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When in Rome . . .

Caravaggio's violent sensuality and emotional intensity speak directly to our times. By Jackie Wullschlager

On July 18 1610, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, feverish, bedraggled, frightful to behold with knife wounds to his face, died alone in Porto Ercole. He was 38 years old and was buried in an unmarked grave. Wanted for murder, he had been trying to reach Rome from exile in Naples, but was thrown into jail en route and had lost track of the paintings which he hoped might secure a papal pardon. The most notable of these was his gory "David with the Head of Goliath", full of dread, in which he depicted himself as the decapitated Philistine.

The paintings survived and their intense naturalism and dynamic effects of light and shade influenced generations, but Caravaggio as a personality dropped from historical view. No letter, drawing, or document penned by him remains; the sole records in which he appears are those kept by police, along with scant references by contemporaries confirming him as a brilliant troublemaker. "There is also a Michelangelo da Caravaggio who is doing extraordinary things in Rome," the Dutch painter-poet Karel van Mander noted in 1603. "He does not devote himself continually to study, but after a fortnight's work will swagger about a month or two with a sword at his side and a servant following him . . . ever ready to engage in a fight or an argument, so that it is most awkward to get along with him. Despite this, his painting is beyond dispute."

This fourth centenary of Caravaggio's death is the first to be celebrated. Although a pioneering retrospective took place in 1951, it is only in the past few decades, in a visual culture held in the grip of Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons, that interest has soared. The violent sensuality and instantaneousness of Caravaggio's pictorial world, with its combination of vernacular language, frank sexuality and provocative effects, resonates with that of the bestselling 21st-century artists. These four excellent landmark, lavish publications, mark the trend. Each claims the artist as the Old Master most pertinent to our times; each interprets his modernity freshly. Italian, English, American and German perspectives are all represented; together they build a compelling analysis of Caravaggio's unique position in art history.

In the catalogue to the major Caravaggio exhibition at Rome's Scuderie del Quirinale earlier this year, Claudio Strinati argues that it was his drive directly to record his own experiences and emotions on canvas that makes him one of us. It is not only that he obsessively includes himself – an instantly recognisable, stocky, dark-haired, often scowling figure – as a self-portrait in narrative or genre compositions. Rather, his entire oeuvre takes its tremendous psychological force from its echoes of his own life story, from the seductive "Self-portrait as Bacchus" celebrating his creative and sexual allure when he arrived in Rome, through the scenes of murder and especially decapitation – "The Beheading of John the Baptist", "Salome with the Head of John the Baptist" – which muse on his own violent history and fear of damnation.

Strinati traces the "autobiographical key" through Renaissance Italy: absent in Giotto, Masaccio, Piero della Francesca, it is discernible in Botticelli, perhaps in Leonardo and Michelangelo, "but none of these artists is constantly saying *I*. In Caravaggio, what seemed hesitant a hundred years earlier becomes explicit. The artist speaks of himself from the beginning to the end and interrogates the viewer in a way no one had ever done before." From the start, in the screeching, forward-leaning "Boy Bitten By a Lizard" or the cupid laughing out loud in "Love Triumphant", Caravaggio's figures explicitly engage us. Yet paradoxically, even more mesmerising are those portrayals of himself when the artist refuses to look us in the face. As St Francis of Assisi (above) he is lost in ecstatic vision. In "The Taking of Christ" he depicts himself as a voyeur watching from the edge of the canvas. In "The Martyrdom of St Matthew" he paints himself as a threatened figure fleeing the scene, glancing back, regretful, at his failure to help the saint.

These and many other compositions are, says Strinati, "extraordinary symbols of

the very idea of entering and exiting the scene". He says of "Sleeping Cupid" that it "seems to be passing into another dimension, beyond the picture itself". "Basket of Fruit", a wonderful still life, "sets up camp on the plane of existence, absorbing its precarious immobility that can only be held still in the aesthetic space". Few artists so distil a sense of fate's irreversibility into the frozen moment. Existence or non-existence, light or darkness, is Caravaggio's overpowering theme.

It was not by chance, therefore, that his "Judith Beheading Holofernes" (1598-99) is the first piece in which he merged his innovative naturalism with a historical motif. Both its literalness (the gnarled old woman holding a sack for the head) and psychological acumen (the barely frowning, refined Judith "moving her lips silently", as in the Old Testament account, in prayer for strength) are arresting. But "the acme of the action", as Strinati puts it, is the focus on Holofernes in "the most feared and denied instant in a man's life: the passage from life to death. The huge Holofernes is no longer alive, as we see from his upturned eyes, but his howling mouth, contracting body and hands gripping the bed tell us that he is not yet dead".

Of all the responses to Caravaggio here, this emotional Italian most closely squares the circle of exploring our gut reaction to his passionate dramas while fixing their historical context. The English way of doing this, of course, is biography – a genre still held in suspicion in continental Europe as a hybrid, between journalism and scholarship, but popular for exactly that lively compromise in Britain. To the first full-scale life of the artist, art critic Andrew Graham-Dixon brings narrative verve and a blood-and-guts evocation of Rome's backstreets, where Caravaggio sought violence, sex and the models whose bodies and faces would jolt his biblical stories into everyday life. "He painted for them and from their perspective," writes Graham-Dixon; in this reading, it is democratic empathy that makes Caravaggio radical and, still today, a shockingly persuasive interpreter of the human heart.

Caravaggio arrived in Rome from Lombardy, aged 20, and soon won attention. But, as this often hilarious yet tender account reminds us, he also began to turn up regularly in the city's Tor di Nona jail: for cracking a plate in a waiter's face over a dispute about an artichoke; for defacing doors, throwing stones, telling a policeman to "stick it up your arse". Each time, an alert to a noble patron got him released. But eventually he went too far and killed a pimp – Graham-Dixon thinks he was trying to castrate him – in a row over a girl and had to flee the papal states. His end-game was life on the run, a period when he painted more disturbingly than ever – from his St John the Baptist, portrayed as an olive-skinned Sicilian teenager, embodying sex and youth, to the decapitated self-portrait painted in terror of his own death "David with the Head of Goliath".

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In this artist the Counter-Reformation found its visual champion, one who could inflame his viewers by speaking their language. Crowds flocked to the unveiling of his stark "The Entombment", where he paraphrases Michelangelo's "Pietà" but "substitutes his own intense morbidity. Caravaggio's dead Christ is punishingly unidealised. . . a real corpse weighing heavily on those who struggle to lay him to rest. John strains not to drop the sacred burden. Nicodemus stoops awkwardly". Posed for two of the three lamenting Marys, the bold, streetwise features of prostitute Fillide Melandroni bring a raw urban flavour.

Fillide is Caravaggio's Judith too, and his flushed, alluring St Catherine, inclining "towards the wheel and its vicious spikes of grey as if leaning towards a lover." Graham-Dixon reckons the subtle handling anticipates Velázquez, "but it is not hard to see why some of the artist's contemporaries would have been troubled. Was it really a picture of St Catherine, rapt in the joyful embrace of death? Or was it just a picture of a sexy modern girl, with some studio props, alone in a room? In truth, it was both".

Such a picture was, according to Michael Fried, something else too: an attempt to establish the "supreme fiction" of realism which, after the initial blaze of Renaissance representational virtuosity, was the essential concern of painters from Rome in the 1600s to Paris in the 1860s. Fried, the most visually penetrating of a generation of US theoretical critics, has spent a lifetime refining the argument that this illusion was achieved by "absorption". First,

"through the persuasive representation of figures so deeply absorbed in what they are doing, feeling and thinking that they appear oblivious to anything else", and second by "a pictorial unity according to which all the elements in a painting are perceived as motivated by a single dramatic imperative, so that the beholder instinctively feels that they cannot be other than as they are".

In his "Absorption and Theatricality" trilogy (1980-96), Fried demonstrated how Chardin, Géricault, Courbet and others embodied this process and Manet smashed it, thus initiating modernism. *The Moment of Caravaggio* is a prequel, in which he proposes that "the invention of absorption" began with Caravaggio, whose first known work, "Boy Peeling a Fruit", was both a strikingly unusual composition, and a masterly study in absolute absorption.

Fried argues that Caravaggio's sense of interiority, like Shakespeare's, belongs to the dawn of religious scepticism and is nothing less than an existential exploration of how, whether, we ever perceive or understand another human being. This explains the almost scientific exploration of pain throughout his oeuvre, from the early "Toothpuller", to the otherworldly "Martyrdom of St Ursula" (1610): "the bow string, one feels, has not ceased vibrating as Ursula looks down at her mortal injury in grave surprise... by now Caravaggio has largely passed beyond the range of recognisable modes of human feeling".

A prime exhibit is his meditation on doubt "The Incredulity of St Thomas", where Christ directs Thomas's forefinger into his bloodless wound, Thomas strains forward to look closely, and the other disciples, gazing with wonder, crowd round in a golden glow. Here, says Fried, Caravaggio discovers "that intense and focused absorption could do the unifying work of composition": the painting's human truth and formal structure are inseparable.

Fried is elegant, complex, original, but not the first port of call for those starting out on Caravaggio. That should be the magnificent catalogue in Taschen's large-scale, highly illustrated series, with an authoritative, sober, scholarly but accessible commentary by Sebastian Schütze. Unlike the other authors here, Schütze offers no over-arching argument but assesses each work and period with measured judgment and precision, carefully filling out historical background and incorporating new academic findings, as well as paying homage to Roberto Longhi, who launched Caravaggio studies.

No reproductions can do justice to Caravaggio's sculpting of light as a tool of moral revelation, but these illustrations come as close as possible to conveying a sense of each work's physical presence. Standards of production are superb, and afford much pleasure in the detail, from the loaf, napkin and carpenter's adze constituting a "still life of the poor" in "The Adoration of the Shepherds" to the horse frothing with fear in "The Conversion of Saint Paul". And on each page we watch how, as Longhi wrote, "out of the abstract and abrupt colour structure of Caravaggio's chiaroscuro, the event emerges suddenly and like a fateful incidence – truer, more tangible, more natural than had ever been imagined and expressed before".

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Caravaggio
edited by Claudio Strinati
Skira £43, 247 pages

Caravaggio: A Life Sacred and Profane
by Andrew Graham-Dixon
Allen Lane £30, 544 pages

The Moment of Caravaggio
by Michael Fried
Princeton $49.50
301 pages

Caravaggio. The Complete Works
by Sebastian Schütze
Taschen £100, 306 pages