



Caravaggio (1571-1610)

by Raymond-Jean Frontain

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Although no conclusive evidence of Caravaggio's sexuality has survived, derogatory accusations made by contemporaries, coupled with the aggressive representation of male eroticism in his paintings, suggest that the most original painter of early seventeenth-century Europe was actively bisexual, if not primarily homosexual.

A poet of dramatic stimulation, Caravaggio was fascinated by the intrusion of the divine into the mundane world; in canvas after canvas he used shifting planes of light and dark to fashion a moment of spiritual *anagnorisis*, that moment of perception that precipitates the reversal of the action in Greek drama.

The divine, however, can manifest itself erotically for Caravaggio, whose earliest paintings (insofar as his paintings can be dated) depict in the most quotidian scenes male youths whose curls, musculature, and luminescent skin tones made Caravaggio the wonder of his age.

Most significantly, in Caravaggio's works the erotic is invariably a part of the scene even when the subject is spiritual intrusion. His religious scenes are often framed in terms of homosexual opposition or homoerotic comfort. Caravaggio, like his English contemporary John Donne, is a poet of erotic spirituality, but, unlike Donne's, Caravaggio's spirituality is invariably homoerotic.

Life

Born Michelangelo Merisi in 1571, but better known to posterity by the name of the town outside Milan where his family owned property, Caravaggio apprenticed with Simone Peterzano before moving to Rome where he found work in the studio of Cavalier d'Arpino.

The artist's early works won him the support of Cardinal Francesco del Monte, one of the period's most influential arbiters of taste, and a patron who seemed especially appreciative of--or whose own tastes encouraged--the homoerotic elements of Caravaggio's style. Caravaggio's other patrons were as much fascinated by his realism as they were offended by his refusal to idealize his religious subjects.

The artist quickly became the most important--and controversial--painter in Counter-Reformation Rome. His personal life proved as unorthodox as his work. His involvement in a series of street fights and legal wrangles culminated in a brawl during which he killed a man.

He was forced to flee to Genoa, then Naples, and eventually seek refuge on the island of Malta. There he was inducted into the politically powerful Order of the Knights of Saint John of Jerusalem, which protected him until a scandal, possibly involving a sexual liaison with a nobly-born male page, forced him once again to flee the execution of a legal sentence.



Three paintings by Caravaggio.
Top: *Judith Beheading Holofernes.*
Center: *Victorious Amor.*
Above: *David with the Head of Goliath.*

Caravaggio died in 1610 under mysterious circumstances while on a return journey to Rome, possibly the victim of malarial fever, but just as possibly the victim of a Machiavellian revenge plot by the family of the man whom he had killed in Rome several years before, whose forgiveness he may have been duped into thinking he had finally won.

Caravaggio's Realism and Psychological Drama

To the amazement of his contemporaries, Caravaggio delivered on canvas the energy and realism of daily life. In his still lifes (a genre that Caravaggio is credited with inaugurating), one can see the spots and bruises on each piece of fruit.

His representations of saints, and even of the Holy Family, reject the conventional use of clouds and *putti* to mark a sacred scene, but instead depict everyday figures in the most common settings rather than the static, idealized figures mandated by Counter Reformation church edicts.

Thus, in *The Madonna of Loretto*, Caravaggio ignores the famous house that legend holds was miraculously delivered by angels to the Italian city, and focuses instead upon the Virgin and Child standing in a shadowed doorway to greet two pilgrims with dirty feet and gnarled fingers. No space divides the divine figures from the coarse yet spiritually earnest pilgrims who crowd the scene with them, suggesting the immediacy and accessibility of the divine in common life.

Likewise, when commissioned to paint *The Seven Acts of Mercy*, which were traditionally depicted separately in images of noble self-sacrifice, Caravaggio painted a single crowded street scene in which realistic persons can be singled out behaving charitably under the oppressive circumstances of daily life.

Again and again Caravaggio brought religion to life. He refused to promote idealized behaviors beyond the reach of the average person. Instead, he produced church paintings with which the multitudes could identify.

Caravaggio's brand of realism was extended by his experiments with light and darkness to represent psychological drama: the moment in a card game when sharpsters cheat, the slyness of a gypsy fortune teller stealing the ring of the young man whose palm she reads, or the surprise and pain on the face of a boy being bitten by a lizard.

In *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, Jesus is almost obscured in the bustle of the tax gatherer's quotidian existence, suggesting how difficult it is for anyone to hear the word of God.

The hindquarters of the horse from which the saint has fallen dominate the tableau of *The Conversion of Saint Paul*, forcing the viewer to make sense of the convoluted and confusing scene, even as the blinded disciple is depicted as straining to understand the immensity of what is happening to him.

The psychological realism matches the physical drama of *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, in which the determined crone who glowers over the straining girl's shoulder, ready to wrap the severed head in a bag, appears as much to be a hard-working, emotionally-hardened servant as an implacable, avenging Fate.

Caravaggio's Sexual Energy

Most disturbing to many of Caravaggio's viewers is the sexual, primarily homoerotic, energy that radiates from his canvases. The adolescent males whose tight musculature and radiant skin tones are so lovingly rendered in his paintings bespeak Caravaggio's fascination with the *ragazzi di vita*--those adolescent street boys, none of them handsome in the classical sense, who radiate a sexual energy that Caravaggio takes to be the very energy of life.

Unlike Pier Paolo Pasolini's later reworking of the type, there is nothing ominous attached to the viewer's engagement with Caravaggio's boys, who transgress--not through danger--but through unbridled sensual joy.

Victorious Amor, for example, depicts full-frontally a nude pre-pubescent boy who rises from his couch to gaze directly at the viewer, engaging him in sexual exuberance and maybe even mischief. The picture offers such a powerful homoerotic invitation that its initial owner kept it secured behind a green velvet drapery in his gallery, drawing the curtain only for select viewers.

Homoerotic celebration and homosexual tension dominate Caravaggio's religious scenes as well. In Caravaggio's several representations of St. John the Baptist in the wilderness, for example, the figure is invariably a naked, post-pubescent boy who gazes directly at the viewer, engaging him in a way that is anything but ascetic.

Similarly, the rapture depicted in *The Ecstasy of Saint Francis* is as much sexual as it is spiritual, the saint (to whom Caravaggio gave the features of his patron, the pleasure-loving Cardinal del Monte, a reputed pederast) reclining in the arms of a nearly naked teenaged male angel.

Conversely, *The Sacrifice of Isaac* is rendered from such an angle that the boy, forcibly bent over a stone altar by a knife-wielding patriarch and crying out in fear and pain, appears more the victim of homosexual rape than the willing victim that, as a type of the self-sacrificing Christ, he was traditionally represented as being.

Finally, in the most famous of his several variations on the theme of *David with the Head of Goliath*, Caravaggio painted his assistant and probable lover, Francesco Boneri, as David and himself as the decapitated giant, making the painting a somber meditation upon a deeply personal frustration.

Caravaggio's Sexuality

The painter's sexuality remains a contested issue in portions of Caravaggio criticism. Creighton Gilbert, for example, argues that all of the supposedly homoerotic traits of Caravaggio's paintings can be explained by inherited traditions. And biographer Helen Langdon expresses difficulty accepting the tradition that Caravaggio slept with Boneri, the servant boy who modeled for *Victorious Amor*, when the painter was also reputedly involved with female prostitutes.

Langdon apparently assumes that it was impossible for a man of Caravaggio's passion to be sexually involved with a woman even though primarily involved with other men, or for a man primarily attracted to pubescent and barely post-pubescent boys to bond emotionally with an intelligent courtesan. Such arguments are poorly informed about the history and psychology of sexuality.

In the absence of clear biographical evidence concerning Caravaggio's sexuality, the decisive evidence must be his work. The female body is rarely eroticized in Caravaggio's paintings, whereas the male body invariably is. Teenaged boys and young men are represented with luscious curls, vibrant skin tones, and muscular legs and buttocks; their gaze directly engages the (presumably male) viewer.

Caravaggio and Post-Stonewall Gay Culture

Little wonder that post-Stonewall gay popular culture has responded so warmly to Caravaggio's work. An in-your-face male sexuality that refuses to apologize for itself has made paintings such as *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, *The Musicians*, *Bacchus*, and especially *Victorious Amor* increasingly popular in gay design.

In one of the most illuminating examples of historical gay intertextuality, poet Thom Gunn has fashioned several poems as responses to specific Caravaggio paintings. And in his film-meditation upon Caravaggio's

life and creative processes (*Caravaggio*, 1986), director Derek Jarman presents the painter as the quintessential gay artist, the cursed poet whose brilliant yet unconventional artistic vision and intense personal life unsettle his contemporaries, making him a source of unease as well as fascination.

When filming Caravaggio's painting *David with the Head of Goliath*, Jarman--in a gesture of gay and artistic identification--placed his own face on the head of the defeated giant, as Caravaggio had earlier placed his own.

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