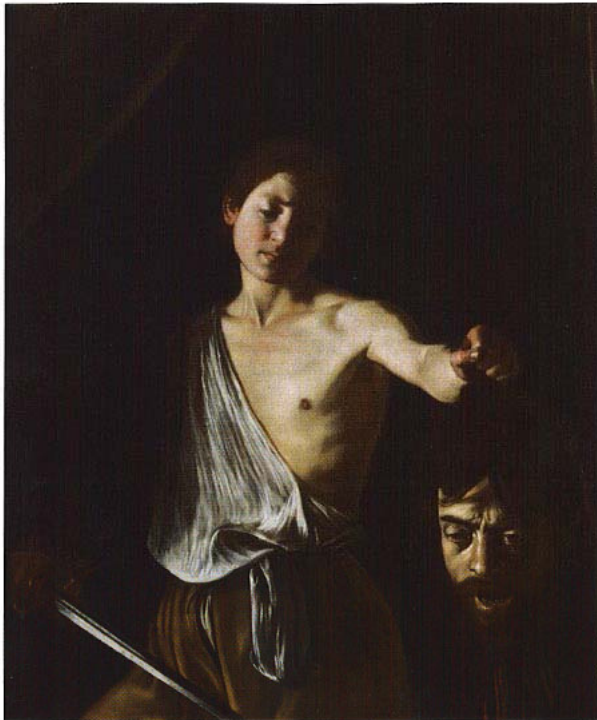


The 400th anniversary of Caravaggio's death prompts fresh debate on his life and art, as well as an exhibition in Rome. *Andrew Graham-Dixon* reviews a new monograph and, in an extract from his forthcoming biography, discusses the artist's famous duel

# Between heaven and hell



*David with the Head of Goliath*, by Caravaggio. Some say it was painted in 1610, the year of his death, others say it was 1606

The art historian Sebastian Schütze has written a bone-dry scholarly book about Caravaggio (1571-1610). His unfailingly level tone of sobriety is all the more remarkable given the dramatic nature of the artist's life and the deeply moving qualities of his art.

Caravaggio's story, even in bald outline, is truly stranger than fiction: the childhood scarred by the loss of all his male relatives to plague; the turbulent years in Rome, when by day he painted some of the greatest pictures in the history of Western art and by night consorted with prostitutes, assassins for hire and other unsavoury characters; the accumulation of a criminal record longer than his own painting arm, including grievous bodily harm, libel, the murder and possible attempted castration of a thuggish pimp Ranuccio Tomassoni (see extract, right); the years of exile in Malta and Sicily; the terrible attack outside a Neapolitan tavern, which left Caravaggio 'a man without a face'; the lonely death in a mosquito-infested garrison town on the coast of Tuscany.

Schütze covers all of this, albeit with great brevity, and sometimes in the clipped tone of an

end-of-term report about a rather disappointing pupil. Published by Taschen, his book is essentially a catalogue with first-class, full-size colour reproductions of all of Caravaggio's principal paintings. It sets out to displace John Spike's earlier monograph, published by Abbeville Press in 2001, as the must-have coffee-table-book-cum-catalogue of the painter's works. It succeeds in almost every way. Although Spike's book has remained invaluable for its comprehensive bibliography, its pictures were not nearly so good. Spike was also unreliable in his attributions.

Schütze is more solid, although even he includes several notably suspect Caravaggios, such as the endlessly touted *Narcissus* (c.1597) from the Barberini collection in Rome. He also fails to rethink the

chronology of Caravaggio's later paintings, the subject of so much recent research. For example, the famous *David with the Head of Goliath* (above) where the blood-gushing head is actually that of Caravaggio himself, is here again consigned to the last year of his life. Yet it seems obvious that Caravaggio painted it for Scipione Borghese in 1606, when he had just been sentenced to death, and that it was a plea for mercy – the painter giving away his head in a painting in the hope of keeping it in real life.

Such flaws aside, this is a book that anyone who loves Caravaggio – and who can afford £100 – will want to own. It is hefty and almost as big as a tombstone (something Caravaggio was never given when he was buried in an unmarked grave in Porto Ercole in 1610). The reproductions are excellent, the details often breathtakingly vivid and beautifully chosen. The sturdiness of the binding is such that the cover closes with the same satisfying thunk as the door of a Mercedes saloon.

**Caravaggio: The Complete Works** by Sebastian Schütze (£99.99, Taschen) **Caravaggio** Scuderie del Quirinale, Rome, 0039 6 39967500, www.scuderiequirinale.it, until 13 June

**Andrew Graham-Dixon has spent more than ten years researching Caravaggio's life and work. In this extract from his new book, he reconsiders the root cause of the infamous duel in which Caravaggio killed the pimp Ranuccio Tomassoni:**

“ Caravaggio probably did have sexual relationships with men, but if so he certainly had female lovers too. There is reason to believe that at the time of the swordfight, he was involved with the wife of his victim. A grim detail of the case suggests that the cause of the duel was a sexual insult or misdemeanour. According to the barber-surgeon who dressed his wounds, Ranuccio Tomassoni bled to death from the femoral artery. Caravaggio had struck him a low blow, aiming perhaps at the groin and missing by just a fraction. Was the artist using his sword as if it were a paintbrush, attempting to mark out the most graphic of sexual insults on the very body of his enemy? Wounds were meaningful, as Caravaggio's friend and model, Fillide Melandroni, had graphically indicated when threatening to cut the face of her own love-rival, Prudenza Zacchia, in the attack of several months earlier. A cut to the face was a *sfregio*, but it was by no means the only form of symbolic, premeditated injury that vengeful Italians inflicted upon their enemies.

The practice was sufficiently common to be mirrored in the provisions of the law, where widely differing penalties were specified for different forms of revenge wound. The fourteenth-century statutes of Florence set a fine of 50 lire for the loss of members including the foot, hand, tongue and eye – but for both eyes the penalty was much steeper. The mid-sixteenth-century statutes of Caravaggio's native Lombardy valued teeth at 50 lire apiece, and set a fine of 500 lire for the amputation of a hand. The loss of a single testicle was assessed at the same rate as four teeth or a tongue, namely 200 lire. The penalty for castration was understandably more than double that, at 500 lire. It is entirely possible that Caravaggio was not actually trying to kill Ranuccio Tomassoni, but attempting to remove his testicles with a duelling sword. ”

**Caravaggio: A Life Sacred and Profane** by Andrew Graham-Dixon (£30, Allen Lane) is published in July