

Caravaggio in Rome c1596-1601 Part I - The Secular Narrative

Michelangelo Merisi, known as Caravaggio (1571-1610), was not the first artist in history to have an associated notoriety, which threatens to overshadow his very considerable legacy to the development of Western European Art. Duccio Buoninsenga (1255-60) was a drunkard and a brawler, the quarrelsome Pietro Perugino (1446-1523) spent time in prison for fighting and most famously, the sculptor Benvenuto Cellini (1500-71) was convicted of embezzlement, murder and sodomy, for which he was incarcerated in the Castille Sant' Angelo; he later escaped. However, the universal appeal of the visceral naturalism of Caravaggio's art, has ensured that his paintings are amongst the best known, most admired and loved in the history of Western European Art. However, from the middle of the 17th century, for almost a hundred years, Caravaggio is all but forgotten. Then suddenly, like Vermeer, his reputation is reborn. First fragmented and not entirely complimentary mentions are made by the renowned Classicist scholar, Johann Joachim Winkelmann in 1750, but it is not until 1890, that Wolfgang Kallab, whilst researching the catalogue of the Imperial Collections of Austria, detected a common style linking several early 17th century works of disputed attribution. He concentrated on the treatment of light, the quality of brushwork and other particularities, putting forward the name of Caravaggio. At that time, there were no definitive attributions of works to the artist and even today, only one signed work is known. This hypothesis began to be developed by specialists such as Hermann Voss, Denis Mahon and Lionelli Venturi, as they began to define Caravaggio's corpus. Meanwhile the discovery of archival documents in Rome, Naples and Malta gave the work of scholars, fresh impetus. Finally, in 1920, Roberto Longhi nailed his colours to the mast:

“People speak of Michelangelo de Caravaggio, calling him now a master of shadow, now a master of light. What has been forgotten is that Ribera, Vermeer, La Tour and Rembrandt could never have existed without him. And that the art of Delacroix, Courbet and Manet would have been utterly different”

Caravaggio was arguably the most mysterious and revolutionary painter in the history of art, since Giotto, Masaccio and Van Eyck. In Rome, some 33 years after the death of Michelangelo in 1564, he originated a violent reaction to the Mannerism of the times, which he regarded as constrained, mawkish and academic. He created a new language of theatrical realism, choosing his models from the streets and like a film director producing carefully contrived reconstructions of religious narratives, full of drama and pathos. He became a painter not long after the Council of Trent (1545-63), had defined the principles of the Counter-Reformation. Papal authority and the Jesuits countered with a great outpouring of imagery, ornament, colours, contrasts and theatrical decors fit to dazzle the believer and reaffirm the predominance of Rome. Claudio Monteverdi had just invented the operatic form. The work of Caravaggio just added to the ferment and tempestuous atmosphere. Almost everyone of his works raised a scandal and he made many enemies. Nicholas Poussin (1594-1665), who arrived in Rome shortly after his death, observed: “He came to destroy painting.”

Much of what we now know about the life of Caravaggio was written contemporaneously by Giovanni Baglione (1566-1642), a painter very much at the heart of the art world in Rome and a member of the Accademia di San Lucca, three times its president and a painter obsessed with his status. In 1603 there was the well documented libel suit, which Baglione brought against Caravaggio, in which we have one of the few records of Caravaggio's thoughts on his artistic rivals in Rome. Another contemporary figure, was Giulio Mancini (1559-1630), born in Sienna, a physician, art connoisseur and writer, who is known to have been a regular visitor at the Palazzo Madama, Cardinal del Monte's residence. Later, after Caravaggio's death in 1610, the painter is mentioned by Giovanni Pietro Bellori (1613-96), a painter and antiquarian, who wrote his *Lives of the Artists*, published in 1672. All to a greater, or lesser extent were critical of his Art, although Baglione was initially heavily influenced by Caravaggio. Consequently, these biographers cannot be regarded as entirely objective critics, but even as such, there is more than a grudging admiration for the dramatic change that Caravaggio singlehandedly brought about. All were astonished to varying degrees by the novelty and naturalism that Caravaggio invested in his paintings. His original and for the time almost unique use of models, with no line

drawing as practised in Renaissance Classicism and the dramatic lighting effects achieved, notwithstanding his ability to depict biblical narratives, brought up to date in apparently mundane, everyday situations, had never been attempted before. The idea that his rise to fame was meteoric was highlighted in Van Mander's account, published in 1603, but evidently based on reports relayed to him by a fellow painter, who had left Rome after the renowned Contarelli paintings were seen around 1600. 'He overcame poverty with great effort and by dint of assiduous work' and the painter observer, Floris van Dijck, also relays traits of his character that do not have the benefit of hindsight, but are the eyewitness testimony of someone truly impressed by this force of Nature.

So, according to the sparse primary documentation available, Caravaggio was born on 29th September 1571, in a village of the same name, near Bergamo in Lombardy, his father, Fermo Merisi, a household steward and architect to the Marchese de Carravagio and mother, Lucia Aratori; he was baptised in Milan. In the Summer of 1576, when Caravaggio was but five, Milan and the surrounding region was struck with bubonic plague and within a year, he had lost almost every male member of the family. It is Andrew Graham-Dixon's supposition that Caravaggio's later troubled, unpredictable, volatile and dysfunctional personality was attributable to this childhood experience. He was first apprenticed to Simone Peterzano (1535-99), a pupil of Titian in 1584, the year in which his mother died, whilst under the protection of the Marchese Colonna and her family. Caravaggio learnt much during this apprenticeship, but little of his early work survives.



Venetian Woman in the Guise of Lucretia, Lorenzo Lotto, oil on canvas, N.G.

So what were his early influences. In Milan, undoubtedly Leonardo's 'Virgin of the Rocks' in San Francesco Grande for its expressive power and quite possibly from nearby Bergamo, the works of the mid 16c Lorenzo Lotto such as 'The Venetian Woman in the Guise of Lucretia.' Lotto (1480-1557), much as Caravaggio, was lost to the art world for centuries, until 'rediscovered' by the renowned art historian Bernard Berenson. Lotto was one of the leading Venetian painters of the High Renaissance, his works were strongly influenced by Giovanni Bellini (1435-1516) and Giorgione (1477-1510).



Mary Magdalene, Girolama Savoldo, oil on canvas, N.G. London

But it was also in Milan, that Caravaggio would have seen the work of Girolamo Savoldo (c1480- 1548) and there received the revelation of Chiaroscuro in works such as '*Mary Magdalene*.' No, light did not fall inevitably from the sky like a gift from the gods. Savoldo was another Venetian trained painter, noted during his lifetime for his mastery of nocturnal effects and this painting is a fine example of his work. The Magdalene is shrouded in a white satin mantel, that covers her head, leaving her face in shadow, except for the merest hint of light on the side of her nose. The silvery expanse of drapery is relieved by the glimpse of a red sleeve. The composition provides an air of mystery unusual in paintings depicting Mary Magdalene.



The Virgin Annunciate, 1476-8, Antonella da Messina, oil on panel, Palazzo Abatellis, Palermo.

Surely one of the most enigmatic and captivating faces in the history of Renaissance art, the renowned *Virgin Annunciate* was almost certainly painted by the Sicilian Antonella da Messina (1430-79) during his visit to Venice from 1475-8. The small panel is a compelling depiction of Mary, with in front of her an open text on top of a simple lectern; by her actions there is the implied presence of the Angel Gabriel. Whilst clasping the folds of her head-covering with her left hand, in the traditional Marian sign of acquiescence and modesty, she extends the open palm of her right hand towards the viewer in greeting, a wonderful example of foreshortening, which predates Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks*, by a decade, or more. It is impossible not to believe that this was painted from life. It's the face of a beautiful young Italian woman, with lighting so very reminiscent of 'Rembrandt Lighting' first seen in the work

of Rembrandt 150 years later, that leaves the viewer spell-bound.

Antonella Messina was the foremost Southern Italian painter of the 15th century. He was also one of the most ground-breaking and influential painters of the Italian Renaissance and had a profound influence on Giovanni Bellini; its thought that he may have been responsible for the introduction of oil painting to the Venetian School. So, is there any hard evidence that Caravaggio would have seen this painting; possibly not. However, portraiture was Messina's particular forte and since it is known that he received commissions in Venice, examples of his work may have been seen by Caravaggio.

The young Caravaggio had sold most of his inheritance by 1590 and the remainder by May 1592, the last documentary evidence confirming that he was still in Caravaggio, being legal documents regarding the sale of land he acquired in his earlier inheritance, which might suggest that this was done in preparation for a journey. There is also the suggestion from the accounts of his life in Milan by the biographers, Mancini and Bellori, that he was leaving under a bit of a cloud; that he may have been involved in quarrels, wounding a girl, a fellow worker and the wounding of a police officer and that he may even have been in prison.

The question therefore arises, as to how one might reasonably speculate on where Caravaggio visited prior to, or on his journey to Rome. Taking account of the influences in his later work, such as the frescoes for Cardinal del Monte, one can reasonably predict that he visited the Palazzo del Te in Mantua, site of Giulio Romano's fresco, *Fall of the Giants*. Eminent art historians such as Bernard Berenson believe he must have visited Venice, perceiving the influence of Giorgione, especially evident in his *The Flight into Egypt*, of 1599, one of his first paintings with a biblical narrative. In Bologna, not so far from Milan, the brothers Annabile and Ludovico Carracci with their cousin Agostino were also reacting against the prevailing taste for Mannerism and the famous Sofonisba Anguiscola, who had as a young woman known Michelangelo, interspersed her portraits of enthroned princes with scenes from real life. The Mannerism of the Late Renaissance, the work of Tinteretto, Parmigianino and Bronzino was the largely prevailing style of painting which the Lombardy painters reacted against, as they sought to bring greater naturalism into their work, but it was Caravaggio who pushed the boundaries further than anyone else.

Until fairly recently, it had been assumed that Caravaggio travelled to Rome between August 1592, his last confirmed presence in Lombardy, and his first inferred presence in Rome being at least six months later in early 1593; this must at best remain speculative. More recent evidence from research of documentation contemporary to Caravaggio's life (Clovis Whitfield, *The Trouble with Caravaggio*, 2014), now appears to confirm that he got to Rome much later in the winter of 1595, arriving penniless and dressed in rags, no better than a beggar, having spent his inheritance on the way. This later date is now accepted by the majority of expert opinion. One of the first and most reliable physical descriptions we have of him in Rome is that of the barber Luca, who in 1597, in evidence to a court of tribunal described him as a large, stocky young man, with a thin black beard, black eyes with bushy eyebrows, dressed in black in a state of disarray, with threadbare black hose and a mass of black hair, long over his forehead. If this 1595 date is to be accepted, there is a so far an unexplained gap of two to three years in Caravaggio's biography and in this scenario, the current dates of his artistic output would require revision, as many works are dated from 1592-4.

Rome in the 1590's was a city of stark contrasts, a cosmopolitan city of intellectuals, scientists, artists, businessmen, ambassadors and diplomats; a city of extreme splendour and luxury and of miserable poverty and extraordinary violence. It was also the centre of the Catholic World, displaying its new found confidence with a rich ceremonial life, following the deliberations of the Council of Trent (1545-63), with its response to the rapid spread of Protestantism throughout Northern Europe following Martin Luther's issue of the 95 theses in Wittenberg in 1517. Nevertheless, the Rome of the 1590s remained much troubled and tense, with the poor and dispossessed significantly outnumbering better-off citizens. It was also a city preparing with ever increasing urgency and passion for the Jubilee Year of 1600. Clement VIII exhorted his Cardinals to set a good example, to act with great piety,

restore ruined churches and recreate the beauty of a city that had triumphed over paganism. As the day approached, thousands of pilgrims were flooding into the city, to receive indulgence for all their sins and thus gain a place in heaven.

Beyond the protective walls of the palaces of Cardinals, nobles and bankers, was the unruly, often violent life of the taverns and the many brothels, clustered around the Mausoleum of Augustus. During the 1590's and early 1600's a wave of extraordinary brutality and violence swept the streets of Rome, with constant brawling and fights with daggers and swords commonplace. Caravaggio was in thick of this dissolute life, as he roamed from tavern to tavern with a band of lusty friends, the architect Onorio Longhi, Prospero Orsi and the painter Orazio Gentilischi, who had as their motto, 'Without hope, or fear', gambling on cards, carousing with women and picking squabbles. One of his earliest documented altercations with the police was his arrest for wearing a sword without a licence, whilst in the service of Cardinal del Monte.

Evidence about Caravaggio's earliest life in Rome suggests that like many of the poverty-stricken arriving in the City, he may have made his way to the SS Trinita dei Pellegrini e Convalescenti, one of the most prominent of the public institutions catering to the periodic influxes of pilgrims; almost 70% of the lay brothers of this institution in the 16th century were artists, or artisans. As such, this was naturally a place that impoverished artisans, refugees from another part of Italy would have gravitated to. Although initially only offered a few days of hospitality, he would have found colleagues, who might have found a use for his skills and patrons, who were predisposed to provide accommodation. Many of Caravaggio's earliest wealthy patrons, Tiberio Cerasi, the Crescenzi and Mattei families, were closely associated with the Trinita dei Pelligrini.

He may also have received help from the Sicilian community, particularly Lorenzo Carli, the owner of a bottega near Saint Agostino, on the Via della Scrofa, where according to his contemporary biographer, Giovanni Baglione, he painted portrait heads; Bellori says, "Caravaggio painted heads for a groat apiece and produced three a day." These would have been copies of existing models, there being a great demand for likenesses of famous people and Caravaggio worked fast, apparently completing three a day, for which he earned a pittance. Mario Minniti, a painter from Syracuse, may also have worked with Caravaggio in Carli's shop as a day worker, in other words without accommodation, so both would have slept on benches under the counter of one of the many workshops around the Via della Scrofa. Doubtless he managed to sell some of his paintings through Constantino Spada, who had a shop in front of the San Luigi dei Francesi and an individual, who also figured in the court proceedings in July 1597.

After some time sleeping rough, according to Mancini, Caravaggio lodged with Monsignor Pucci, otherwise known as Mgr Insalata, although this biographer is the only one to refer to such an attachment; here he commenced further pictures to be sold on the open market. Pucci lives on with the fame of his meagre salads, rather than by owning any of Caravaggio's paintings.

Caravaggio next spent a limited time, probably only a few months, in the studio of a minor Sieneese painter, Antiveduto Grammatica, where he painted half-length figures in chiaroscuro. The facility that Caravaggio had with replication and copying per-existing models and patterns, would have confirmed for him his particular skill, perhaps the first intimation of his artistic gift. Then he moved to the workshop of Guiseppe Cesari, also known as Cavaliere d'Arpino, himself a former boy prodigy, only a little older than Caravaggio, but already an established society painter, who moved in the circles of the Papal Court. D'Arpino was at the time the rising star of Rome, specialising in frescoes and large biblical altarpieces and who self-consciously considered himself the successor to Raphael.

The studio would have been an excellent place to meet the wealthiest Roman art lovers: cardinals, ambassadors and painters such as Rubens, Bruegel, Brill and Adam Elsheimer. According to Bellori, it would appear that Caravaggio's task in this studio was the painting of fruit and flowers, decorative borders, or embellishments to complement d'Arpino's work. Again, according to Bellori, Caravaggio

resented being restricted to to such lowly subjects: “As he was working at these things against his will and feeling great regret to see himself kept from figures, he welcomed the encouragement of Prospero Orsi” to break out on his own.

So, it was with the benefit of the Lombardy training and the various influences already highlighted, that we recognise one of his earliest works, *‘Boy peeling Fruit’*, followed very soon afterwards by *‘Boy with a Basket of Fruit’*, in the Galleria Borghese, which was part of Cavalier d’Arpino’s collection. Still in the Borghese, *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, is an example of the half length genre that Caravaggio produced during these first few years in Rome. It depicts a boy in a white shirt, revealing his right shoulder and holding a basket of fruit represented with the utmost accuracy, so much so that they become almost the focus of the painting. The light falling from the left, the first evidence of a diagonal shaft of light, is intense, but not yet harsh. Many interpretations of the work have been advanced, some of which are centred on the androgynous nature of the boy.



Boy with a Basket of Fruit, c1596, oil on canvas, Galleria Borghese

In the all pervasive culture of the Counter-reformation, still life paintings referred to the concept of *vanitas*, a reflection on the transience of earthly matters, which even in their fullest splendour, could not conceal the beginnings of decay. Many of the fruits depicted would have a specific symbolic meaning, the apple being the forbidden fruit and the grapes and pomegranate referring to the passion of Christ. The picture of a boy with a basket of fruit, insistently real and modern, as if he was selling fruit in the piazza, with its air of theatricality, would have appealed enormously to aristocratic patrons.

It is known that Cavalier d'Arpino purchased it, along with the *Sick Bacchus*. Somewhat later, the two masterpieces aroused Cardinal Scipione Borghese's acquisitive instincts and since Cavalier d'Arpino also collected arquebuses, this was used as an excuse to imprison him, confiscate all his goods and condemn him to death; later he was pardoned, but only by donating all his paintings, 107 in total, to the Apostolic Chamber. Pope Paul V then assigned all the paintings to his nephew Scipione.



The Basket of Fruit, 1597-1600, oil on canvas, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, Naples

The Basket of Fruit is one of Caravaggio's very few known still-life compositions. It amazes with its illusionary, trompe-l'oeil, almost photographic quality of representation; blemishes, the evidence of natural decay and all. Such was its impact, that Cardinal del Monte is said to have turned away from it with tears in his eyes. Much has been said over the years about the overall appearance of fruit past its best. In line with the culture of the age, the allegorical theme appears to revolve around fading beauty and the natural decaying of things. Some scholars even refer to the basket of fruit as a metaphor for the state of the Roman Catholic Church of the time. Purchased by Cardinal Federico Borromeo, the work is quite possibly the most renowned painting of fruit ever painted and it has since been regarded as the

prototype of the still-life genre, one which was to become such an important feature of the 17th century Dutch Golden Age.

This is perhaps an apposite moment to discuss briefly the part played by optics in the work of Caravaggio. In *Secret Knowledge*, David Hockney devotes a significant amount of effort in persuasively theorising on the degree to which Caravaggio employed optics, specifically a combination of mirrors and lenses. **Caravaggio's was a comprehensive change in perception, which can only be explained by a moment of divine inspiration, a Eureka moment. In other words, a way of representing reality by directly transferring a projected image onto a canvas, without all the previously regarded essentials of Classical picture-making.**



The Lamentation, 1505, Raphael, pen, ink and black chalk, Louvre

Traditionally, the artist would have used his imagination to formulate a composition based on a narrative. Then followed meticulous planning, with the production of multiple drawings, or transfer cartoons, as in Raphael's wonderful preparatory drawing, *The Lamentation*, one of a number for the renowned *Deposition*, in the Galleria Borghese. Although it's probable, if not certain, that Jan van Eyck, Robert Campin and Hans Holbein employed optical devices, Caravaggio was in Hockney's words, the first painter to be more akin to a film director. Strong illumination from the sun was directed into his studio through a hole in the roof, or an elevated window, the walls of the room painted a dark colour, in essence turning the space into a giant Camera Obscura. At first Caravaggio would have used a concave mirror, but graduated to a convex lens, which most obviously came into his possession from one of Cardinal del Monte's associates, Giambattista Della Porta, or even Galileo.

Roberta Lapucci, an Italian conservation expert, claimed in 2010 that these images may have been fixed on the primed canvas by the use of a light-sensitive mercury salt, traces of which have been found on canvases. The image 'burned' onto the canvas would last only 30 minutes and only then be visible in the gloom; as such, he used a white lead paint with barium sulphate, which is luminous, to sketch in the outlines (again traces of this have been found on canvases). The highlights and shading on the basket, the result of intense lighting from the front left, are simplified tonally and the background was added later, as it does not seem to correspond with the light. Hockney, further postulates that when

good convex lenses became available about this time, a painter such as Caravaggio would have immediately recognised the distinct advantage over the mirror-lens projection, a wider field of view, greater depth of projection and hence the facility of composing more complex pictures.



The Sick Bacchus,
c1596, oil on canvas,
Villa Borghese

Almost certainly painted towards the end of his convalescence from the illness, following being kicked by a horse, belonging to the Guistiniani, or Pinelli family, this is undoubtedly a self portrait. The livid complexion, puffy flesh and rings around the eyes all suggest that he had not yet fully recovered; in fact, he never did, as all his life he complained of head and stomach aches.

It was during his time with D'Arpino, that Caravaggio and the Cesari brothers may have been involved in some escapade on the house of Frederico Zucarro, a renowned painter in Rome. Caravaggio's involvement resulted in unwelcome attention from the Papal

authorities, as Zucarro was under the protection of the Pope. Desperate to avoid such attention, Caravaggio was kept well out of sight, so much so that when he was injured by the kick of a horse, the Cesaris would not call a surgeon. It was only at the insistence of his friend Mario Minniti, that he was taken on a cart to the Ospedale de Santa Maria della Consolazione, where he was cared for by the prior.

On the other hand, Clovis Whitfield in his research on the various biographies, published in, *The Trouble with Caravaggio*, arrived at the conclusion that the leg injury was in fact first dressed by Luca Benni, the barber's son, for whom Pietro Paolo worked and eventually led to the Sicilian shopkeeper, Lorenzo Siciliano (Carli) taking the artist to the Hospital. It is now known that the prior was another Sicilian, Luciano Bianchi, who like Carli himself was from Messina and actually had close links with the Saint Agostino, just a few paces from Carli's shop. Whichever version of the sequel to the leg-

injury scenario is most plausible, it seems certain, that Caravaggio had alienated Bernardino and Giuseppe Cesari, for they seem not to have visited him in hospital and even years later they were not on speaking terms and Mancini's notes makes it clear that they thought that his friend, Prospero Orsi was also a trouble-maker. It was during this stay, or shortly afterwards, back at D'Arpino's studio that *The Sick Bacchus* was painted.



Still-life from The Sick Bacchus, Villa Borghese

According to Hockney, due to the limitation of the size of composition possible with the mirror-lens, here Caravaggio has almost certainly used it for a series of projections, possibly four, to construct as if in a collage, so capturing the composition in bits and then meshing them together. This is because with the mirror-lens, the usable image

is never much more than 30 cms, irrespective of the diameter of the mirror, due to the consistently limited focal length; hence critical 'sweet spot.' Its noticeable that whilst the viewer appears to look down on the table-top, the still-life of the fruit appears to be viewed head-on. In fact, his biographer, Baglione remarked at the time, that Caravaggio, 'made a few small pictures portrayed from a mirror and the first Bacchus with a few bunches of grapes, painted with great diligence, but in a slightly dry manner.'

Referring to the wonderful *Lute Player*, it would be almost impossible to produce the amazing foreshortening without such an aid. **Further proof if needed that he used an optical projection technique, is the fact that no drawings, or sketches by Caravaggio have ever been identified and furthermore there is no evidence of under drawing on the canvases.** Indeed, Holbein much earlier, in 1533, in the *Ambassadors*, in the National Gallery, undoubtedly used a mirror-lens, evidenced not only by the remarkably foreshortened lute, but also for the amazing accuracy of the globe and the renowned, much cited example of Anamorphosis, the '*distorted skull*', impossible to conceive without optics; digital correction confirms that the skull can be returned to its original shape.



The Ambassadors, 1533, Hans Holbein the Younger, oil on panel, N.G. London

Detail of Lute, Globe, book on mathematics and Hymnal etc. The two books have different vanishing points at different levels, which in analytical perspective means different eye levels. This indicates that they were seen at different times from different

viewpoints, suggesting the painting was constructed using a mirror-lens.



Boy Bitten by a Lizard, 1596, oil on canvas, Longhi Foundation, Rome

Boy Bitten by a Lizard in the Longhi Foundation in Rome, is another half length painting thought to have been produced around this period, or possibly a little earlier. There is a definite reminiscence of Sofonisba Anguisciola's drawing, *Portrait of Her Son Bitten by a Crayfish*. The young model is shown at precisely the moment when he reacts to the pain and jerks his hand away.

The work is revolutionary in marking the advent of the instantaneous in painting.

The American critic Bernard Berenson, not it must be noted an enthusiastic advocate of Caravaggio, perceived this as astonishingly innovative and for people of the time, the effect must have been revelatory. There may be an allegorical intention, reflecting the pain inherent in love; the model's bare shoulder and flower behind his ear may identify him as a prostitute. The beautiful reflections in the carafe of water would become a feature in the several versions of *The Lute Player*.



Portrait of her Son Bitten by a Crayfish, 1554, Sofonisba Anguisciola, Capodimonte, Naples

It is likely that the French dealer Valentin acted as an intermediary with Caravaggio's early patrons and for several years he would remain a very influential figure in his life. It was Valentin, who first advised Caravaggio to paint religious subjects in the period that Caravaggio spent amongst the low life of Rome, having left d'Arpino's studio. It was also in the studio of Cavalier d'Arpino that Caravaggio met the painter Prospero Orsi, who would become a close friend and drinking companion.

After leaving the Studio of Cavalier d'Arpino, to return to the low life of the taverns, drinking with his friends in an atmosphere clouded in mystery, it was his friend Prospero, who persuaded by his talent, encouraged him to become independent. It was as if Prospero had undergone a conversion. A powerful advocate for his friend, he was in touch with many noble families and was so insistent in his advocacy of Caravaggio, that his

efforts were resented by other painters. However, it was eventually through the dealer, Constantino Spada, that Caravaggio attracted the attention of Cardinal del Monte.



The Fortune Teller, 1596, oil on canvas, Louvre

According to Mancini, Caravaggio painted *The Fortune Teller* whilst he was staying with Monsignor Petrigani. It was acquired by Cardinal del Monte for eight scudi. By 1657, it was in the collection of Prince Camillo Pamphilj, from where it was sent as a present to Louis XIV, when Gian Lorenzo Bernini visited Paris in 1665. By 1683 it was in Versailles, where it remained until the French Revolution, when it was transferred to the Louvre. Mancini described the action as, a gypsy girl telling a youngster's fortune. She demonstrates her roguishness by faking a smile, as she removes a ring from his finger. He by his naivety and libidinousness, unaware that he is being robbed, smiles at her. The model for the boy is quite possibly Mario Minniti, a Sicilian painter, who was Caravaggio's roommate. The biographer Bellori states that the artist hand-picked the gypsy girl from the street to prove that he did not need to copy the works of the masters of antiquity:

“When he was shown the 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.” Bellori then added, “and in these two half-figures, he translated reality so purely that it came to confirm what he said.”

The narratives of both this and *The Cardsharps*, were repeated with variations by many of Caravaggio's contemporaries and followers, including the French painters Georges de la Tours and Valentin de Boulogne and the Dutch painter Dirck van Baburen.

Cardinal Del Monte, came from a noble family, his baptism having been attended by figures no less eminent than the poet Pietro Aretino, Titian and the sculptor and architect Jacopo Sansovina. At the Montefeltro court of Urbino, the setting for Baldassare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, Del Monte

enjoyed a youth distinguished by refined and subtle worldly pleasures of poetry, music and leisure. He became the Duke of Tuscany's ambassador to the Pope and as such lived in the Palazzo Madama. He read Ancient Greek and Hebrew, loved music and poetry and was always open to new ideas, in fact very much the late Renaissance man. Del Monte's first purchases, *'The Cardsharps'* and *'The Gypsy Fortune Teller'*, are dated c1596. *The Cardsharps* won Caravaggio immediate and considerable success. Cardinal del Monte could hardly believe his eyes, such was the naturalism and novelty of the composition with its sense of theatre. Here there was no sign of Mannerism, but thoroughly believable protagonists, wearing malicious, or perverse expressions; the trickery of the cheats is here for all to see. Card playing and gambling was commonplace at all levels of Roman society and so the narrative would have been very much a contemporary occurrence. Radiography has confirmed that the composition was painted on a used canvas and the many pentimenti testify to the fact that no under-drawing was employed.



The Cardsharps, 1596, oil on canvas, Kimbell Museum, USA

After purchasing this painting, del Monte rescued Caravaggio from the streets and gave him an honoured place in his household. Caravaggio moved into the Palazzo Madama in the Autumn of 1597 and through del Monte won introduction to the Roman elite. As a result he became a prominent artist, controversial, admired and hated in equal measure, but, above all, famous, which was his greatest wish. At this time, del Monte had assumed the directorship of the Academia di San Luca from Cardinal Frederico Borromeo, the first director when the Academy was set up in 1593. It was Borromeo, who was largely responsible for ensuring that artists were aware of the guidelines decided upon at the 25th and last session of the Council of Trent in 1563.

The Concert of Young People (The Musicians) in the Metropolitan also belongs to this period and was probably the first work by the artist commissioned by Cardinal del Monte. It is rooted in Venetian art, in the concert pictures of Giorgione and Titian, such as *Le Concert Champetre* of 1509 in the Louvre. The painting marks a distinct change in Caravaggio's choice of subject, which must of course have been influenced by his new life under the protection of Cardinal del Monte. The artist was now in the midst of a cultivated milieu, where artists, musicians, poets and fellow art lovers regularly met. The Cardinal was not the only enlightened aristocrat to appreciate Caravaggio's potential and while his

work was not yet that well known, these interested parties remained keen to commission works; in other words, the Cardinal did not enjoy a monopoly of his attention.



The Musicians, 1597, oil on canvas, Metropolitan, New York

The Musicians is a pivotal work in the development of Caravaggio's style, one of the first in which he attempted to bring together multiple figures. The elaboration of the design was evidently a challenge, another step in the progression from the two figure *Fortune Teller* and the three figure, *The Cardsharps*. In all of Caravaggio's work, there is an absence of Renaissance classical draftsmanship, the structure of the figures being derived by the external appearance of light and shade, as projected on the canvas. Through trial and error, the artist was trying to identify the optimal paint application techniques to reproduce what he observed from the combination of the projected image and the models before him, to give the optimal three dimensional illusion. Unlike the later works, that demonstrate the self-assurance and affirmative understanding of the new perception that Caravaggio achieved, the hesitations, repetitions and corrections present in this painting, give some idea of the difficulties he had in translating what he saw into two dimensions. New techniques in the scientific examination of paintings are revealing the sequence of compositional components in such paintings, the materials he used and the optical devices that were undoubtedly involved in capturing the images, piece by piece.

The lute player is tuning his instrument, whilst the singer studies his music and behind them the cornetto player, almost certainly the first surviving self portrait, turns to look at the viewer. Painted naturalistically and yet there is a theatrical, somewhat mythological and pastoral aura about the composition. A winged cupid in the background, with a quiver full of arrows, unheeded by the rapt musicians, plucks grapes, reminding us that music and wine both lighten the spirits and prepare for love. Cardinal del Monte's friend Vincenzo Giustiniani, delighted in the skill of musicians and seeing

this painting in his friend's Palazzo, may then have been inspired to commission the *Lute Player*, or as more recent evidence suggests, had the Cardinal already commissioned *Apollo the Lute Player*.

Here rather than having four figures in front of him, Caravaggio has worked sequentially on each figure. The idea of using the same model for different poses, definitely that of Cupid on the left of the image and the boy reading the music on the right, was probably already part of Caravaggio's technique, as there is a strong likelihood that the young dupe in the *Cardsharps*, is the same model as his opponent across the table. New images of *The Musicians*, both Xray and Infrared, confirm the incremental character of Caravaggio's working method. The principal figure of the Lute Player was worked on quite elaborately, before the major feature of the red Damask cloth was added, covering his right-hand side, already fully detailed. The other figures were then progressively added.

In *Bacchus*, again the model is his painter companion, Mario Minniti. Bacchus is depicted in a classical pose, sitting on a triclinium, playing with the draw-strings of the loosely draped robe. The painting was commissioned by del Monte, who gave it as a present to his employer, Ferdinand I de Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany in 1608, on the occasion of the marriage of the Grand Duke's son. The painting was unknown to the public, as it stayed for centuries hidden in the private quarters of its owners, only to be rediscovered in 1913 in the storage of the Uffizi, after which it was firmly attributed to Caravaggio.

On his head Bacchus is wearing a crown of vine leaves and bunches of grapes as befits the God of Wine and in his left hand he holds a glass of wine by the bottom of the stem, as if captured in the act of offering it to the viewer (viewed in person, ripples are depicted in the meniscus, indicating the movement of the arm). In front, on the stone-table is a ceramic bowl of fruit, apples, pears, grapes, apricots and a pomegranate, some with blemishes, whilst some is frankly rotten. As already highlighted with *The Basket of Fruit*, such images are regarded as vanitas symbols, symbolic of the transitory nature of life and the worthlessness of worldly goods. To the right of the figure is a decanter of wine, whose shadow is faithfully depicted on the surface of the table and in the meniscus of which has been identified, the image of the artist.



Bacchus, 1597, oil on canvas, Uffizi.

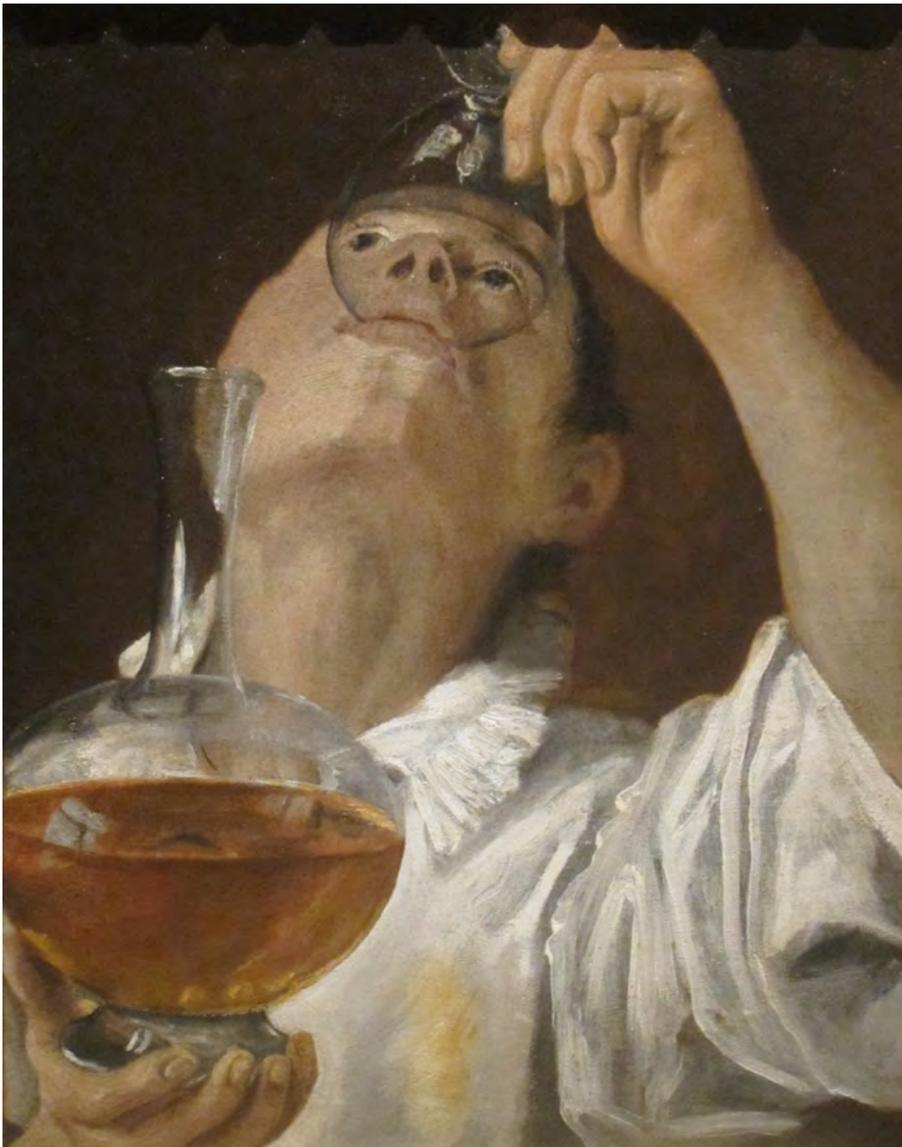


Sick Bacchus, 1596, oil on canvas, Borghese.

The question arises as to why the glass of wine is in his left hand. Most people lift a glass of wine in their right hand, glasses and cups are traditionally laid out on the right at dinner, military salutes are given with the right hand and we usually shake hands with our right hands and so on, even if we are left-handed for writing etc. So is it a coincidence that towards the end of the 16th century, **when convex lenses, which reverse the image**, were first used, that quite suddenly there are so many left-handed drinkers depicted in paintings; a further example is *Boy Drinking Wine*, by Annibale Carracci, painted in 1583 and illustrated below, one of the earliest examples, followed closely by Caravaggio and the phenomenon lasted for about forty years, when good quality flat mirrors used in combination with the convex lens reversed the image back again.

Again, comparing the two depictions of Bacchus, in the Borghese version, the body appears very close to the viewer, as one would expect with a mirror-lens montage, where the effect is to bring the subject closer to the picture plane. However, in the later Uffizi version, the subject appears much further away. This is the effect that one would expect from a conventional convex lens, which can project a much wider field of view, with a larger 'sweet-spot of precise focus' and therefore more of the figure is shown in one go.

Hockney in his *Secret Knowledge*, regards these two paintings as **marking a radical shift in how Caravaggio produced his subsequent paintings**. It is proposed by Hockney and others, that by the time that the Uffizi Bacchus was painted, Caravaggio was already under the roof and protection of Cardinal del Monte, in whose circle, Galileo and Giovanni Battista Della Porta mixed.



Boy Drinking Wine, oil on canvas, Annabile Carracci, Cleveland Museum of Art.

Giovanni Battista Della Porta was an especially interesting personality in the court of Cardinal del Monte. He was a scholar, polymath and playwright, regarded in his time as something of a magician, who perfected the camera obscura and in a 1589 edition of *Natural Magic*, described this device as having a convex lens; in 1589 he published, *De Refractione optics*. He was also the author of other scientific publications on agriculture, cryptography, meteorology and human physiology. Between Galileo and Della Porta, undoubtedly lies the source of the convex and parabolic lenses that came into Caravaggio's possession around 1597, when he entered the Cardinal's Palazzo Madama in 1597.



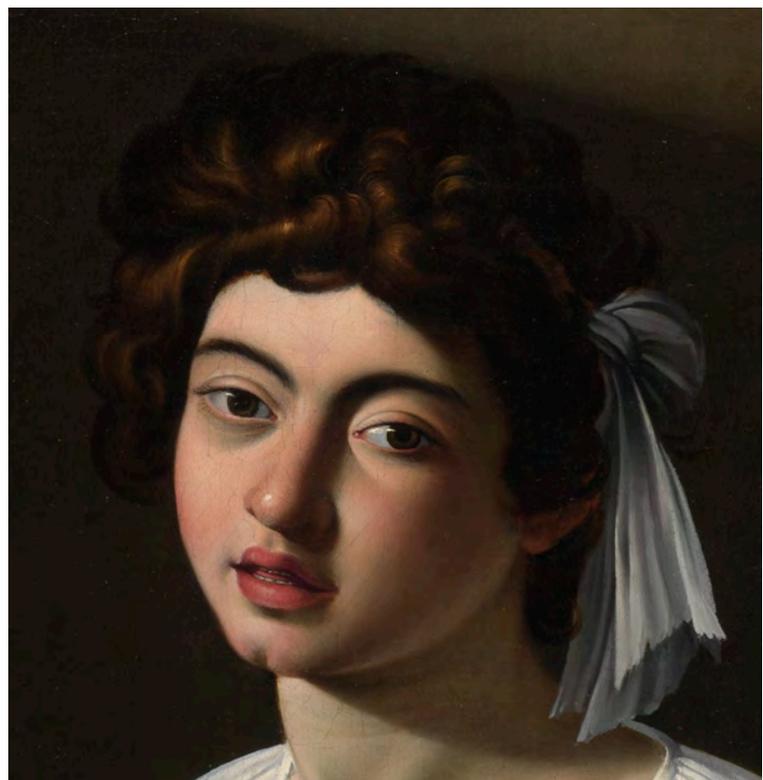
The Lute Player, 1596-7, oil on canvas, Hermitage



Apollo the Lute Player, 1596-7, oil on canvas, Badminton House Version, Private

In the Hermitage *Lute Player* of c1597, of which there is at least one other version, Caravaggio again employed one of his favourite models, his friend the painter Mario Minniti. This is undoubtedly one of Caravaggio's most poetic and beguiling compositions and consequently most admired. Again we recognise Caravaggio's allegorical intention, music traditionally being the food of love. The good looking youth is clad in a loose fitting shirt, framed on one side by a vase of flowers, painted more loosely than the musical instruments, which are truly mimetic in their representation. Also again we see the strong lighting from the figure's right. But most amazing is the evocation of the incredibly foreshortened Lute, the appearance of the violin and the manner in which the musical score follows so accurately the curve of the page. The lute, long associated with love, was considered the most noble and refined of instruments.

In the musical score, or Part book, are portions of four madrigals by Jacques Arcadelt (1515-68), all passionate love songs; the visible text reading "Vous savez que je vous aime et vous adore...Je fus votre." The fruit itself carries an erotic charge and yet here it is veiled, courtly, far removed from the bawdy humour of North Italian concert scenes. Vincenzo Giustiniani recalls that as a boy he had studied the music of Arcadelt and in a sense the painting looks back to Giustiniani's youth and laments the transience of life and the passing of youth. The choice of a Franco-Flemish composer, no doubt reflects the cultural and political affiliations of the pro-French Del Monte-Giustiniani circle.



Close-ups of Badminton House version

In both the Hermitage *Lute Player* and the Badminton House, *Apollo the Lute Player*, there are beautiful still-lives of a bunch of flowers in a glass vase, which on first sight appear identical. However, there are subtle differences to the arrangement, most obviously a pink peoni, or rose bloom present in the Badminton House version, but absent from the Hermitage one. There are also wonderful reflections of a blanked-out and another brightly lit window, similar to that in *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*, strongly suggesting that this may be the same room as that used for the *Calling of St Matthew*. The beam of light

across the rear wall has an upper limit that would appear to be the shutter of the window in the *Calling*. The carafe thought to be a cut-and-paste motif from a separate projected image, where the principal light came from a window at more, or less the same level as the carafe itself; such a complex illustration of refracted light is unprecedented in the 16th century and was undoubtedly arrived at as a result of collaboration with Del Monte and more particularly Della Porta, who was the guiding spirit behind the foundation in 1603 of the Accademia dei Lincei. His *De Refractione Optics* (1593) was particularly concerned with optical matters, the second volume being entirely devoted to the incidence of light on water-filled and glass spheres.

The carafe of flowers is now thought to originate in a still-life painting owned by the Cardinal, which he would appear to have bought from the dealer Valentin, before he met Caravaggio and may well be the source for the minor variations seen between the Hermitage and Badminton House versions. That painting was bought at the sale of Del Monte's collection on his death, in a lot including *The Musicians*, but has never been seen since. The flowers correspond with those illustrated by Giovanni Battista della Porta in his *Magia Naturale*, as ones corresponding to vision, from the marigold that looks like the sun, the yellow cornflower that resembles the eyebright that was used since the middle ages as an ingredient for eye remedies; irises dominate the top of the arrangement, symbolic of Eros, the mythological messenger of the Gods.

Here it's worth pointing out that when *Apollo the Lute Player* was offered for auction at Sotheby's in New York on 25th January 2001, lot 179, the painting was sold for just 110,000 \$, attributed only to the circle of Caravaggio. Clovis Whitfield, previously of the Courtauld and author of *Caravaggio's Eye*, questioned this attribution, suggesting Caravaggio himself and further, that this was not a copy of the original in the Hermitage, but more likely the picture commissioned by Cardinal del Monte, that is the original. As proof, Whitfield has stated that various adjustments, such as the profile of the boy's hands had been made and there were incised brush-handle marks characteristic of Caravaggio; this would not have been done if a copy. This would seem the most obvious scenario, as the Marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani was a particular associate of the Cardinal and could have commissioned his version, on seeing the Badminton House version in the Palazzo Madama. Originally covered in thick yellow varnish, it corresponds in all details with the description given by Giovanni Baglione of the work he saw at Cardinal del Monte's palace:

"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 very exquisite care. And this (he said) was the best piece that he ever painted."

This contemporary description and the considerable number of *pentimenti*, incisions made in the wet paint with the brush-handle, set the Badminton house painting apart from the Hermitage version, being also slightly larger. Notwithstanding, Sothebys has refused to accept that the Badminton House painting is the original, or even painted by the master, despite expert opinion, including that of the renowned Caravaggio expert, Sir Denis Mahon and others.

The Wildenstein *Lute Player*, is a markedly different composition from the two versions already discussed. Here an ornate carpet covers the table, in itself unusual for Caravaggio, as even with a lens of the quality and size then available, the depiction of the pattern would have been an unwarranted additional challenge. In place of the carafe of flowers is a spinetta, a small keyboard instrument and in front of the music and violin, a tenor recorded. On loan to the Metropolitan in New York until 2013, when it was taken back by the family, there is now considerable doubt as to its authenticity.

In the Wildenstein version, the six course lute has been replaced by what appears to be a seven course instrument, similar to the lute in the Metropolitan *Musicians*, complete with its ebony pegs and fingerboard, ebony edging to the soundboard and ebony strips between the ribs of the back. The shape of the peg-box too with its wider end is similar to the Lute in the *Musicians*.



The Lute Player, 1596-7, oil on canvas, Wildenstein version

According to David Van Edwards, a lute maker, who carried out intensive examination and comparison of the technical features of the Wildenstein painting and the instruments depicted, also noted a peculiarity of the visible end of the lute bridge, where the ends appear to turn down rather than upwards towards the top of the instrument; this would be expected for Italian Lute bridges of the time. If anything it looks like a back-to-front mandora bridge from the 18th century. In general, the depiction of the bridge betrays complete uncertainty about what the actual nature of the structure is. Clovis Whitfield concurs suggesting that Caravaggio's obsessive observation of detail was such, that these oversights disqualify its comparison with the Hermitage and Badminton House versions.

A violin appears in at least four of Caravaggio's early paintings, *The Musicians*, *The Hermitage* and *Badminton House* versions of *The Lute Player* and the *Flight into Egypt*. The appearance of the violin is also different in several respects, between the Hermitage and Badminton House paintings when compared with the Wildenstein version; it is unstrung and the bow is situated below the neck of the instrument, whereas in the aforementioned, the bow lies under the strings near the bridge.

There are several other figurative inconsistencies, namely the inconsistency in the effects of the lighting, on the sleeve and cloth covering the elbow. Finally, given that the features are similar, the Wildenstein face of the lute player displays a flatness and lifelessness of flesh tones, entirely at odds with that in both the Badminton and Hermitage versions. All of the issues above highlighted, are discussed much more fully by the aforementioned David Van Edwards, who has written extensively on the subject.



Lute from Badminton House Apollo the Lute Player for comparison with Wildenstein version above

The table top in the Wildenstein version is also problematical. Unlike the Hermitage and Badminton House pictures, where the perspective of the stone table top appears in harmony with the remainder of the composition, the Wildenstein table top is clearly observed from a higher vantage point than the figure itself and when the two are viewed

simultaneously, the table appears to slope sharply downwards towards the viewer. Indeed, the catalogue for an exhibition of the Wildenstein version actually admits to this discrepancy, stating that it is worth noting that there is no single vanishing point and that Caravaggio had returned to an empirical approach to perspective. This makes no sense, as if it is as accepted in the catalogue, that the Wildenstein, is a later version, why would Caravaggio have first painted the Hermitage and Badminton versions using a 'modern-seemingly unified perspective', afterwards to have his interest aroused in perspective theory by Del Monte's brother in order to return to a more primitive type of spatial construction, which he had never previously used, just for this one picture; and afterwards to paint with a unified optical projection based perspective for the rest of his life.

Concerns over attribution of paintings is a concern for all Old Master paintings, especially where works of great value are concerned. For instance, the Wildenstein *Lute Player* has been valued at \$79 million, but would realise a small fraction of that if concerns expressed over attribution are upheld. Conversely, the Badminton House *Apollo the Lute Player*, was sold in 2001 at Sotheby's New York as the work of the little known, Carlo Magnone, when in truth its almost certainly the original by Caravaggio, with a potential value of \$100 million. As already highlighted, the positive identification of autograph paintings by the master did not really begin until the late 19th century and only really gained momentum in the 1920's. Some of his works were misattributed to somewhat lesser mortals such as Cecco del Caravaggio and Bartolomeo Manfredi, but others to more highly regarded masters such as Jusepe de Ribera and Gerrit van Honthorst. Whilst Caravaggio had few students, the Sicilian Mario Minniti, is well documented, there were associates, most prominent amongst them, Orazio Gentileschi and Giovanni Baglione, until that is the libel trial in 1603. However, there were other Italian contemporary painters, Antiveduto Grammatica, Giovanni Galli, Giovanni Caracciolo and even the young Artemesia Gentileschi who began to work in his style and even more followers after his premature death; the Dutch and French Caravaggisti and the aforementioned Jusepe Ribera and Francisco Zuburan. However, with further archival research and as his painting technique becomes better understood and his corpus of work more clearly defined, concerns over attribution should become less of an issue.

Acknowledgements and suggested reading:

Caravaggio's Eye, 2010, Clovis Whitfield, Paul Holberton Publishing

The Trouble with Caravaggio, 2014, Clovis Whitfield, Available to download as pdf

Secret Knowledge, 2009, David Hockney, Thames & Hudson

A Life Sacred and Profane, 2010, Andrew Graham-Dixon, Penguin

Lute News, No. 50, June 1999, David Van Edwards, Available to download as pdf