

Caravaggio 1571 - 1610

Paris Art Studies – Winter 2009

Caravaggio –
(Michelangelo Merisi) 1571- 1610

1571 - Born in Milan.

His father, Fermo Merisi, was a household administrator and architect-decorator to the Marchese of Caravaggio. His mother, Lucia Aratori, came from a propertied family of the same district.

1576 - Family moves to

Caravaggio to escape the plague in Milan.

Caravaggio's father died there in 1577 and his mother in 1584. It is assumed that the artist grew up in Caravaggio. His family retains its connections with the powerful Sforza and Colonna families of Milan.

1584 - Apprenticed for four

years to the Lombard painter Simone Peterzano, a pupil of Titian.

In Milan he

would have studied Leonardo's Last Supper and Lombard naturalism.

Possible visit to Venice

where he could have seen Giorgione and Titian's work at the end of his apprenticeship.

1592 – Flees to Rome

after wounding a police officer. Work in the studio of Giuseppe Cesari, a painter favoured by Pope Clement VIII, painting “flowers and fruit.” Known works from this period include a small Boy Peeling a Fruit, a Boy with a Basket of Fruit, and the Young Sick Bacchus, supposedly a self-portrait done during convalescence from a serious illness that ended his employment with Cesari.

1594 – Leaves Cesari's studio. The painter Onorio Orsi introduces him to important collectors. Another friend the architect Onorio Longhi introduces him to the underworld of Roman taverns.

The 16-year old Sicilian artist Mario Minitti will serve as his model (in *The Fortune Teller*) and later help him get important commissions in Sicily.

The similarly themed *Cardsharps* will prove very popular and will attract patrons, notably Cardinal Francesco Maria Del Monte.

The Musicians, *The Lute Player*, a tipsy *Bacchus*, *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* are some of the genre paintings Caravaggio will paint for the Cardinal and his circle of connoisseurs.

1599 - Through the influence of Del Monte, Caravaggio is commissioned to decorate the Contarelli Chapel in the church of San Luigi dei Francesi for which he paints the *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* and the *Calling of Saint Matthew*, delivered in 1600. these paintings provoked an immediate sensation. Caravaggio's tenebrism (emphatic chiaroscuro) brought high drama to his subjects, while his acutely observed realism brought a new level of emotional intensity. Opinion among Caravaggio's artist peers was polarized. Some denounced him for his insistence on painting from life, without drawings and careful preparation, but for the most part he was hailed as a great artistic visionary: "The painters then in Rome were greatly taken by this novelty, and the young ones particularly gathered around him, praised him as the unique imitator of nature, and looked on his work as a miracle." Caravaggio went on to secure a string of prestigious commissions for increasingly powerful and naturalistic religious altarpieces.

1601 - *The Death of the Virgin*

is commissioned by a wealthy jurist for his private chapel in the new Carmelite church of Santa Maria della Scala. It was, however, rejected by the Carmelites in 1606 because, according to Giulio Mancini, Caravaggio had used a well-known prostitute as his model for the Virgin or possibly because of the Virgin's bare legs.

The painting was immediately after its rejection purchased by the Duke of Mantua, on the advice of Rubens.

1602 – *Amor Vincitor* was painted for Vincenzo Giustiniani, a member of Del Monte's circle. The model was named in a memoir of the early 17th century as "Cecco", the diminutive for Francesco. He is possibly Francesco Boneri, identified with an artist active in the period 1610-1625 and known as Cecco del Caravaggio ('Caravaggio's Cecco').

1606 - Caravaggio led a tumultuous life. He was notorious for brawling and the transcripts of his police records and trial proceedings fill several pages. On 29 May, he killed, possibly unintentionally, a young man named

Ranuccio Tomassoni. Previously his high-placed patrons had protected him from the consequences of his escapades, but this time they could do nothing. Caravaggio, outlawed, fled to Naples. There he was protected by the Colonna family, quickly becoming the most famous painter in the city. He received a host of important church commissions, including the Madonna of the Rosary, and The Seven Works of Mercy.

Despite his success, after only a few months he leaves for Malta, the base of the Knights of Malta, presumably hoping that the patronage of Alof de Wignacourt, Grand Master of the Knights, could help him secure a pardon for Tomassoni's death. De Wignacourt was so impressed at having the famous artist as official painter to the Order that he inducted him as a knight, and the early biographer Bellori records that the artist was well pleased with his success. Major works from his Malta period include a huge Beheading of Saint John the Baptist (the only painting to which he put his signature) and a Portrait of Alof de Wignacourt and his Page, as well as portraits of other leading knights.

1608 - Arrested and imprisoned in Malta

as a result of yet another brawl, during which the door of a house was battered down and a knight seriously wounded. By December he is expelled from the Order "as a foul and rotten member." He escapes to Sicily and settles with his old friend Mario Minniti, in Syracuse. Together they set off on a triumphal tour from Syracuse to Messina and on to the capital, Palermo. In each city Caravaggio receives prestigious and well-paid commissions: The Burial of St Lucy, The Raising of Lazarus, Adoration of the Shepherds. Contemporary reports depict a man whose behaviour was becoming increasingly bizarre, sleeping fully armed and in his clothes, ripping up a painting at the slightest word of criticism, mocking the local painters.

1609 - After nine months in Sicily Caravaggio returns to Naples placing himself again under the protection of the Colonnas until he could secure his pardon from the pope (now Paul V) and return to Rome. In Naples he paints The Denial of Saint Peter, a final John the Baptist (Borghese), and, his last altarpiece, The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula. His late brushwork is freer and looser. In Naples he is attacked by persons unknown and apparently seriously disfigured in the face. He paints a Salome with the Head of John the Baptist (Madrid) showing his own head on a platter which he sent to de Wignacourt as a plea for forgiveness. Perhaps at this time he painted also a David with the Head of Goliath, showing the young David with a strangely sorrowful expression gazing on the severed head of the giant, which is again based on Caravaggio's own. This painting he may have sent to the unscrupulous art-loving cardinal-nephew Scipione Borghese, who had the power to grant or withhold pardons.

1610 – Leaves in the summer by boat for Rome still hoping to receive a Papal pardon with three last paintings, as gifts for Cardinal Scipione. Landing in the small port of Palo in Papal territory he is detained for two days by papal guards. On his release he discovers that the boat with his paintings and belongings has departed. Caravaggio frantically sets off on foot to catch up with it. Catching malarial fever in the infested marshes of the coast he dies in Porto Ercole, in Tuscany.

