

# The Caravaggio season opens for scholars

Two substantial books mark the literary launch of the artist's 400th anniversary celebrations

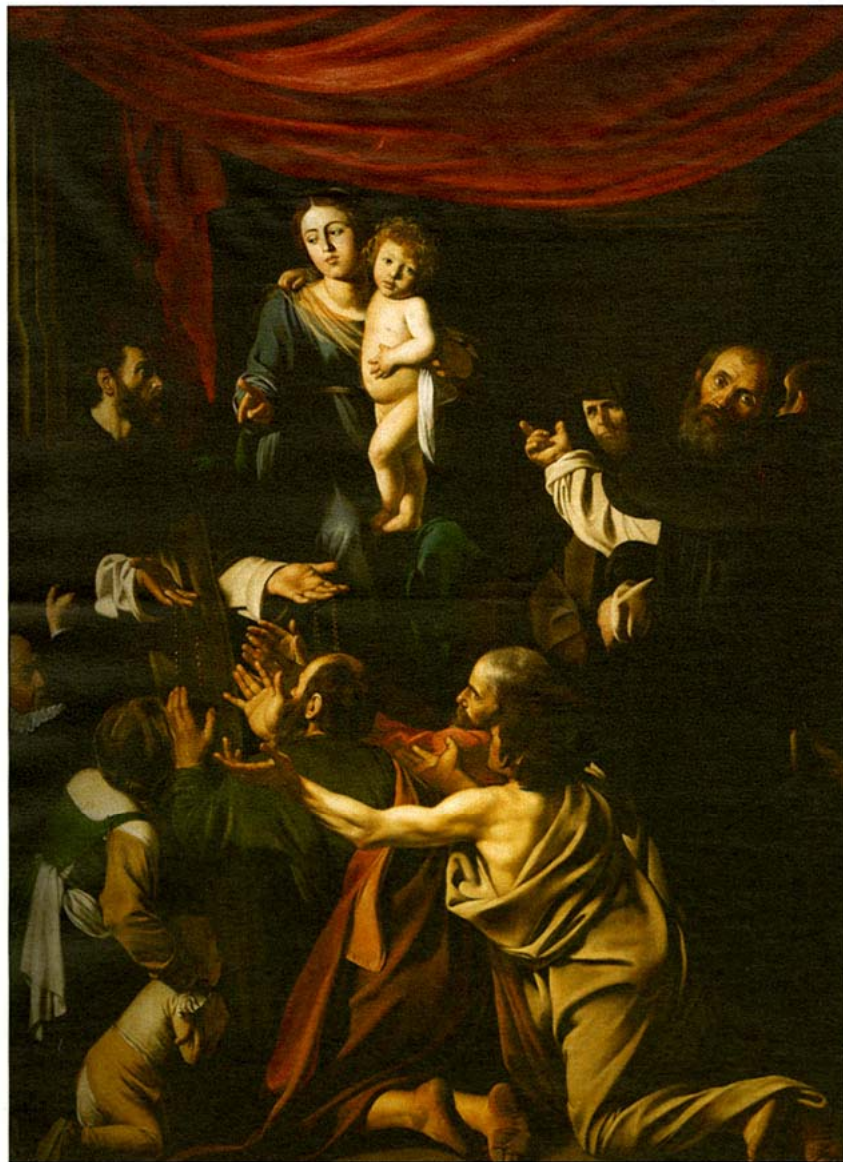
It is not surprising that, on the fourth centenary of Caravaggio's death (1610) and with the numerous exhibitions and events scheduled for this year across the world to celebrate his artistic achievements, scholars might be tempted to offer the public new monographs on the Italian master. Also, it is fortunate that two outstanding German scholars, Sybille Ebert-Schifferer and Sebastian Schütze, have seized this opportunity to produce two excellent books on Caravaggio's painting: the former, *Caravaggio. Sehens-Staunen-Glauben. Der Maler und sein Werk* (also translated into French); and the latter, *Caravaggio: the Complete Works* (of which a German version also exists).

Elegantly written and accurately informed, both works present Caravaggio's deeds and misdeeds, artistic career and production chronologically in four *tempi*, from his origins and training in Lombardy through his difficult beginnings and nascent success in late 16th-century Rome, and from the apogee of his Roman career in the early 1600s through the last years spent in exile between Naples, Malta and Sicily.

Of course, each author approaches the subject with his or her own bias and sensibility. More attuned to technical and aesthetic issues, Ebert-Schifferer explores Caravaggio's painting more formally, by dwelling on the master's complex methods of working directly on the canvas, and succinctly expounding the structural specificities of each composition. For this reason, her book might be more suited to students who wish to become acquainted with Caravaggio's art and critical literature.

More interested in historical and cultural phenomena, Schütze reconstructs with remarkable erudition the diverse milieus in which Caravaggio evolved, the concrete circumstances in which his pictures were produced, and his patrons' expectations. In tandem with the sumptuous reproductions that illustrate his volume, most of them amazingly good with a few exceptions (for instance, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, 1601-02, and *The Annunciation*, 1608-09), Schütze's detailed readings of Caravaggio's works efficiently guide the reader through the diverse aspects of the iconography, and therefore might be particularly attractive to Caravaggio neophytes.

Given Caravaggio's extravagant life, both authors take great pleasure in browsing through the master's misadventures. However, though the artist's brawls and brothel escapades, the murder and nocturnal escape from prison obviously provide the authors with thrilling material to capture the reader's attention, they proceed matter-of-factly and cautiously, never indulging in gossip innuendo. Schütze in a



Caravaggio, *Our Lady of the Rosary*, around 1605-06

drier vein, Ebert-Schifferer with more piquancy.

Refreshingly enough, both volumes drastically reassess and whittle down the corpus of Caravaggio's painting. Independently from one another but with similar results, Ebert-Schifferer and Schütze reject as inauthentic or dubious many paintings that, in spite of the prestigious support with which distinguished Caravaggio scholars such as Mina Gregori, Denis Mahon and Maurizio Marini have sought in the past decades to demonstrate their originality, neither live up to the master's portentous craftsmanship nor conform to his style and poetics. In this regard, I must regrettably denounce the oddity of Ebert-Schifferer's checklist of works at the end of her volume, which can by no means be considered a catalogue since, among other anomalies, the author does not explain on what criteria and for what reasons a painting has been maintained as

authentic or implicitly expunged. For instance, there is no mention of Caravaggio's *Ecce Homo* in Genoa, around 1606, a superb original discovered by Roberto Longhi in 1953-54; nowhere in her volume is recorded the beautiful *Narcissus*, around 1597-99 (Palazzo Barberini, Rome), which the author apparently does not attribute to Caravaggio (with reason in my opinion).

On the other hand, Schütze's catalogue of paintings, articulated in two sections—original and attributed works—supplies the reader with a clearly structured critical tool, but is not immune to criticism.

First of all, the author inexplicably introduces some copies of Caravaggio's paintings along with the originals, thereby creating a sort of hermeneutical hybrid unusual for a catalogue. Still more disconcerting is the co-existence among the attributed works of both paintings that the author is prone to accepting as

originals (for instance, the Genoa *Ecce Homo*) and paintings that he assigns to other hands. In a few entries of the second section, one is, furthermore, unable to find the author's specific opinion or argument with regard to the painting's authenticity. Although space does not allow me to comment on Schütze's attributions, I find his insertion of the so-called portrait of Giambattista Marino among the originals extremely strange, not only because, placed between the *Crucifixion of St Peter*, around 1600-01, and the *London Supper at Emmaus*, around 1600-01, it appears out of context and of a much poorer quality, but also because the sitter by no means resembles Marino. At any rate, Schütze's level-headedness in judging the originality of Caravaggio's work is highly welcome and praiseworthy in many respects.

## Chronology problems

Evidently, both Ebert-Schifferer and Schütze have had trouble establishing the chronology of Caravaggio's early paintings: a delicate question that deserved much more space and reflection. Although both authors acknowledge the novelty and revolutionary charge of Caravaggio's painting, they come to divergent conclusions in this regard.

For Schütze, Caravaggio's originality resides in what he defines as the actualisation of the *historia sacra* (the sacred narrative): "The aim of Caravaggio's interpretation of the *historia sacra* was to transport it into modern times and illuminate it from a human perspective, to provide a visual answer, as it were, to the question of what it could mean in concrete terms for his contemporaries and their religious convictions." On this premise, Schütze systematically interprets Caravaggio's paintings as radical expressions of Counter-Reformation religiosity. Noticeably, the author tends to forget that the *historia sacra* is the most elaborate and thoroughly reflected upon pictorial institution of the early modern period. More often than not, Caravaggio's paintings disobey, disrupt or subvert the many principles and tenets of this noble genre. As for Caravaggio's tendency to actualise, an accurate analysis of his works would undoubtedly prove that the definition of "actualisation" and the mapping of its applications are much more problematic than one would expect.

## Unusual strategies

Ebert-Schifferer's interpretation of Caravaggio's novelty relies on two specific elements: the master's self-fashioning in view of the contemporary art market and his "concettismo". I agree with the author when she stresses that, especially upon his arrival in Rome, Caravaggio tried to adopt unusual strategies of marketing: among others, the development of the half figure and the single figure as pictorial sub-genres, allowing the artist greater liberty of expression and margins of profit—at least at a further stage of his career: a development that, over time, would become one of the hallmarks of Caravaggio's thought and practice. Also, Ebert-Schifferer suggests that Caravaggio's frequent recourse to patterns and schemas characteristic of Renaissance Venetian painting during his early years in Rome must be construed as a deliberate tactic to signal the newness of his painting: a valuable suggestion that rewards further analysis. More importantly, Ebert-Schifferer asserts that Caravaggio's subtle and sometimes unnoticeable elaborations on canonical Renaissance formulas hint at a discourse on artistic

novelty that is usually associated by scholars with the literary movement of concettismo.

Although I am drawn to the implications of this idea, I see a substantial risk in evaluating Caravaggio's art through the touchstone of 17th-century concettismo literature for two reasons. First, Caravaggio's achievements chronologically precede those of the concettisti, so that his pictorial innovations prefigure, but do not necessarily reflect, those of his fellow literati. Second and more crucially, concettismo as a poetic style ordinarily pertains to the literary genre of lyrics, whereas Caravaggio's production, especially since 1599 onwards, centres on religious painting—a genre that was then paired with the epic. At any rate, it is reductive, in my view, to regard Caravaggio's painting as the counterpart to the concettisti's "art of stunning", for the procedures of the pictorial marvellous are multifarious, and thus need better critical definition.

As a general rule, both Ebert-Schifferer and Schütze tend to "normalise" Caravaggio's art: to consider it as a refined and dramatic manifestation of his own time. Among other things, this tendency becomes evident in the ways that these authors characterise Caravaggio's sexuality. By insisting on his acquaintance with Roman prostitutes—corroborated by

contemporary documents—Schütze disregards the testimony of other sources implying Caravaggio's pederasty: Schütze's Caravaggio ranks in the well-defined category of straight libertinism. On the contrary, Ebert-Schifferer recognises an irrefutable homosexual component in Caravaggio's life and painting, but she dismisses it as wholly normal for this period: "In a time when the denominational identification with forms of sexuality was neither possible nor relevant, it is simply ahistorical to wonder whether Caravaggio's paintings contain an equivalent message." Does the author mean that by transforming the traditional female representation of the lute player into a masculine one, endowed with the same lyrical and amorous undertones, Caravaggio never intended to dislodge the cultural and social conventions of contemporary viewers? If there is nothing provocative in this manipulation of genre and gender, then I must admit that Caravaggio's originality is probably a critical chimera. Fortunately enough, the utter provocation and substantial rebellion of Caravaggio's painting remains a vital matter of discussion, interpretation and discovery.

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□ Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Caravaggio. Sehen-Staunen-Glauben. Der Maler und sein Werk* (C.H. Beck), 320 pp., €58 (hb) ISBN 9783406591402

□ Sebastian Schütze, *Caravaggio: the Complete Works* (Taschen), 306 pp., £99.99 (hb) ISBN 9783836501835