

Distorted images

Few artists have been as misrepresented as Caravaggio. This sensible survey at last gets us somewhere near the truth

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CARAVAGGIO: The Complete Paintings

by SEBASTIAN SCHUTZE

Taschen £100 pp306

I doubt that any artist has ever been misunderstood as fiercely as Caravaggio (1571-1610). Certainly among the Old Masters his case is unique. Since the shocking rediscovery of his career at the start of the 20th century, the image we have of him has slalomed at an extraordinary lick from the misty to the unlikely to the thoroughly silly. The first defining exhibition of his paintings (the first show to give him a tangible and observable career) was not mounted until 1951, when Roberto Longhi, the pioneering Caravaggio scholar, assembled a selection of the known Caravaggios in Milan. Since then it has been open season for the fantasists.

A charitable view of Caravaggio-mania is to see it as proof of the visceral nature of his talents: his art speaks so vividly to its modern audience that we eagerly assume it was intended for us. My realisation that these passions were blinding us to the truth can be dated to 1986, when Derek Jarman released that absurdly sweaty biopic in which a topless Caravaggio careers through baroque Rome gathering rent boys and knifing rivals. Jarman's horny vision was a crystal-clear case of modern values being projected from Old Compton Street onto the past.

Until 2000, I imagined that Jarman's Caravaggio could never be surpassed in its degree of misunderstanding. Then the Australian Caravaggio-hunter, Peter Robb, published *M* (it stands for Caravaggio's proper name, Michelangelo Merisi), a tome of such extraordinary tremulousness that it seemed actually to struggle in your hands like a lifted chicken. Robb's Caravaggio was a violent lunatic so unbalanced that you wondered how he managed to stay vertical long enough to complete a single painting, let alone enjoy the busy and fruitful career that he actually had. Caravaggio was undoubtedly turbulent, and occasionally violent, and one of his brawls culminated in a

murder, but that doesn't make him a guy in a slasher movie.

It had to stop. This projecting backwards of wayward modern understandings needed to be replaced by some proper scholarship. Recent Caravaggio thinking has duly sought to recognise the religious complexion of his art and to place him at the centre of Catholicism's counter-reformatory fight-back. Even here, though, some have gone too far and imagined a fully programmed religious plan for him.

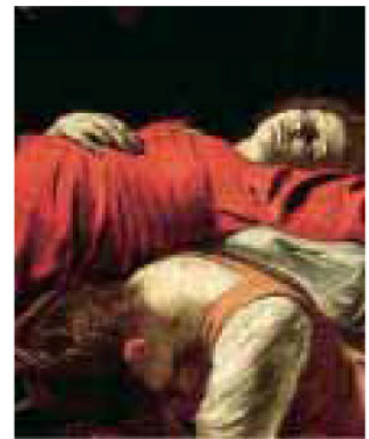
All of which is worth worrying about because 2010 is the 400th anniversary of Caravaggio's premature death, and a fresh tsunami of material is heading our way. When I heard that Taschen was to launch the torrent with a huge new edition of Caravaggio's complete paintings, I admit to fearing the worst. Restraint is hardly a Taschen characteristic. But this summation

of Caravaggio's output is impressively sensible and nonsense-free.

The distorting of Caravaggio was originally made possible by an unusual shortage of real information about him. Not a single letter has survived. Not a single drawing. He wrote no treatises or autobiographical snippets. There is no will, no contemporary estate record. The two brief biographies of him that appeared after his death were written by cultural enemies who were

using him to define their own aesthetic programmes. This absence of facts has been the desert in which all the crazy Caravaggio cacti have sprouted.

Sebastian Schütze has chosen, therefore, to concentrate on the one reliable source we have: the paintings. Dispensing with most of the biographical imaginings that have had such a disfiguring effect on Caravaggio scholarship, Schütze has looked deeply and unwaveringly at the art.



A detail from *The Death of the Virgin*

Caravaggio's baptismal name, Michelangelo, was bequeathed to him by chance, not, as some have suggested, by a family decision to parallel his famous artistic predecessor. He was born in Milan on September 29, 1571, the Feast of St Michael. When plague broke out in the city, he was sent to the small Lombard town of Caravaggio where his family ran several businesses. That is all we know for sure about his beginnings except that he was apprenticed in his late teens to a local painter, Simone Peterzano, and that by 1592 he was in Rome.

No art from his student years in Milan has survived. Which gives the series of mysterious and fascinating portrayals of Bacchus with which he commenced his Roman career an almost miraculous air. The passages detailing this catherine wheel of an arrival on the scene are the book's weakest. By trying too hard to remain objective, Schütze fails to convey the sheer excitement of Caravaggio's debut. A little less sangfroid and a little more trembling would have been in order. We need only look at the countless variations on Caravaggio's originals that began immediately to be churned out internationally — a representative sample is also collected in the book — to sense the hugeness of his impact.

The author, though, comes into his own in the discussion that follows of the religious art that Caravaggio begins now to concentrate on and revolutionise as the 16th century clicks over into the 17th. It is here that sensibleness pays its best dividends. One of the more misleading fantasies about Caravaggio, often repeated, is that the Roman clergy kept rejecting his art because it was shocked by it. Schütze carefully examines the few cases where plans were changed or pictures altered and finds a realistic explanation for all of them.

The most notorious Caravaggio rejection, of the magnificent Death of the Virgin

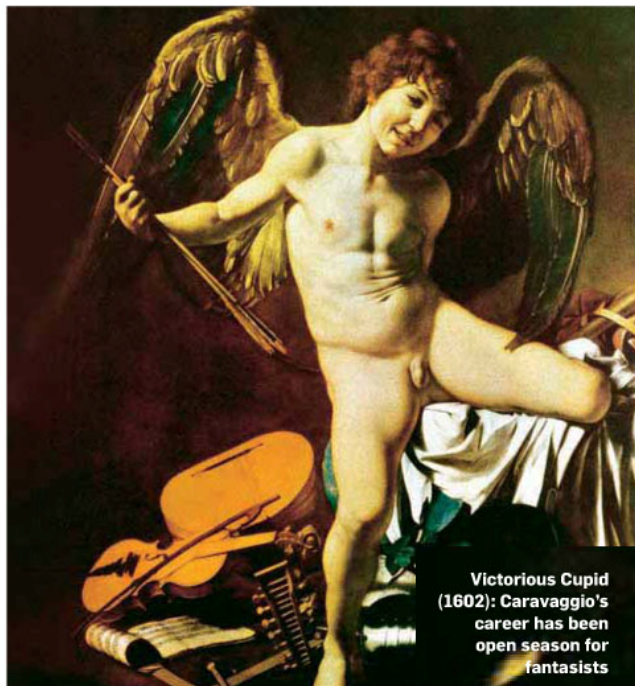
that now hangs in the Louvre, was said by his jealous biographers to have been caused by "errors of decorum". The woman who modelled for the dead Virgin was, they claimed, a whore fished out of the river. This ridiculous suggestion that Caravaggio used dead prostitutes as models has convinced enough swallows of the Caravaggio myth for it to keep being repeated. But by following the course of the commission and seeing what

happened when Caravaggio was replaced, Schütze is able to reach the thoroughly likely conclusion that Caravaggio's Virgin was rejected on canonical grounds. The commissioning monks wanted a Mary who was less deceased and more divine.

So this author has brought some ordinariness back to Caravaggio. I could hardly pay him a higher compliment. Always beginning with the art, he paints a truthful-feeling picture of a creative one-off whose ambition to make his art vivid, pluck it out of the clouds and plonk it before our faces, is revolutionary by default. Even in his last difficult years after fleeing Rome in 1606 after that fatal brawl, as he flitted restlessly from Naples to Malta to Sicily, the dark religious art he produced turns out to have been impressively sentient.

Where the book is certainly not ordinary is in the size and quality of its illustrations. One of the reasons why Caravaggio has had the belated impact he has is because of the cinematic drama of his art. This Taschen masterclass in reproduction offers thrilling proof of those talents.

Available at the Sunday Times BooksFirst price of £90 (including p&p) on 0845 271 2135



Victorious Cupid (1602): Caravaggio's career has been open season for fantasists