

Robert P. Imbelli

Tortured Genius

THE MIRACLE OF CARAVAGGIO'S ART

Claims of a “once in a lifetime opportunity” to see the works of a popular artistic genius rightfully merit skepticism. But when they come from an acknowledged authority like Keith Christiansen, curator of European paintings at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, one pays heed. When I read his enthusiastic review in the December 12, 2004 *New York Times* of “Caravaggio: L’Ultimo Tempo 1606–1610,” then on display at Naples’s Capodimonte Museum, I knew this was a singular opportunity.

Since my student days in Rome, in the mid-1960s, I have been enchanted by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610). The church of San Luigi dei Francesi, which houses his great cycle of the calling, inspiration, and martyrdom of St. Matthew, has become a regular pilgrimage stop on my visits to Rome. In addition, Rome’s splendid Galleria Borghese, founded by one of Caravaggio’s patrons, features several outstanding paintings of this artistic genius, including two of the last he completed.

These two, joined with sixteen others painted in Naples, Malta, and Sicily during Caravaggio’s fearful flight from Rome under papal sentence of death for having killed a rival, composed the collection at the Naples exhibition. After its run ended in January, the exhibit moved to the National Gallery in London (February 23–May 23). Still, as Christiansen rightfully insisted, Naples was the place to see it “because in Naples the paintings resonate as nowhere else.” Since I was in Rome in early January, a two-hour train ride to Naples and a two-hour wait in line at Capodimonte allowed entrance into the tragic world of a tormented man and extraordinary artist.

The Capodimonte galleries were crowded but there was little sense of rush. An almost contemplative air pervaded. Often the paintings were hung one to a wall, offering ample space to focus, to view

from different angles, to linger, and to return. Caravaggio’s style seems to have changed as he absorbed the particularities of the places to which his exile drove him. The rough and tumble of Neapolitan streets give way to the confined, weary world of the island domain of the Knights of Malta, to pass into the almost impressionistic figures and dream-like spaces of Sicily. Each new stay pressed out of Caravaggio singular compositions. There are no formulaic Baroque madonnas, prettily ornamental angels, or idealized saints here. Rather, the artist concentrates on the ordinary, the everyday, revealing its dignity and depth of mystery. Caravaggio’s stunning interplay of light and darkness seems to intimate a ceaseless struggle between encroaching despair and impossible hope. His paintings’ intensity and pathos are rooted in overwhelming personal experience.

While the exhibition was devoted to Caravaggio’s *Ultimo Tempo* (final period), its climax might be styled *L’Ultimo*

dell’Ultimo Tempo. For reasons not fully clear, in late summer 1609 Caravaggio returned to Naples, probably hoping to obtain a long-desired papal pardon that would allow him to return to Rome. He remained there until mid-summer the following year. Not yet assured of pardon, he set out for Rome but was arrested on route and delayed for several days, causing him to miss the ship carrying his belongings. This precipitated a final feverish rush to the small seaport where he died, possibly of malaria, on July 18, 1610. One of his first biographers, Giovanni Baglione, a fellow painter and hostile competitor, penned these barbed words at the conclusion of his life of Caravaggio: *morì malamente, come appunto male avea vivuto*—he died as badly as he had lived.

Another, more compassionate contemporary, Giulio Cesare Gigli, captured the artist’s tragic ambiguity when he exclaimed: “Such was the great Michelangelo Caravaggio, a miracle of art, a wonder



Not such a rock

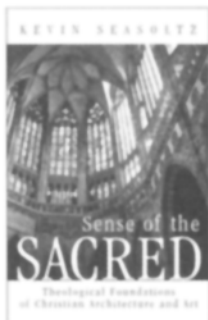
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of nature, though buffeted by unhappy fortune." Caravaggio's final sojourn in Naples illustrates both poles of this judgment. During the approximately ten months of his second stay, Caravaggio, always a prolific artist, created at least a half-dozen masterworks. These last surviving paintings manifest a new concentration and interiority, a melange of light and darkness that is no mere stylistic device, however striking, but wells up from within his figures. At the same time, the violence that marred so much of his personal life continued. On October 24, 1609, the painter was assaulted outside a Naples tavern, nearly killed, and left disfigured. His plight is summed up by two of his final works: *David with the Head of Goliath* from Rome's Galleria Borghese, and *The Denial of St. Peter* from New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art—both prominent in the exhibition.

I know of no painting in the Western tradition that instills so great a sense of dread as Caravaggio's final *David*. In an almost resigned way, the adolescent David holds the bloody decapitated head of the giant, gazing on it with a mix of fascination and pity. This portrayal alone would make the painting memorable, but what makes it unforgettable is that the battered giant's head is Caravaggio's own, vacant eyes still staring, mouth agape.

The painting was intended as a gift to Cardinal Scipione Borghese, an inducement to intercede with his uncle, Pope Paul V, for *grazia*, clemency, to be shown the beleaguered, near-despairing Caravaggio. As I contemplate the work, the words of one of Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Terrible Sonnets" spring to mind: "No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief, / More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring."

What, perhaps, forestalls total despair in the painting is that the pitying David is, according to some scholars, a representation of the young Caravaggio. His look of compassion is the lone sign of hope in the scene, one that unites the wounded humanity of both executioner and victim in a common yearning for redemption.

The Denial of St. Peter portrays another dramatic scene, Peter's betrayal of his Lord. Three figures are frozen in a deci-

sive, life-transforming moment: the accusing maid servant, the threatening guard, and the shamed, stricken apostle. In the background, the dying embers of a fire cast their physical light; but the foreground discloses the faces on which spiritual darkness and light contend. Christiansen, in his notes for the exhibition catalogue, remarks on the Neapolitan "rhetoric of gesture" at play in the painting. The hand of the soldier and the two hands of the servant signify the three-fold accusation and denial; the in-folded hands of Peter tellingly express both denial and repentance.

One is also drawn into the drama of the eyes, as they dance in counter-clockwise motion, a *moto spirituale*: the woman's denunciation, the soldier's menace, Peter's grief-filled realization of guilt. The apostle stands slightly apart, confronting the inescapable imperative of decision. Entering meditatively and imaginatively into the biblical narrative, as the spirituality of the Catholic Reformation exhorted, one journeys with Caravaggio to the crossroads of despair and hope. In this *ultimo tempo*, the paths of Peter and his apostolic twin, Judas, cross and ultimately diverge.

Michelangelo da Caravaggio set out for Rome in hope. He died before receiving confirmation that the pope's *grazia* had been accorded him. One can only pray he died, not *malamente* as his critic contended, but in the light that darkness does not overcome.

When I ponder the "miracle of art" of these two paintings, so wonderfully contextualized in the Naples exhibit, I recall another of Hopkins's late poems. Its complex title almost conjures Caravaggio: "That Nature Is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection." Two verses sum up the struggle between despair and hope that permeates Caravaggio's last paintings: "All is in an enormous dark / Drowned." But, "Across my foundering deck shone / A beacon, an eternal beam." ■

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