with a Basket of Fruit' (some are know to us by later copies). These include self portraits and portraits of his friends and studio assistants.
- In **Cavalier d'Arpino's** workshop he was set to paint baskets of fruit and flowers, but later rebelled and abandoned d'Arpino because he wanted to devote himself to figure painting. These early paintings already reveal a fully original talent, drawing scenes from everyday life by posing and depicting the people around him with a startling realism ("The Card Sharps", The Fortune Teller"). He did away with preparatory studies and composed directly onto the canvas.
- It was under the patronage of **Cardinal Del Monte** that Caravaggio was able to develop his art to maturity. The great works he produced for San Luigi dei Francesi and Sta Maria del Popolo mark the arrival of a seriously original and startling new talent.
- The immediacy of these paintings lies in the proximity of the artist to his subject, giving us the sensation of participating in the scene. Every detail is a perfect study in itself, and nothing is left unresolved. Every inch of the canvas is worked up to perfect resolution, and there is absolutely no spatial ambiguity about the positions of limbs, fingers or draperies.
- Colour is used rich and vibrant and clings closely to the local surfaces which it describes.
- Texture is attended to and varied as required,
- But above all lighting is used to perfection for dramatic effect and there is a perfect harmony between drawing, colour, composition, surface texture, spatial articulation, drama and psychological effect.
- If ever there was a 'painter's painter' it is Caravaggio.

The Sick Bacchus, c. 1590

Galleria Borghese, Rome



- Oil on Canvas, 66 x 52 cm
- Probably a self-portrait aged about 22, while recovering from malaria at the Ospedale della Consolazione, and experimenting with light effects.
- Confiscated from the Cavalier d'Arpino in payment of tax arrears by Pope Paul V in 1607 and given to his Cardinal-nephew, Scipione Borghese.
- Sedlmayr interprets the theme as a self portrait of the artist under the sign of Saturn (melancholy)

Boy with a Basket of Fruit, c.1591

Galleria Borghese, Rome



- Oil on Canvas, 70 x 67cm
- Appears to be one of the first works painted in Rome.
- Possibly a portrait of his studio assistant Mario Minniti from Sicily
- Appears in the list of works sequestered from the Cavalier d'Arpino's workshop in 1607.
- Berra interprets the painting as a depiction of Vertumnus, Roman God of change and transformation.

Boy with a Basket of Fruit, c.1591

Galleria Borghese, Rome



- Detail showing:
articulation of surfaces,
- precision of spatial
drawing
- and attention to outline,
- surface and
- texture detail.

Boy bitten by a Lizard, c. 1592

Florence, Fondazione Longhi



- Oil on Canvas, 66 x 34 cm
- Mancini included it in the works painted to sell while lodging with Pandolfo Pucci da Recanati.
- Possibly a later painting from the period in which Caravaggio was lodging with Cardinal del Monte.
- Notable for the skillfully executed reflection of the room in the glass vase
- Intersecting diagonals of the composition from front to back
- Dramatic lighting and composition
- Animation, emotion, gesture

The Fortune Teller ('La Zingara')

c. 1593, Louvre, Paris



- Oil on Canvas, 99 x 131 cm
Dates from the time he was living in Fantin Petrignani's house, before he stayed with Cardinal del Monte
Bellori recounts that when Caravaggio was directed to study the most famous Antique statues of Phidias and Glycon as examples to follow, Caravaggio's, "Only answer was to point to a crowd of people, indicating that nature had provided him with more than enough teachers. And to prove his point, he called a gypsy, who happened to be passing by, and took her back to his rooms, where he painted her reading a palm, as is the custom of these Egyptian women. He also painted a young man, with one hand, holding a glove, resting on his sword, the other stretched out to the gypsy, who holds it and looks at it. And thus Michelangelo copied life so truthfully in these two half-length figures, that he made good his claim."

Damaged while being shipped to Paris for Louis XIV in 1665. Crates opened by Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini.

The Fortune Teller, c.1593

Capitoline Museum, Rome



- Detail of a young Man
- Second version of the subject, with different models.

The Lute-player, c. 1594

St Petersburg, Hermitage



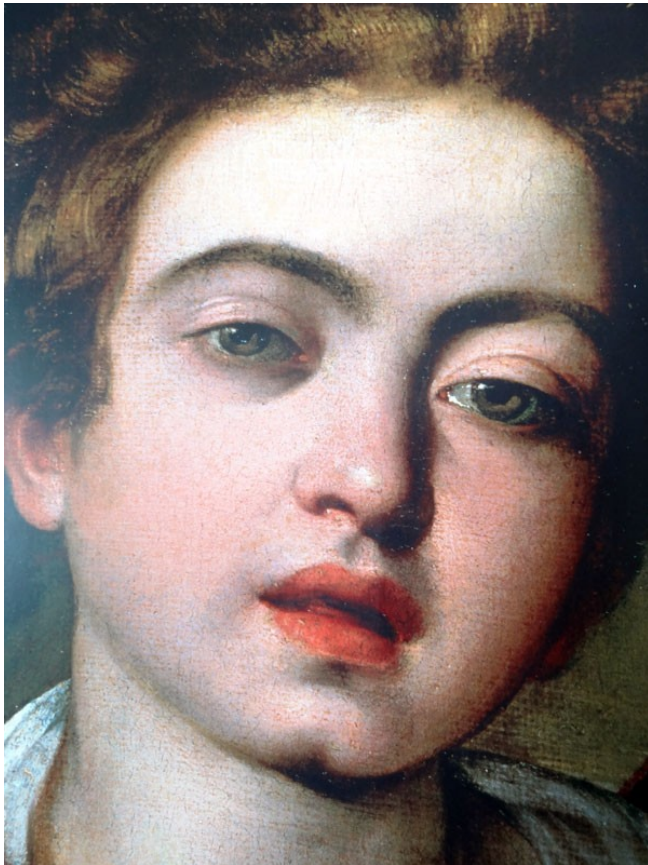
- Oil on Canvas, 94 x 114 cm
- Bellori: “He painted a vase of flowers, with its transparent glass and water, and the reflection of a window in the room, and the flowers sprinkled with the freshest dew.”
- Painted for the Marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani, a major collector of Caravaggio’s works, and an expert on music, antique sculpture and Stoic philosophy.
- Regular concerts at the Palazzo Giustiniani were attended by Cardinal Francesco Marai del Monte. Already beginning to darken the shading, which marks the progression of his style.
- Bought by Tsar Nicholas I in 1808 in Paris.

‘Una Musica’ (Concert) c. 1594, Metropolitan Museum, New York



- Oil on Canvas 92 x 118 cm
- Painted for Cardinal del Monte:, “A concert, given by several young men, portrayed very skillfully from life.”
- Shortly after the Cardinal had taken in Caravaggio to his household as a paid artist.

Head from 'Una Musica' (Concert) c. 1594, Metropolitan Museum, New York



- Details showing:
- Fine articulation of surfaces
- Spatial organisation
- Purity of colour
- Directional lighting to increase three dimensional effect

The Basket of Fruit, c.1596

Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, Milan



- Oil on canvas, 46 x 64 cm.
- Bought or given to Cardinal Borromeo, member of the Roman Curia, and Archbishop of Milan.
- The only known still life by Caravaggio, important in the development of the genre of autonomous still lifes.
- Painted over a canvas by Prospero Orsi, described as ‘one of Caravaggio’s ‘henchmen..’

The Cardsharps, detail, 1595/6

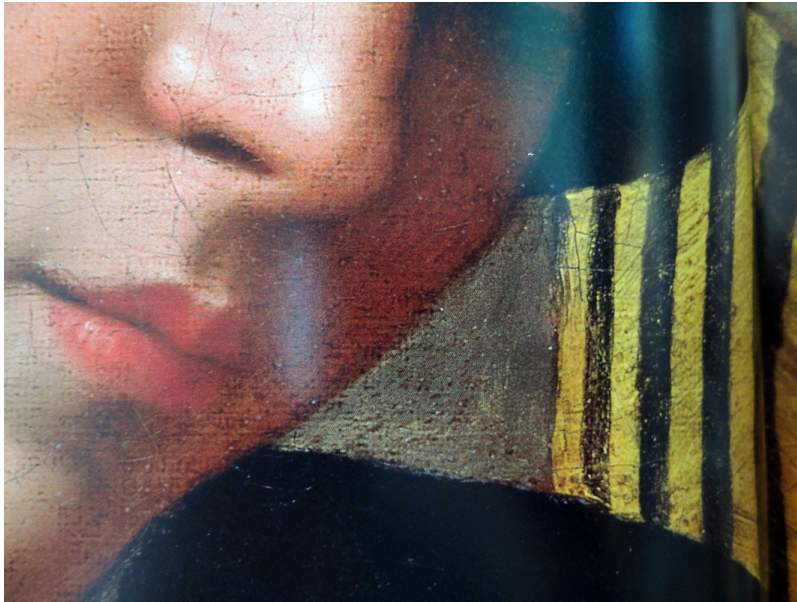
Kimbell Art Collection, Fort Worth Texas



- Oil on Canvas 99 x 137 cm
- Purchased by Cardinal Del Monte, probably from Valentino, who had a shop near San Luigi dei Francesci.
- Possibly the painting which brought Caravaggio to the Cardinal's attention
- Novelty of the composition
- With 'The Fortune Teller', it forms a new kind of Genre painting which was to have great influence for subsequent painting.

The Cardsharps, detail, 1595/6

Kimbell Art Collection, Fort Worth Texas



- Oil on Canvas 99 x 137 cm
- Beauty and luminosity of the colours: “these are Michele’s first brushstrokes in the simple style of Giorgione, with shaded colours.” (Bellori).
- One of Caravaggio’s most successful works, copied more than 31 times.

The Cardsharps, detail, 1595/6

Kimbell Art Collection, Fort Worth Texas



- Detail of the hands and cards showing:
- fine attention to detail,
- firmness of drawing,
- dramatic lighting
- and purity of colours.
- The inclusion of a backgammon board in the bottom of the picture serves to warn against the dangers of gaming in general.

Bacchus, c.1596/7

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence



- Oil on Canvas, 95 x 85 cm
- One of the first of a series of portraits painted after leaving Cavalier d'Arpino's workshop.
- Baglione described it as 'painted in a rather dry manner'.
- Passed to Grand Duke Ferdinando de' Medici as a gift from Cardinal del Monte
- The young god is depicted in the antique manner, leaning on a 'kline' (Greek couch). There are fine air bubbles depicted around the edge of the wine in the carafe, the fruit shows clear signs of decay - overripe and with worms in the apples.
- The movement of the glass send ripples across the surface of the wine. Model is probably Mario Minniti.
- Possible reference to the 'Bentveughels' a group of Northern artists who would dress up in Bacchic costume for their drinking sessions in Rome.

Head of Medusa, c. 1596

Uffizi, Florence



- Canvas, applied to panel, diameter 58 cm
- Presented to Grand Duke Fernando de' Medici as a gift from Cardinal del Monte, for his new armoury. Worn ceremonially in conjunction with a magnificent suit of Persian armour presented by Shah Abbass in 1601.
- Allegory of painting; Gaspare Murtola's madrigal ('Per lo Scudo di Medusa', 1604), warns viewers not to succumb to "the deceptive illusions of painting."

Narcissus, 1597/8

Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini,
Rome



- Oil on canvas, 110 x 92 cm
- Recent restoration confirms the attribution to Caravaggio which has been disputed by some authorities.
- Bought by Genoese merchant Giovanni Battista de Valdibella in 1645 and shipped to Savona.
- Theme also acts as an allegory of painting (Illusion/fatal deception of images which are only 'surface deep').

St Catherine of Alexandria 1597/8, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid



- Oil on Canvas, 173 x 133 cms
- From Del Monte's collection, Theme is particular to the Cardinal who evokes her special protection in his will. Purchased by Cardinal Antonio Barberini the Younger in 1628.
- Bellori notes that, with the Cardsharps and the Fortune teller, the painting already belongs to a more mature style, "displaying deeper colouring, for Michele was already beginning to fortify tones."

St Catherine of Alexandria 1597/8, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid



- Detail of the sword, showing the 'blood groove' a type of duelling sword, illegal at the time in Rome.

David & Goliath c. 1598/9

Prado, Madrid



- Oil on Canvas, 110 x 91 cm
- Longhi: “He alternates between delicate idyll and cruel drama.”
- Sold to Spanish collector soon after its execution.
- Radical, dramatic composition perfectly fitting the 3/4/5 geometry of the rectangular canvas,

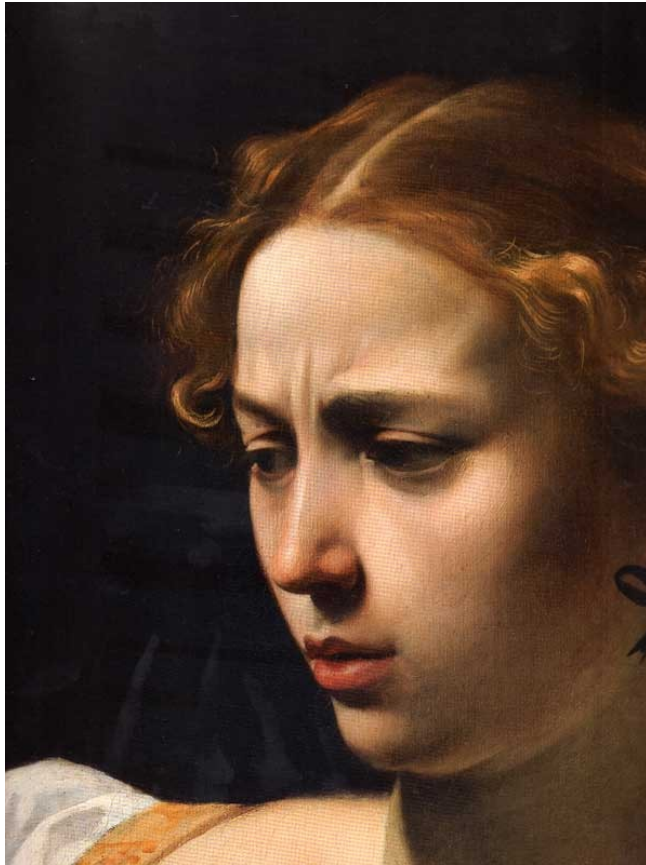
Judith & Holofernes

Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini,
Rome, 1598-9



- Oil on Canvas, 145 x 195 cm
- Purchased by Ottavio Costa and remained in his family until 1875.
- Here, Caravaggio leaves behind the idyllic phase, and paints the scene with a brutal realism.
- Forms stand out strongly against the dark background.

Judith (detail)



- Clarity of articulation of all the volumes
- Expression of determination mixed with horror (furrowed brow, pursed mouth)
- Sculptural effect of the modelling.

Holofernes, detail



- High attention to the specificities and concreteness of horror
- ‘Forensic’ exactitude reveals a morbid fascination with the moment of pain.

The Calling of St Matthew and

St Matthew & the Angel 1599-1602

Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome



- First public commission (French national church in Rome). Matthieu Cointrel, French Prelate, drew up scheme for the decoration of the fifth Chapel (his funerary chapel) in detail around the Life of St Matthew: (Calling on the left, Inspiration from the Angel in the apse, and Martyrdom, on the right)
- Dramatic use of natural lighting as a compositional element
- No work begun before his death in 1585. Girolamo Muziano, then Cavaliere d'Arpino and finally Caravaggio was commissioned to execute the two side paintings, by Cardinal Del Monte.

The Calling of St Matthew

1599-1602 Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome



- Oil on Canvas, 232 x 343cm. Left side of chapel
- Caravaggio's first full size History painting,
- Complex composition in which all is subordinated to the drama, unfolding from right to left, in contradistinction to the usual direction of reading.
- Light streaming in from the window, follows the direction of Christ's pointing finger and picks out the bearded tax gatherer Levi (St Matthew) who expresses his amazement at being selected for Divine duty by pointing to himself.

St Matthew and the Angel

1602 Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome



- Oil on Canvas, 323 x 183 cm Altarpiece
- Following the success of the two side paintings, Caravaggio was expressly commissioned to complete the chapel with the altarpiece in February 1602:
- “With all the great skill he knows ...and with all perfection and excellent skill”
- It was completed in September of that year.
- The first version was removed ‘as it pleased no-one’ - the gesture of the foot was thought to be awkward, and Marchese Giustiniani acted to support him, taking it for himself and encouraging Caravaggio to make the present version.
- Notably, Matthew in the first version is writing his Gospel in Hebrew, as a former Jewish tax gatherer, In the later version, as the Papacy was stressing the Latin Vulgate, the script is unreadable.

The Martyrdom of St Matthew

(Detail) 1599-1602 Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome



- Oil on Canvas, 323 x 343 cm Right hand wall of chapel
- Groundbreaking composition following a number of attempts
- Radiographs reveal two different underlying compositions before the final one was arrived at.
- Initial versions followed Muziano and Arpino's similar work, but then abandoned these for the current, more radical and dramatic result.
- Turbulent composition, expressive gestures and expressions.

Crucifixion of St Peter, 1600-2

Cerasi Chapel, Sta Maria del Popolo, Rome



- Oil on Canvas, 230 x 175 cm
- Major commission to paint the side walls of the Cerasi family Chapel. (Tiberio Cerasi was Papal Treasurer)
- Original versions did not please the patrons and were removed, probably because Caravaggio had reversed the order of the paintings in the Chapel and the patrons wished them otherwise for liturgical reasons.
- Caravaggio's temperament did not suit the restrictions of the legal contracts which were imposed upon him and this rejection was not the first difficulty he suffered.
- The new 'dark' style reaches perfection here, with the carefully composed diagonals and the strong 'spot lit' effect.

Conversion of St Paul, 1600-2

Cerasi Chapel, Sta Maria del Popolo, Rome



- Oil on Canvas, 230 x 175 cm
- The scene concentrates on the moment of conversion, the sudden drama of the fall from the horse and the resultant blindness, enhanced by the dramatic theatrical lighting.
- The composition is revolutionary and manages to fill the canvas with just the horse and two figures, arranged in a circle of action.
- Paintings became very famous and influential in Rome where they were seen to indicate a 'new flowering' of art.

Supper at Emmaus, 1601-2

National Gallery, London



- Oil on Canvas, 141 x 196.2 cm
- Painted for Marchese Ciriaco Mattei and passed into the collection of nephew Scipione Borghese between 1605-16. It was donated to the National Gallery in 1831 by George Vernon.
- Remarkable work of the middle period - clearly demonstrating Caravaggio's mastery of pictorial drama, surface composition, space and light.
- St James literally 'measures' the internal space of the canvas so that the viewer can grasp the physical dimensions of the space in which Christ performs his miracle.

Doubting Thomas, 1601-2, Bildergalerie, Schloss Sanssouci, Potsdam



- Oil on Canvas, 107 x 146 cm
- In the collection of Vincenzo Giustiniani, acquired, with the bulk of his collection by the King of Prussia in 1815, but deemed ‘unsuitable for public display’ (too ‘physical’?)
- Circular, clockwise composition.
- Shadow of doubt erased by clarity of illumination.
- The physicality of the wound - embodied/incarnate
- ‘Seeing is believing’ (Allegory of painting)

Doubting Thomas, 1601-2, detail



- Profoundly physical, the reality of the wound and the incredulity of the ‘materialist’ Thomas, who has not just to closely examine, but physically touch, before he believes.

“Eros Triumphant”, 1601-2

(Amore Vincitore) Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin



- Oil on Canvas 154 x 110 cm
- Painted for Marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani and acquired by the King of Prussia in 1815,
- Specifically refers to Giustiniani and his family's history as rulers of Chios.
- Mentioned in a libel case that Giovanni Baglione brought against Caravaggio, Orazio Gentileschi and others, for disseminating burlesque verses about him. Model is the same boy who appears as the angel in the first Conversion of St Paul and the Second “Martyrdom of St Matthew”).
- Depicts the triumph of earthly love over the arts and sciences. Eros is scoffing at these worldly distractions.
- Stylistically, Caravaggio's preference for the ‘double diagonal’ is evident.
- Sandrart later observed that this painting “eclipses all other paintings.”

The Entombment of Christ, 1602-3

Pinacoteca Vaticana, Rome



- Oil on Canvas, 300 x 203 cm
- Commissioned for Pietro Vittrice for the family chapel in Sta Maria della Vallicella (Chiesa Nuova).
- Bellori describes it as one of Caravaggio's masterworks - There are many copies, by Rubens, Van Dyck and Cézanne.
- The descending semi-circles of the composition follow a rocking rhythm from the upheld hand of the Magdalen, down through the arms and bodies of the helpers, as if tracing the force of gravity from Heaven to the tomb, which juts out illusionistically into our space. The unrelenting blackness of the background here enhances the lamentation and pathos of the scene.
- It is a masterpiece of tightly controlled three dimensional composition, staging, lighting, drama and liturgical exposition.

Madonna del Rosario, 1604-5

Gemäldegalerie, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna



- Oil on Canvas 364.5 x 249.5 cm
- The precise conditions of its commission are unknown, (Perhaps for the merchant Niccolò Radulovik) but it appeared for sale in Naples in 1607 via 2 Flemish art dealers, (Finson & Flinck)
- Frans Pourbus tried to buy it for Vincenzo I of Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua. Unsuccessful, the painting returned to Flanders with the art dealers where Rubens and Jan Brueghel bought it for the Dominican Church in Antwerp, where it stayed until Emperor Joseph II of Austria bought it.
- Like the Death of the Virgin, Caravaggio uses the red drape to articulate the upper space of the composition, giving a concrete form to what would otherwise be receding, negative space.

Madonna del Rosario, detail



- The drama, again expressed with a circular motion, is carried out via the multiple hands, competing for the rosary, as they do for space; and yet Caravaggio is able to precisely articulate the exact spatial coordinates of all these animated fingers.

The Death of the Virgin, 1606

Louvre, Paris



- Oil on Canvas, 369 x 245 cm
- Commissioned for the Chapel of Laerzio Cherubini in Sta Maria dell Scala, but probably never installed there. The Carmellite Monks rejected it for its “wantonness and offence against decorum”.
- Giulio Mancini tried to buy it, and came to a verbal agreement, but Duke Vincenzo I Gonzaga of Mantua, prompted by his court painter, Rubens, also tried to buy it.
- The Duke’s envoy Annibale Chieppio, wrote: “The painter numbers amongst the most famous modern masters in Rome and the altarpiece is considered to be one of his best works..”
- After purchase by Gonzaga, it was put on public display for one week on demand of the many artists who flocked to see it before it was shipped off to Mantua. It caused great public excitement.
- It subsequently belonged to King Charles I of England, and after his execution moved to Cologne and then France.
- It was completed just before Caravaggio’s flight from Rome to Naples in spring 1606.

Death of the Virgin, Detail - 1606

Louvre, Paris



- The dramatic action follows the diagonal axes, and the billowing red drape above echoes the body of the Madonna sprawled below. One of the aspects which caused most interest and offence was the use of a dead prostitute as the model for the Virgin.

Michelangelo Merisi

- On 29 May 1606, Caravaggio killed Ranuccio Tomassoni: “He quarrelled with a young friend over a game of tennis, and they beat each other with the rackets, then he drew his weapon and killed the youth and was himself wounded. (Bellori)
- He fled from Rome without money and, under pursuit, took refuge in Zanarolo, where he was sheltered by Duke Mario Colonna.
- He moved to Naples, and from there to Malta, where he painted a portrait of the Grand Master, and was admitted to the Order of the Knights of St John. But another violent incident - he assaulted a senior Knight Justiciary, led to his imprisonment.
- Following a dramatic escape from prison, he fled to Sicily, pursued by the agents of the Knights. He stayed in Syracuse, Messina and Palermo, returning to Naples hoping to obtain a Papal pardon. This was, eventually, granted, but, impatient to receive it, he left Naples for Rome, and died of fever and his wounds in Porto Ercole, in 1610, before receiving it. He was 36.
- During these last desperate years, he painted his greatest works: the complex and crowded canvases: the Madonna del Rosario and the Seven Acts of Mercy, and perhaps the greatest and most tragic of them all: The Beheading of St John the Baptist”. In his last works, the images emerge dramatically from the darkness which surrounds and threatens to engulf them.

Seven Works of Mercy, 1607

Pio Monte della Misericordia, Naples



- Oil on Canvas, 390 x 260
- Painted in Naples in 1607.
- Caravaggio depicts for the first time the acts of mercy narrated in the Gospel of St Matthew. The commissioning Confraternity, established by a group of 7 young nobles in 1601, was sworn to perform all seven of the Charitable works. The altarpiece was to represent ‘ A colossal figural transcription’ of the Works.
- The disparate acts have no internal narrative coherence, but are united pictorially by the circular spatial composition and directional lighting.
- As with the Death of the Virgin, the long vertical format is animated from top to bottom, ensuring that no part is left ‘uninvolved’ in the drama of space and light.

David with the Head of Goliath, 1609-10, Galleria Borghese, Rome



- Oil on Canvas 125 x 101 cm
- Commissioned by Cardinal Scipione Borghese
- Bellori describes the head of Goliath as being a self-portrait of Caravaggio. The shadows are very deep, which brings out the relief of the figures.
- May reflect on the artist's tortured anxiety during his years of flight and persecution.

Portrait of Antonio Martelli, 1608

Palazzo Pitti, Florence



- Oil on Canvas, 118.5 x 95.5 cms
- Caravaggio went to Malta in 1607, probably hoping that the Grand Master would help him to get a pardon .
- Martelli, a Florentine took part in the heroic defence of Malta against the Turks in 1565, and was one of the closest confidants of the Grand Master Alof de Wigancourt, whose portrait Caravaggio also painted.
- One of two paintings executed in Malta.

Decollation of St John the Baptist, 1607/8, Oratorio di San Giovanni Battista dei Cavalieri, Valletta



- Oil on Canvas, 361 x 520 cm
- The most important commission Caravaggio carried out in Malta, the largest of all his surviving works, and the only one that he signed, here, dramatically, in the ‘blood’ from the Saint’s severed head.
- Directly linked to his being made a Knight of the Order.
- Bellori notes the radical technique: “In this work, Caravaggio used all the powers of his brush, working at it with such intensity, that he let the priming of the canvas show through the half tones”

Decollation of St John the Baptist



- Detail with Caravaggio's signature in the 'blood' from the decapitation.

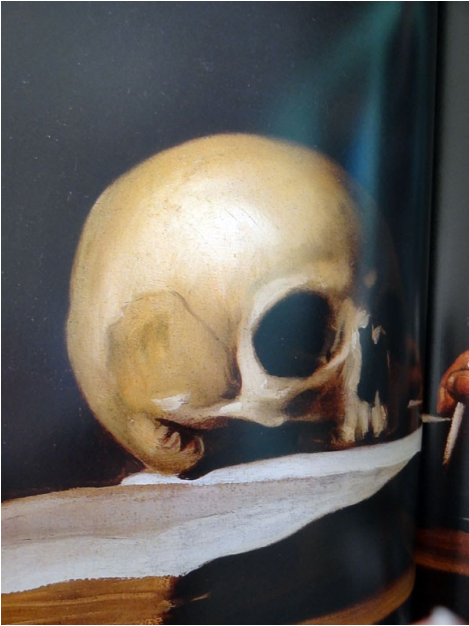
The Young John the Baptist, 1610

Galleria Borghese, Rome



- Oil on Canvas, 159 x 124.5 cm
- Amongst his very last paintings,
- Took it with him when he left Naples, seeking a pardon in Rome.
- When he died in Porto Ercoli, Scipione Borghese, The Knights of Malta, and the Spanish Viceroy were all keen to lay claim to Caravaggio's surviving paintings, and this one ended up in the Borghese collection.

Caravaggio



- Caravaggio's epitaph was composed by his friend Marzio Milesi. It reads:
- “Michelangelo Merisi, son of Fermo di Caravaggio – in painting not equal to a painter, but to Nature itself – died in Port' Ercole – betaking himself hither from Naples – returning to Rome – 15th calend of August – In the year of our Lord 1610 – He lived thirty-six years nine months and twenty days – Marzio Milesi, Jurisconsult – Dedicated this to a friend of extraordinary genius.”
- “He was, indeed, in many senses the first modern artist; the first artist to proceed not by evolution but by revolution..” (Roger Fry, 1905).