A Case of Caravaggiomania

The bad boy of Baroque is back in style with scholars, museumgoers, filmmakers, and even video artists
by Ann Landi

It has been a very big year for the Baroque genius Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610). An exhibition of some two dozen of his paintings, commemorating the 400th anniversary of his death, packed the crowds at Rome's Quin nale last spring. News of the discovery of his bones in the Tuscan town of Porto Ercole, verified by DNA analysis, made headlines around the world. And at the annual convention of the College Art Association, University of Toronto art historian Philip Born, a specialist in the Italian Renaissance and Baroque periods, announced in a slightly tongue-in-cheek PowerPoint presentation that Caravaggio's popularity—if measured by the number of books, catalogues, and scholarly papers devoted to him—has overtaken that of the other Michelangelo (Buonarroti) in the last 50 years.

Not a bad showing for an artist whose powerful works and tumultuous life went largely ignored until the last few decades. The phenomenon academics are now calling “Caravaggiomania” may have sprung from a number of causes, from the appeal of his paintings to the modern eye to an insatiable appetite for anhors and bad-boy artists.

The eclipse of Caravaggio's art for centuries strikes us as a twisted trick of art history. His subjects—often ordinary people (including prostitutes and beggars) enacting biblical scenes—heir-otherwise-witless use of light, and his operatically charged compositions would seem sufficient to guarantee him five-star status through the ages. In his day, he was the favorite of nobles and prelates. If a church patron rejected one of his radical interpretations of a particular commission, there was generally a prince or a cardinal eager to snap it up. But within a few years after his death, at the age of 38, most likely from malaria, biographers and critics were heaping scorn on his reputation.

Gian Pietro Bellori, the most influential biographer of the 17th century, “created this narrative that Caravaggio was a wonderful naturalistic painter but fell short because he hadn't understood that the goal of painting was to improve upon nature,” says Catherine Huglist, a professor of Baroque art at Rutgers University.

And right through the 19th century, his predilection for scandalous behavior—he fled Rome after killing a man, was in and out of scrapes in every city he visited, and even attacked a waiter in a sleazy over artichokes—colored views of his talent as an artist. “The thinking was that if he painted these dark, violent pictures, it was because he was a dark, violent person,” adds Puglisi. “That kind of storytelling even went so far as to maintain that he painted the way he did because he was short and stout and swarmy”—in sum, a man from the lowest level of society, like his models.

Scholars began to reassess Caravaggio's work early in the 20th century, and a landmark exhibition in Milan in 1951, along with the publication of Walter Friedlaender's Caravaggio Studies, in 1935, set the engine of rehabilitation into motion. By the 1970s, the popularity of gaudier studies led to feverish speculation about his sexuality. (“It can be read either way,” claims Puglisi. “There's no hard evidence.”)
While moviemakers began picking up on the dramatic possibilities of his life as early as 1948—Radio Uno produced an Italian miniseries in 1967—the exhibition that put him on the map, especially in America, was "The Age of Caravaggio" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in 1985, organized by Keith Christiansen, now the John Pope-Hennessy Chairman of European Paintings at the museum. The blockbuster exhibition included more than 90 paintings by the artist, along with works by precursors and contemporaries, including Rubens, Domenichino, and Orazio Gentileschi.

"He's become the prototype of the modern artist," says Christiansen. "Somebody who paints against the grain, whose life is antiestablishment and also very bohemian. In the same way that van Gogh fits into our notions of a contemporary counterculture artist, Caravaggio does too. It's not surprising that the same people who love van Gogh love Picasso and Caravaggio. It's art that's seen as transgressive."

"His life of sex and death is one that fits with modern notions of celebrity," says Andrew Butterfield, an expert in the Renaissance and Baroque and president of Andrew Butterfield Fine Arts. "He's like James Dean or Jimi Hendrix. He fits in perfectly with the modern story of the tortured, outre rebel, the self-destructive artist." (Even when that image, polished over the centuries, is not always consonant with the facts. Caravaggio spent much of his life working in luxurious palaces, dined with princes of the church, and yearned to be elected a Knight of Malta.)

"The paintings are confessional in some way," adds Sohm, who notes that his students particularly gravitate to Caravaggio's scenes of beheadings: David and Goliath, Judith and Holofernes, or Salome with the head of John the Baptist. The artist also appeals to younger people, Christiansen says, because they "have a hard time dealing with the art of the past. It seems to embody values and conventions that are so different from theirs that it's difficult to make that leap. In Caravaggio's art, they feel a connection, because the figures do have a palpable reality. They seem to be incredibly present—and dramatically so—and this leads people to the idea that he's painting outside of his own time—it's their time—which is of course totally false."

Puglisi believes that Caravaggio's life and work speak to the literary enthusiasms of our day, a time when memoirs are particularly popular. "Caravaggio offers the story of a man who committed terrible crimes, including murder, and yet in a sense redeemed himself through his art," she says. "Just as a memoir now has to be about someone who has suffered and come through and learned something. For that reason, the Caravaggio story resonates with us."

The theatrical quality of the artist's compositions and his extreme use of chiaroscuro, modeling from velvety darks to brilliant lights, also appeal to eyes conditioned by movies and photography. His canvases find an echo in the tenebrous lighting of film-noir classics, and indeed directors like David LaChapelle, Derek Jarman, and Martin Scorsese have acknowledged his influence. When Scorsese was making The Last Temptation of Christ, he told the biographer and critic Andrew Graham-Dixon that the "idea was to do Jesus like Caravaggio."

But what exactly is going on in Caravaggio's works is open to interpretation and debate. Some say they spring from a deep autobiographical impulse. "This is the first painter in the Western tradition who convinces us that every picture he does is about himself," says John T. Spike, a Florence-based art historian and the author of the catalogue raisonné of Caravaggio's works. "We never think when we look at the great painters before him—Titian or Raphael or Veronese—that these artists are telling us something about themselves. We look at how they paint the stories they chose to depict. But we always think with everything that Michelangelo Merisi does that the pictures are about himself."

"Every painter paints himself," Leonardo da Vinci wrote in a treatise. Caravaggio seems to have known by heart," Spike says. "Leonardo was merely observing that painters tend to paint faces resembling their own. Caravaggio took the idea to its logical extreme by making paintings that seem directly concerned with his own life. This is the reason that he is often described as the first modern artist.

"Here is an example: when Caravaggio paints Judith killing Holofernes, cutting off his head, he makes it look like a murder in a bordello—a place he'd been. We don't think this about a Titian painting of the Judith story."

For Michael Fried, author of The Moment of Caravaggio, his canvases are in large part about the painter's relationship with the viewer. It has often been noted that his compositions have a way of drawing us in that is new and unusual in the history of art—an elbow seems to jar out into our space, a figure threatens to topple beyond the picture plane, or, in the case of The Supper at Emmaus (1601), in London's National Gallery, the fruit basket seems about to fall from the table.
“The standard account is that it makes it seem as if we were there,” says Fried. “But there’s also a sense in which the disciples’ big gestures—and above all the basket that is halfway off the table—push us back from the scene. There are always things that are meant to drive us back a little bit.

“That driving us back is part of a way of saying, ‘Look, in the end, this is just a picture,’” Fried continues. “It’s not simply about stumbling upon a scene of two disciples and Christ. Caravaggio is working for the richest connoisseurs in Rome and he has all the time he needs to complete these pictures with a high degree of finish. He knows they’re going to hang in fancy galleries and be studied at close range. So they have built into them the powerful realism of the theme, but they are also fantastically carefully made artifacts with a way of taking the viewer out of the picture so that he or she can return and appreciate it as something made, not just seen.”

In his lifetime, Caravaggio’s influence spread to Spain and Northern Europe, where Vermeer and Rembrandt may have seen canvases by the group known as the Utrecht Caravaggisti. And then for centuries he was not much noticed by ambitious artists. Today his brand of realism seems to appeal more to movie directors, but he still makes his impact felt in fine art. (Cindy Sherman famously made a self-portrait as the artist’s Sick Bacchus, but has not otherwise had an ongoing engagement with the Baroque master.)

Those who have been most deeply affected by Caravaggio’s work have learned from both his manipulation of light and his choice of subject matter. In his early travels to Europe, Barkley Hendricks, who is noted for his paintings of African American subjects, says he “looked at his use of light and reversed that. He used white people against dark backgrounds, and I took black people and put them against light backgrounds.”

Observes realist painter Vincent Desiderio, “Caravaggio’s highlights flash back at us like moonlight on a lake.” For Caravaggio, however, “the careful placement of highlights was nothing short of an analogue to linear perspective’s vanishing point”—it was a breakthrough every bit as revolutionary as the Renaissance discovery of how to create the illusion of three-dimensional space on a flat surface. He also points out how Caravaggio’s figures “frequently seem to inhabit the very space in which we live and breathe.” Desiderio says he has attempted to give the same “weight to the forms in my pictures, even as I have sought to thwart the clear intelligibility of my dramatic narratives.”

Andres Serrano, the photographer whose Piss Christ caused so much controversy in 1987, is drawn to Caravaggio’s use of marginal characters in his art. “I like to use real people—real Klansmen, real homeless people, real dead people,” Serrano says. He also identifies with the artist’s complicated personality, his outlaw character. “He’s a perfect example of a person who in another life might have been a madman. Art became a way for him to socially redeem himself.”

And for video artist Bill Viola, both Caravaggio’s religious imagery and his handling of light and dark made an indelible impression. “The thing I really love is his darkness,” Viola says. “The darkness is palpable, like a physical substance. You can feel it in the space the people are in. It’s a kind of organic and ontological force, and that’s really strong for me because video is all about light and dark.

“It wasn’t until my mother died, in 1991, that I really understood what these pictures are about,” he adds. “They’re about life and death and the beyond. That didn’t sink in for me until I had that personal experience.”

It seems unlikely that Caravaggio is going to disappear again anytime soon. “He’s completely remarkable,” says Fried, who has been studying the artist since 1993. “He’s got a staggering imagination. His ability to reconceive traditional subject matter is profound. There’s only a handful of artists you can say that about—Giotto, Michelangelo, Rembrandt. Just a handful of guys whose imaginations are that powerful.”

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Comment:

The illustration that accompanies this article is Caravaggio’s *Supper at Emmaus*. Looking at the excessive realism in this painting, I can understand why Caravaggio’s work was sometimes labeled as blasphemous, even by admirers of his skill. You have to really look at the details, and understand the story behind the scene to find the sacred meaning in this painting. According to a course in the history of religion that I took last year, the theme of the *Supper at Emmaus* was often commissioned by Counter-Reformation patrons to further the Catholic Church’s message about the Eucharist. With its references to the Last Supper and the Catholic mass (Jesus’ blessing the meal, with the bread in the foreground), the painting illustrates the Counter-Reformation doctrine of transubstantiation – or the miraculous change of the bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Christ in the mass.

As part of his realism, Caravaggio chose to represent the disciples with torn clothes and around a humble meal, stressing a humble domestic scene that viewers could relate to, but one that does not seem traditionally sacred or even particularly special – until you look deeper and understand that Caravaggio is using the strong light to represent the presence of God. The contemporary setting isn’t all that different from Campin’s contemporary interior in the *Merode Altarpiece*; Caravaggio just takes it to a heightened degree.