OpenLearn

The Open University

Helen Langdon's ‘Caravaggio’

About this free course

This free course provides a sample of postgraduate level study in Arts and Humanities: http://www3.open.ac.uk/study/postgraduate/qualification/f33.htm.

This version of the content may include video, images and interactive content that may not be optimised for your device.

You can experience this free course as it was originally designed on OpenLearn, the home of free learning from The Open University – www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/culture/literature-and-creative-writing/literature/helen-langdons-caravaggio/content-section-0

There you'll also be able to track your progress via your activity record, which you can use to demonstrate your learning.

The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA

Intellectual property

Head of Intellectual Property, The Open University
The Open University

Contents

Introduction

This course will concentrate on one of the most common forms of art history writing – a biographical monograph about a single artist's life and work. You will be focusing on the way that one author, Helen Langdon, has used biography in her book about one artist, Caravaggio. In order to get the most out of studying this course you will need access to a copy of this book (ISBN 071266582x)

You will look in detail at the methods she has used to approach her subject and the different kinds of primary sources available to her. You will also be asked to think about how an artist's work relates to his or her life, and especially how useful it is to understand one in terms of the other.

In Section 1, you will be specifically exploring the methods Helen Langdon uses to construct her biography of Caravaggio and the way she has employed the sources available to her. Following on, in Section 2, you will consider in what ways an artist's life can help explain the art he or she produced. Section 3 will then compare other ways of interpreting works of art with those contained within a biographical structure, and consider the possibilities and limitations of the biographical monograph.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of postgraduate level study in Arts and Humanities.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- analyse the pros and cons of the biographical monograph in art history
- examine the strengths and weaknesses of the biographical monograph in relation to other kinds of art history writing.

1 Caravaggio's ‘Life’

1.1 Biography and art history

The biographical monograph, that is, a book about a single artist and his or her works, is one of the most common forms of art history writing. Biography, as a literary form, applied to art history, is underpinned by the assumption that knowing about an artist's life can help to establish both the significance and the meaning of that artist's work. This is a very common, and it seems a reasonable, assumption to make in the interpretation of pictures. It is therefore a central theme in this course. Behind the assumption that an artist's life and the meaning of his or her work are closely related lies a series of other assumptions and traditions in the history of art.

1.2 The myth of the artist

Consider Howard Hibbard's analysis of Caravaggio's *The Martyrdom of St Matthew* in the Contarelli chapel (Langdon Plate 19 – see the Web Gallery of Art at http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/c/caravagg/04/index.html) from his monograph, *Caravaggio* (1983). Hibbard identifies the figure at the rear to the left of the semi-naked executioner as the artist's self-portrait: ‘a bearded, saturnine villain who is none other than Caravaggio himself’.

> Caravaggio's face looks precisely like Ottavio Leoni's portrait of him [Langdon Illustration 1]. We recognize the arched eyebrows, flaring nostrils, and somewhat hostile expression of the mouth. (Bellori said Caravaggio was ‘brutto di volta’ – he had an ugly face.) The emotions of this witness to the martyrdom are hard to read; is he angry or horrified? The most plausible explanation would make him King Hirtacus, who ordered the slaying of Matthew. The concerned glance back would thus be explained, as would the fierce but perhaps ambivalent expression on his face. We sense here a beginning of the fatalistic or tragic self-image that can be deduced from some of Caravaggio's later works, his identification with violence and evil, which seems to have increased with time. He must have expected to be recognized here, and his presence is a form of signature that was known in Italian Renaissance art.
>
> (Hibbard, 1983, p. 108)

The ‘form of signature that was known in Italian Renaissance art’ refers to a convention whereby artists sometimes included portraits of themselves in their works to raise their professional status as intellectuals, rather than as mere craftsmen. That being said, Joanna Woods-Marsden in her book, *Renaissance Self-portraiture* (1998), specifically excludes Caravaggio's ‘portraits’ from her study because, she writes, ‘many of the issues addressed by Caravaggio's self-images are of a different nature from those that concerned artists in the previous 150 years’ (Woods-Marsden, 1998, p. 6). She does not explain how Caravaggio's ‘self-images’ are distinct (if they are in fact self-portraits): what

is important in this context is the fact that she, like Hibbard, creates a 'hostile' character and singles Caravaggio out as an outsider.

Activity 1

Look at a detail of the *The Martyrdom of St Matthew* in the Contarelli Chapel that was considered above. This is taken from the cover of the first hardback edition of Langdon's *Caravaggio*.

Click to view Colour Plate 1, showing detail from The Martyrdom of St Matthew, from the front cover of Helen Langdon's Caravaggio: a Life, Chatto & Windus, 1998, hardback. Reprinted by permission of The Random House Group Ltd.

1 What assumption is being made about the relationship of the artist to his work on both the cover and in Hibbard's description above of the painting?

2 What evidence would demonstrate that this assumption is accurate?

1 The cover of the hardback uses a 'portrait' of Caravaggio, which is a relatively small detail within the large picture. The assumption is that Caravaggio is in some sense 'present' in his art. Langdon says in her 'Introduction', 'Often Caravaggio included a self-portrait, reflecting the new self-consciousness of the seventeenth century, and his art seems bound up with the stormy events of his life' (Langdon, 1998, p. 7; see also pp. 151, 234–5 and 388).

2 Other than through a comparison with Ottavio Leoni's portrait of Caravaggio, as Hibbard proposes, there is no conclusive evidence – such as the artist's own admission that these were self-portraits – to confirm whether these figures are self-portraits of the artist. Based on expectations of the kind of elements artists at the time might include in their works, and on the likeness of these figures to Caravaggio with his dark hair and beard, there is only a possibility that Caravaggio included a likeness of himself in some of his paintings.

The assumption that Caravaggio is present in his art carries with it considerable implications for writing about art and about the relationship of an artist to his or her art. Caravaggio's apparently dramatic art and life, tantalisingly absent in parallel historical material, has even led some historians to 'embellish' primary documents. In 1994 *Caravaggio assassino* was published, a now notorious monograph which although 'presented as fact, was largely fictional' (Langdon, 1999, p. 19). 'It has already inspired other biographies, and details have seeped out even into some scholarly publications.' Readers beware!

When Hibbard wrote his biographical monograph about Caravaggio in 1983 there were relatively few modern books already written about the artist. Recent years have seen a large number of books, including Langdon's, dedicated to the artist and his art. Writing about Caravaggio began during his own lifetime, in 1604, when Carel van Mander wrote the first literary source for his art and life. A further eight 'Lives' followed in the next century, the last of them written by Francesco Susinno and published in 1724 (you can find one of these writings under the 'View document' link below, and two further writings in Section 1.4). By that time a great deal of apocryphal detail had been added to the Caravaggio story. Thereafter Caravaggio fell out of fashion and from the eighteenth century until the middle of the twentieth there was very little written about him. He was not even included in guide books to Rome until well into the twentieth century. Since the

1970s in particular, Caravaggio has returned to favour and he has become one of the most written about artists of any period. (Look at The British Library online catalogue to survey recent books about him.

Click to read Carel van Mander's writing on Caravaggio's life

Activity 2

Langdon in the introduction to her book outlines the reasons for the many modern publications about Caravaggio and reviews some of the literature on him. Please read the 'Introduction' now and answer the following question.

What factors does Langdon suggest have shaped writing about Caravaggio in his own lifetime and the present day?

Langdon suggests that the main factor in his own lifetime that attracted attention was his style of painting, his naturalism (p. 5). Later, this style was seen to be a threat to painting. In the twentieth century, interest focused on his social role as an artist – as a rebel rejecting contemporary conventions and ideals, with a personality and sexuality demanding psychoanalytic and existentialist interpretation.

Caravaggio's personality and physiognomy have always featured in writing about him. This is something which makes him an ideal subject for modern methodological developments, particularly those that focus on psychology and psychoanalysis.

New approaches to art history appeared in the 1960s and 1970s which encourage very different books written about essentially the same subject matter.

New documents have been found and are still being found that relate to Caravaggio's art and life. This has happened relatively recently because of easier travel, more archives opening their doors to scholars, and the history of art as a discipline accepting a wider range of sources.

Part of Caravaggio's attraction for his contemporary biographers and for modern art historians is precisely the mix of art and artist that Hibbard highlights in his analysis of *The Martyrdom of St Matthew*. Leoni's portrait of Caravaggio is the first illustration in Langdon's book because it is as much about the artist as it is about his art.

Hibbard's reference to Caravaggio as a 'saturnine villain' further exposes assumptions he is making about Caravaggio as an artist. The description 'saturnine' refers to one of the four humours or temperaments, each of which was linked to a planet (for a definition of the humours see Barker, et al., 1999, p. 153). The saturnine humour is melancholia, suffered most in the evening when the planet Saturn is in the sky. It was particularly associated with creative individuals such as poets and painters. Melancholia was certainly associated with artists at Caravaggio's time (Wittkower, 1961, pp. 293–4): Cardanus in 1561 described painters as 'fickle, of unsettled mind, melancholic, and changeable in their manners'; and Michelangelo wrote these lines in one of his sonnets,

Melancholia is my joy

And discomfort is my rest.

Some artists even pretended to be mad to impress clients with their genius. Giovan Battista Armenini, in his *Dei veri precetti della pittura* (1587), wrote that

> An awful habit has developed among common folk and even among the educated to whom it seems natural that a painter of highest distinction must show signs of some ugly or nefarious vice allied with a capricious and eccentric

> temperament springing from his abstruse mind. And the worst is that many ignorant artists believe to be very exceptional by effecting melancholy and eccentricity.
>
> (Quoted in Wittkower, 1961, p. 299)

Ever since the sixteenth century the idea of the artist – 'a highly individualized professional type' (Wittkower, 1961, p. 295) – as melancholic or outsider has prevailed, not least because it gave painters the same character, and thus status, Aristotle had ascribed to poets. Later it achieved renewed effect during the Romantic period in the idea of the 'bohemian' artist or poet. Still to this day the paradigm that artists are in some way 'different' persists. 'Paradoxically', Wittkower wrote, 'the untrammelled individualism of twentieth-century avant-garde artists, their personality and social problems were ultimately derived from the Italian Renaissance, the period in history on which they heaped the fullness of their scorn' (Wittkower, 1961, p. 199). Not only are artists traditionally stereotyped as 'different' but biography further separates them from 'normal' or 'ordinary' people simply by singling them out for literary attention.

The literary genre of biography relies on narrative. The narrative form structures the information in the book and it also makes the book appeal to the reader. Hayden White explains this appeal: 'far from being one code among many that a culture may utilize for endowing experience with meaning, narrative is a metacode, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of shared reality can be transmitted' (White, 1980, p. 6). This narrative structure explains why it is difficult to pick out only parts of a biography (and why, shortly, you will be asked to read the book all the way through). The biographical narrative is constructed with a beginning, a middle and an end to tell a good story about an individual's life – all the more readable if it were about a 'saturnine villain'.

So was Caravaggio actually a melancholic or does Hibbard describe him as such because that is how artists were – or are – expected to be and because it helps create the dramatic figure Langdon identifies in her introduction? Behind this lies a bigger assumption: that we need to know what kind of person Caravaggio was or what mood he was in when he painted to appreciate his paintings. I will return to this assumption in more detail in the next section.

I asked Helen Langdon how she came to write about Caravaggio.

> I have always been interested in Caravaggio, but the idea of the book came to me when I was working as editor of the Italian Baroque at Grove Dictionary of Art. I had edited several articles on Caravaggio's patrons, and then I received one on the Sicilian painter Mario Minitti, who shared Caravaggio's rowdy life in Rome, and then welcomed his old friend years later to Sicily, when Caravaggio was on the run. This story struck me as such a vivid and concrete detail, that stood out with such sharpness amongst much stylistic analysis, that I had the idea of writing a book which should be a narrative, that should be full of such details; I wanted to write a book about characters, about people, about the real places and streets of seventeenth-century Rome and Naples which are still so recognizable. It seemed to me that Caravaggio's life had something of the quality of classical tragedy, a sense of inevitability, of hastening onwards towards doom, and I wished to create a strong narrative. But I also wanted to avoid twentieth-century myth and speculation, and as far as possible use seventeenth-century source material, so that the voice of the times should speak out.

(Helen Langdon interview, February 2002)

Langdon refers to her sense of Caravaggio being a tragic figure, and therefore an attractive subject for a biography that will make a good story, appeal to readers and – ultimately – sell. But Caravaggio's appeal to the biographer appears to be part of a circular process: artists are traditionally portrayed as melancholic or tragic figures with dramatic lives; Caravaggio was portrayed as a tragic figure; biographers are typically attracted to the tragic figure; therefore Caravaggio makes an ideal artist-subject for a biographical treatment. The publication of the problematic *Caravaggio assassino*, ‘which slips so dizzyingly between fact, fantasy and hypothesis’ (Langdon, 1999, p. 19), exacerbated the situation because of the spectacular, but falsified, material it contains about the allegedly murderous artist. Many recent writers have failed to question the reliability of this study, instead preferring to repeat its outrageous claims. The book has only added fuel to the fire of the Caravaggio cult.

1.3 Artists' ‘Lives’

Helen Langdon's subtitle *‘A Life’* points to a very particular combination of literary and artistic sources in her biography. Catherine M. Soussloff suggests that the literary genre of artists' ‘Lives’ has led to the artist and his work being ‘inextricably entwined’ in a way that does not happen in the ‘Lives’ of poets or prose writers (Soussloff, 1990, p. 154). Although she overstates the case, as recent biographies of novelists, musicians, etc. demonstrate, artworks can illustrate biography in ways that texts alone cannot; ways that make artists seem more present in their art

> When biography and commentary appear conjoined for the first time in the vernacular, the ‘Life’ serves as an introduction to and a comment upon the study of the textual or formal concerns of the poetry.
>
> The ‘Lives’ of artists differ in one very significant way from this model. The separation of the discussion of the writer and his works into two genres does not occur in the case of the visual artist. The non-textual nature of the work of art required this, and other traditional literary forms, such as ekphrasis [‘Ekphrasis’ is a way of writing about art to bring what it represents to life. You can find out more detail about this rhetorical method from classical antiquity to the Renaissance in the entry in the *Grove Dictionary of Art* online at http://www.groveart.com.], were inserted into the *Vita* in order to deal with the work of art. In the early literature on art there is no parallel or equivalent of the textual commentary. Vasari is explicit about the necessity for the conjunction of the artist's life and works of art in his Preface to the second part of his Lives, where he starts:
>
> > … I have striven not only to say what these craftsmen have done, but also, in treating of them, to distinguish the better from the good, and the best from the better and to note with no small diligence the methods, the feelings, the manners, the characteristics and the fantasies of the painters and sculptors; seeking with the greatest diligence in my power to make known, to those who do not know this for themselves, the causes and origins of the various manners and of that amelioration and that deterioration of the arts which have come to pass at diverse times and through diverse persons.

> Thus the life of the visual artist serves as the locus for a commentary on the works and a history of a life and the vicissitudes of art. It can be said that the genres of commentary and 'Life' are truly conflated in the 'Life' of the visual artist. No doubt, this conflation has been responsible, in part, for the confusion regarding the 'Lives' of artists which is present today in the secondary literature of art history.
>
> (Soussloff, 1990, p. 158)

The confusion to which Soussloff refers concerns the nature of artist's 'Lives' as source material for art history, that is, as an explanation either of the artist or his works. We will consider this in more detail later in this section.

As a form, the biographical structure confounds the artist and his or her works to the exclusion of other factors: the narrative of the artist's life becomes part of the meaning of the artworks; these artworks are evidence of artistic – and sometimes 'divine' – genius; primary documentary testament, pictures and anecdote serve to reconstruct the appearance and presence of the artist. With the artist's life and work conflated, external influences become secondary: 'the author … appears as a coherent and distinct individual whose coherent and distinct work derives from individual experience and genius, free of environmental influences' (Thomas, 2002, p. 264). The myth of the artist as hero is reinforced through certain conventions of artists' 'Lives' (Kris and Kurz, 1979, pp. 13–60 and Thomas, 2002, pp. 262–6). In Renaissance 'Lives' the divine nature of the artist's gift is often described not only in his active career as an artist but in his birth and death as well. Vasari, for example, credited the very best artists with stories that apparently explained their later success. In Giotto's 'Life', for example, Vasari tells the story of the artist as a boy, aged ten, leading some sheep to pasture. At each place they stopped to graze, Giotto drew the sheep on a rock, from nature. Cimabue passed by and, impressed by his skill, took him off to his studio. Leonardo was a child prodigy, in everything from maths to music. Michelangelo, the epitome of the artist as divine master, was born under the constellation of Mercury and Venus, said to augur his great genius. (Immanuel Kant explains the origin of genius in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790) '… the word genius is derived from [Latin] *genius*, [which means] the guardian and guiding spirit that each person is given as his own at birth, and to whose inspiration … original ideas are due' (Kant, 1987, p. 175).) He was also named after the archangel Michael because both he and, by implication, anachronistically, his artworks were considered divine. Even in death the best artists were like the saints: Vasari records that Michelangelo's body was still perfect and did not stink even twenty-five days after his death (Soussloff, 1997, p. 36).

If Helen Langdon's book *Caravaggio: A Life* is, then, part of this tradition, it is about a lot more than a sixteenth-century artist's working life.

Activity 3

Read the entire book quickly, noting the way that significant events and works of art are used to build the structure of the book. Identify which are the most significant chapters. You may like to make a table like this in your own notes to help you record the main features of each chapter. For example,

Chapter	date	location	events	paintings
1 'Milan'				

2 'Rome 1592'				
3 'Flowers and Fruit'				
… and so on.				

1 In her book, how does Langdon combine Caravaggio's life with his work?

2 Which features of the book remind you of the traditional structure of artists' 'Lives'?

3 Make a list of the disadvantages and advantages of Langdon's incorporation of Caravaggio's work and life in analysing works of art by him.

4 To what extent do you think Langdon is concerned with Caravaggio's personality in her book?

1 The book is organised chronologically and each chapter takes up particular themes. Thus works of art are included chronologically and also in terms of the particular themes of the chapters they crop up in. Some chapters do not mention works of art at all and when they are discussed their inclusion depends on their appropriateness to the theme.

2 There are both general and specific points to be made here. In general terms, the contextualization of art works within their creator's life span is typical of 'Life' writing. This approach dictates very largely what can and cannot be included about the artwork. Descriptions of particular images can depend on where they are introduced in the life.

3 *Advantages*

Chronological narrative overrides every other factor – it is a very convenient way to structure a lot of information.

Events and works occur in the text at the right time so that relativities can be established.

Disadvantages

The fact that chronological narrative overrides every other factor is as much a disadvantage as an advantage – artworks take their place within the biography. But if, for example, a new document proposes a different date for an artwork, then the whole biography must be reordered accordingly.

Themes that might help explain artworks are not necessarily chronological.

Often later works throw light on the earlier, but if artworks are dealt with in the chronological order of the artist's life then this connection cannot be made without disturbing the strict linearity of the biographical structure.

Because of this structure the *causality* of events can be overemphasised – connections are made where they did not necessarily exist.

4 Although Langdon relies on primary source material wherever possible – something that gives the book an air of objectivity – nevertheless value judgements of Caravaggio and his art creep in. For example, you may have noticed that in some cases descriptive words – such as 'isolated' (p. 118), 'sardonic' (p. 217), 'ignobility' (p. 357), 'bleak and desolate' (p. 373) – can be applied as much to the artist as to his art.

1.4 The artist's 'Life' as a historical source

In the introduction to *Caravaggio*, and at different points in the book, Langdon discusses the comparative merits of different kinds of evidence. Her main form of evidence is textual rather than artistic, however. This is the key to the empirical method that she applies to her subject.

Activity 4

Helen Langdon emphasises the empirical nature of her method in constructing a biography of Caravaggio, preferring 'as far as possible … seventeenth-century source material [over] twentieth-century myth and speculation'. In Chapter 3, 'Flowers and Fruit', she combines a variety of sources to recreate the earliest part of Caravaggio's career. Read the two seventeenth-century sources by Mancini and Bellori now (below) then read Chapter 3 again before answering the following questions.

Click to read the Mancini source.

Click to read the Bellori source.

Langdon relies heavily on the early 'lives' of Caravaggio. Do you think these 'Lives' are primary or secondary sources? What are the advantages and disadvantages of using these 'Lives' as historical sources?

The first of many 'Lives' of Caravaggio, *Considerazioni sulla pittura* (1617–21) was written by Giulio Mancini. It contains both primary and secondary information. Knowing a bit about Mancini helps: Mancini knew Caravaggio, so he provides in part an eye-witness account of the artist. As well as specific details about Caravaggio himself, Mancini also refers to some of the conventions of the day, such as the 'appropriateness' of depicting particular subjects in certain ways, and to attitudes to some of Caravaggio's paintings. This information is primary source material. When Mancini turns to defining the Roman school of painting he interprets the information he has and provides his own categories or conclusions based on it. Usefully, he often points to his interpretation of material by writing phrases like 'it seems to me …'. This is secondary source material, though of a uniquely important kind because it was written so close to the time of the artist himself. Other sources that Langdon uses are more problematic. On page 55, for example, Langdon writes that Caravaggio arrived in Rome with no property or reputation. Bellori, writing in 1672, tells us this. Though early, this is a secondary source. Similarly Caravaggio's relationship with Mario Minniti, the Sicilian painter, comes from a 1724 source (p. 60). Although the Mancini and Bellori 'Lives' are seventeenth-century sources, they are themselves narrative constructions: they are not neutral primary sources. Bellori's was written some time after Caravaggio's death and yet what he writes is privileged in the way a primary source is.

A great deal of what seems to be reliable fact about Caravaggio is open to question and interpretation. Throughout her book, Helen Langdon turns to discussion of the veracity of different sources and adds circumstantial evidence about patrons and the wider cultural context to fill in gaps and confirm otherwise unreliable information about Caravaggio. In fact, few artists have surrounding them as much primary source material as art historians would like to be able to recreate their career or to reinterpret their works. With so few other sources surviving, artists' 'Lives' can and have taken on a significance and weight that they simply do not support or often deserve.

Part of the 'confusion' Soussloff refers to in Section 1.3 is the status of an artist's 'Life' as a source for other discussions of an artist's work. Are 'Lives' primary or secondary sources?

> The pragmatist who seeks the individual in the 'Life' will, of necessity, be disappointed, although a desire to find the 'individuality' of the visual artist has led many to read the 'Lives' as primary documents.
>
> (Soussloff, 1990, p. 162)

In Soussloff's book, *The Absolute Artist* (1997), the author develops her point about the problem that artists' 'Lives' create when used as a primary source. Indeed, 'assumptions regarding the artist and work of art appropriated from the biographical literature have determined art history's view of these subjects and also of itself' (Soussloff, 1997, p. 77). She notes, for example, that even Jacob Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860, English translation 1878) is based largely on artists' 'Lives' (though it is thematic rather than biographical in form). In this context, according to Soussloff, it is no wonder that Burckhardt is able to celebrate 'The Development of the Individual' as one of his sections.

> Burckhardt's characterization of the civilization of the Renaissance in Italy relied on texts that were as concerned with individual personalities as they were with the works that those personalities produced. His Romantic strain was naturally attracted to the idea of the individual genius, a concept central to all German historicism of the nineteenth century …
>
> The account of the artist and the works known as the biography of the artist has proven to be constitutive of itself in highly significant ways for art history writing. Perhaps this is because the genre mediates so well between the imaginary and the real, between the myth and the history, between the artist and the object … The nineteenth- and twentieth-century conception of the artist remains pegged to the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century concept on which it is uncritically based.
>
> (Soussloff, 1997, pp. 87 and 93)

Activity 5

As a means of revising this course, answer the following question:

What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of using artists' 'Lives' as sources for art historical study?

1.5 Further reading

Battersby, C. (1989) *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics*, London, Women's Press.

Kris, E. and Kurz, O. (1979) *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

Soussloff, C.M. (1997) 'The artist in nature: Renaissance biography', *The Absolute Artist: The Historiography of a Concept*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, pp. 43–72.

White, H. (1990) *Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press.

Wittkower, R. and Wittkower, M. (1969) *Born Under Saturn: The Character and Conduct of Artists: A Documented History from Antiquity to the French Revolution*, New York, Norton.

2 Artists and their art

2.1 Understanding an artist's art

Bernard Berenson wrote his book about Caravaggio (1953) because,

> Until a few decades ago his artistic personality was as nebulous as Leonardo's or Giorgione's before Giovanni Morelli. Almost any canvas was attributed to him that was startlingly lit, that represented figures with plumed hats, vulgar obese giants blasphemously posing as Christ and His disciples, dice-throwing or card-sharping undermen, jumbles of over-jolly, swilling, embracing males and females, or more decorous musical parties. It is different now. He has ceased to be a class of kind and has become as much of an artistic personality as Leonardo, or Giorgione at least.
>
> (Berenson, 1953, p. ii)

For Berenson, making Caravaggio ‘as much of an artistic personality as Leonardo, or Giorgione’ allowed him to be incorporated into the art historical canon or mainstream. The canon itself consists of mostly male, white, western artists (Perry, 1999).

Despite significant challenges in recent years to the paradigm of the monograph, books about single artists – with their characteristic glossy illustrations and occasional catalogues – are still among the most common and popular forms of art history writing. Undoubtedly nineteenth- and twentieth-century values, which promoted the idea of ‘the artist as romantic genius’, still hold sway, particularly in more popular histories. Behind the persistence of the monograph lies the assumption that remains dominant in contemporary thought – that to understand an artwork one must also understand its creator.

When I talked with her in 2002, Helen Langdon explained why she had adopted the method she had for writing about Caravaggio.

> Caravaggio had a powerful personality which one senses in his art; it is surely not fanciful to see his self portraits as having autobiographical meaning. But in a sense he is so utterly silent that a psychoanalytical approach offers very little; I tried to demythologize and contextualize his violence and his sexuality, and to say nothing where there is no evidence. I think that a study of the times, of its intellectual, religious and political pressures, of its violence and codes of honour, do tell us much about Caravaggio's art, and are more revealing than subjective meditations on his inner thoughts and feelings.
>
> (Helen Langdon interview, February 2002)

Langdon clearly finds Caravaggio's personality in his art but she resists ‘subjective meditations on his inner thoughts and feelings’. While she suggests that ‘a psycho-analytical approach offers very little’ to an understanding of Caravaggio and his art, she

nevertheless tries to ‘contextualise his violence and his sexuality’, admitting them as factors in attempting to understand his art.

2.1 ‘Every painter paints himself’?

Art history methods of biography or ‘Life’ writing attempt to link an artist to his art. Why do we need to know about an artist's life to know about his art in the first place? Why might Helen Langdon want to explain Caravaggio the *man* and not just his *world* or his *art*? Behind this questions lies a problem central to art history. Do we need to know about artists to know about their art?

Martin Kemp gives the link between an artist and his art a historical complexion:

> The notion that there was something inherent in each artist at the deepest level found expression in the idea that ‘every painter paints himself’ – a tag that seems to have gained popularity in late fifteenth-century Florence … it was already expressed with some sophistication by Girolamo Savonarola, the reforming Dominican, whose fiery preaching was to precipitate the fall of the Medici in 1494. In one of his sermons on Ezekiel, he claimed that,
>
> > Every painter paints himself. He does not paint himself as being a man, because he makes images of lions, horses, men and women that are not himself, but he paints himself as a painter, that is according to his concept [*concetto*]; and although the *fantasie* and figures that the painters paint will be diverse, they will all correspond to this concept. So too the philosophers, because they were proud, described God in swollen and haughty ways.
>
> This idea could be expressed literally in terms that each painter tended to make all his figures look somewhat like himself, and more generally in that the character of a particular artist's personality was mirrored in his works. Thus a devout master, such as Fra Angelico, would paint serenely devout works, while an irascible master like Castagno would exhibit a fiercer *aria* in his paintings. In the hands of Leonardo, Vasari and other later authors, the identity of virtuous artists with virtuous works … became a central plank in the requirements for good art.
>
> (Kemp, 1997, p. 242)

Activity 6

Giorgio Vasari, for example, claims in his *Lives of the Artists* (1550) that it is the artists who have led virtuous lives who he also judges to have produced good art (see Rubin, 1995). According to the two early biographers of Caravaggio you read in Section 1.4, (Mancini and Bellori, see below), did Caravaggio's personality affect his painting?

Click to read the Mancini source.

Click to read the Bellori source.

Mancini and Bellori certainly link Caravaggio's art with his personality: Mancini says that he would have lived longer and established a workshop and contributed to the

future of art if he had been less unruly. They are primarily concerned with his attention to ‘naturalism’ and with his care, or lack of it, to take studies from nature. Caravaggio's ‘mere copying’ put him at odds with the intellectual current in the classicising art of his colleagues. Bellori suggests that Caravaggio supplied an easy option for young artists who therefore lacked discipline in their practice and simply tried to outdo one another.

These are powerful models for any writer about Caravaggio. The way that Caravaggio's art was judged depended more on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Renaissance rhetorical traditions which deliberately link his art and life than on any objective analysis of his work.

2.3 Biography and psychobiography

A significant, inescapable identifying feature of the twentieth century was the birth and development of psychoanalysis. Combined with romantic notions of the artist-genius and the attractiveness of the artist's ‘Life’ as evidence for writing the history of Renaissance art, psychoanalysis further ensured the continued success of the monographic construction of art history. A good example of this overlap between the increasingly redundant/discredited ‘Life’ of an artist and the more recently adopted psychoanalytic theories, is the recourse to the individual's childhood. The inclusion of the artist's childhood in a biography is acceptable because, according to psychoanalysis, the earliest development of the personality, created by events experienced in early life, will explain what happens to the individual subsequently. ‘The individual's life history is the route to the understanding of his personality’ (Kris and Kurz, 1979, p. 14).

Sigmund Freud's (1856–1939) short but groundbreaking psychoanalytic study of Leonardo da Vinci was published in 1910 and revised in subsequent editions to 1923. It was Freud's only attempt at ‘psychobiography’ and it was criticised as soon as it appeared. He tried to pre-empt criticism in Chapter 6 of the study, and in doing so explained his thinking behind his method. Biographers on the whole, he wrote,

> present us with what is in fact a cold, strange, ideal figure, instead of a human being to whom we might feel ourselves distantly related. That they should do this is regrettable, for they thereby sacrifice truth to an illusion, and for the sake of their infantile phantasies abandon the opportunity of penetrating the most fascinating secrets of human nature.
>
> (Freud, 1963, p. 177–8)

He then goes on to ‘summarise what we have been able to discover about the course of his [Leonardo's] psychic development’ which reveals Freud's objectives in writing the book.

> We should be most glad to give an account of the way in which artistic activity derives from the primal instincts of the mind if it were not just here that our capacities fail us. We must be content to emphasize the fact – which it is hardly any longer possible to doubt – that what an artist creates provides at the same time for an outlet of his sexual desire; and in Leonardo's case we can point to the information which comes from Vasari, that the heads of laughing women and beautiful boys – in other words, representations of his sexual objects – were notable among his first artistic endeavours …

> If in making these statements I have provoked the criticism, even from friends of psycho-analysis and from those who are expert in it, that I have merely written a psycho-analytic novel, I shall reply that I am far from over-estimating the certainty of these results. Like others, I have succumbed to the attraction of this great and mysterious man, in whose nature one seems to detect powerful instinctual passions which can nevertheless only express themselves in so remarkably subdued a manner.
>
> But whatever the truth about Leonardo's life may be, we cannot desist from our endeavour to find a psychoanalytic explanation for it until we have completed another task. We must stake out in a quite general way the limits which are set to what psycho-analysis can achieve in the field of biography: otherwise every explanation that is not forthcoming will be held up to us as a failure. The material at the disposal of a psychoanalytic inquiry consists of the data of a person's life history: on the one hand the chance circumstances of events and background influences, and on the other hand the subject's reported reactions. Supported by its knowledge of psychical mechanisms it then endeavours to establish a dynamic basis for his nature on the strength of his reactions, and to disclose the original motive forces of his mind, as well as their later transformations and developments. If this is successful the behaviour of a personality in the course of his life is explained in terms of the combined operation of constitution and fate, of internal forces and external powers. Where such an undertaking does not provide any certain results – and this is perhaps so in Leonardo's case – the blame rests not with the faulty or inadequate methods of psycho-analysis, but with the uncertainty and fragmentary nature of the material relating to him which tradition makes available. It is therefore only the author who is to be held responsible for the failure, by having forced psycho-analysis to pronounce an expert opinion on the basis of such insufficient material.
>
> (Freud, 1963, pp. 180–5)

Freud's study is clearly not so much about Leonardo in particular as about the creative process in general and the limitations of conventional biography which exclude discussion of it. One important effect of Freud's psychoanalytic approach was to entwine more closely what he defined as cause and effect – the artist and his art – in the creation of artworks. But Freud uses artworks as evidence for the artist's *personality*; the psychobiography does not aim to interpret the works of art themselves. Significantly Freud's *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood* relied explicitly on works from the artist's own hands – Leonardo's writings, paintings and drawings – and not on biography because, he argued, this was based on cumulative history which produces legend rather than fact. Through that primary evidence, Freud was looking for 'truth' about a historical individual by subjecting that individual, or rather, products from the hand of that individual, to a clinical session.

In the end Freud's book says more about psychoanalysis than it does about the artist or art history, but the method – connecting the development of the individual self to the products of that individual life – has proved irresistible to subsequent scholars and a defining feature of modern consciousness. Freud's psychobiography has been discredited in its details but its broader implications have proved more difficult to shake off. Ernst Gombrich criticised psychoanalytic interpretations of art in general terms in a lecture he gave to the British Psycho-Analytical Society in November 1953.

> In most psycho-analytic discussions of art the analogy between the work of art and the dream stands in the foreground of interest. I think it cannot be denied that this approach has proved more rewarding in the field of literature than of painting. True, there are paintings such as some by Goya, Blake, or Fuseli which are dream-like; but if you follow me in your mind on a lightning excursion to the National Gallery, with its Madonnas and landscapes, still lifes and portraits, you will realize that the traditional conventional elements often outweigh the personal ones in many, even of the great masterpieces of the past. Now I would not be here, of course, if I were inclined to deny that a personal determinant must always exist and have always existed …
>
> But does it matter all that much? This may seem at first a very heretical question to ask, yet on its answer depends the whole relationship between psycho-analysis and the history of art. For try as we may, we historians just cannot raise the dead and put them on your couch… Such attempts as have been made, therefore, to tiptoe across the chasm of centuries on a fragile rope made of stray information can never be more than a *jeu d'esprit*, even if the performance is as dazzling as Freud's *Leonardo*… And so I repeat the question whether it really matters all that much if we know what the work of art meant to the artist. It clearly matters on one assumption and on one assumption only: that this private, personal, psychological meaning of the picture is alone the real, the true meaning.
>
> (Gombrich, 1971, p. 31)

Gombrich concludes that while 'taste may be accessible to psychological analysis, art is possibly not' (Gombrich, 1971, p. 43). Perhaps taste or fashion will determine whether an artist's work is studied in the first place but it will tell us little about the artist or the works. The context in which the artist lived and worked, beyond the images and texts specifically produced by that individual, are more significant aspects in rebuilding the artist's activities, as Langdon's biography illustrates. What psychobiography does is almost irretrievably to attach the artist to his art. 'The "story" in psychoanalysis can be told from only one point of view, that of the analysand' (Soussloff, 1997, p. 127). I would argue that the two need to be separated, for inextricably united they are as much a problem as a solution to their understanding.

Activity 7

On the basis of the extracts from Freud and Gombrich above, what advantages and disadvantages do they suggest for the psychoanalytic approach to art history? How does Helen Langdon's approach in *Caravaggio* fare in this context?

Freud sees psychobiography as a way of bringing the artist to life. Gombrich questions this approach because it assumes that understanding the artist will lead to the one 'true' interpretation of his or her artworks. With respect to this issue, Langdon's *Caravaggio* fares quite well. While she conflates the artist and his art, as the biographical structure dictates, she none the less has to look beyond the artist's inner life for explanations of his artworks. Unlike Leonardo, Caravaggio left no letters or drawings. Nevertheless, the more the historical documents seem to allow access to Caravaggio himself, the stronger – or closer to the 'truth' – the interpretation of the artworks seems. It is this that Gombrich challenges: 'whether it really matters all that much if we know what the work of art meant to the artist'.

2.4 The intentional fallacy

In the final sentence of the Gombrich quotation in Section 2.3, he claims there is only one reason why what the artist meant could matter to us and that is the artist's meaning or intention is ‘the real, the true meaning’.

Questions about interpretation of works of art by resorting to the artist's intention were brought together by the literary theorist William K. Wimsatt and the aesthetician Monroe Beardsley in their article ‘The intentional fallacy’, first published in 1946. The article remains an important point of arrival or departure for debate about the relationship of the artist to his or her art. They summed up their criticism (the fallacy) of the recourse to the artist's intention as follows:

1 A poem does not come into existence by accident. The words of a poem … come out of a head, not out of a hat. Yet to insist on the designing intellect as a *cause* of a poem is not to grant the design or intention as a *standard* by which the critic is to judge the work of the poet's performance.

2 One must ask how a critic expects to get an answer to the question about intention. How is he to find out what the poet tried to do? If the poet succeeded in doing it, then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do. And if the poet did not succeed, then the poem is not adequate evidence, and the critic must go outside the poem – for evidence of an intention that did not become effective in the poem. ‘Only one *caveat* must be borne in mind,’ says an eminent intentionalist in a moment when his theory repudiates itself; ‘the poet's aim must be judged at the moment of the creative act, that is to say, by the art of the poem itself.’

3 Judging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine. One demands that it work. It is only because an artefact works that we infer the intention of an artificer. ‘A poem should not mean but be.’ A poem can *be* only through its *meaning* – since its medium is words – yet it *is*, simply *is*, in the sense that we have no excuse for inquiring what part is intended or meant. Poetry is a feat of style by which a complex of meaning is handled all at once. Poetry succeeds because all or most of what is said or implied is relevant; what is irrelevant has been excluded, like lumps from a pudding and ‘bugs’ from machinery. In this respect poetry differs from practical messages, which are successful if and only if we correctly infer the intention. They are more abstract than poetry.

4 The meaning of a poem may certainly be a personal one, in the sense that a poem expresses a personality or state of soul rather than a physical object like an apple. But even a short lyric poem is dramatic, the response of a speaker (no matter how abstractly conceived) to a situation (no matter how universalised). We ought to impute the thoughts and attitudes of the poem immediately to the dramatic *speaker*, and if to the author at all, only by an act of biographical inference.

5 There is a sense in which an author, by revision, may better achieve his original intention. But in a very abstract sense. He intended to write a better work, or a better work of a certain kind, and now has done it. But it follows that a former concrete intention was not his intention. ‘He's the man we were in search of, that's true,’ says Hardy's rustic constable, ‘and

> yet he's not the man we were in search of, for the man we were in search of was not the man we wanted.'
>
> (Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1946, reprinted in Wimsatt, 1954, pp. 4–5)

Activity 8

1 Consider the implications of the above five objections for the interpretation of Caravaggio's work in terms of his intention.

2 Based on the advantages and disadvantages of linking an artist's art and life you listed above, how does Helen Langdon's *Caravaggio* stand up to Wimsatt and Beardsley's critical framework?

The interpretation of a work of art, Wimsatt and Beardsley argue, lies outside and beyond the artist. Studying an artwork to find the artist's state of mind is quite different from the interpretation of the artwork itself.

> There is criticism of poetry and there is author psychology, which when applied to the present or future takes the form of inspirational promotion; but the author psychology can be historical too, and then we have literary biography, a legitimate and attractive study in itself … Certainly it need not be with a derogatory purpose that one points out personal studies, as distinct from poetic studies, in the realm of literary scholarship. Yet there is a danger of confusing personal and poetic studies; and there is the fault of writing the personal as if it were poetic.
>
> (Wimsatt and Beardsley in Wimsatt, 1954, p. 10)

According to Wimsatt and Beardsley, then, Langdon's *Caravaggio* would be a personal study, something they suggest is quite different from an artist

2.5 Is the author dead?

When Roland Barthes (1915–80) wrote 'The Death of the Author' (first published 1968, reprinted in Barthes 1977), he did not mean that, like Wimsatt and Beardsley, the author had been, or should always have been, absent in the interpretation of art works. Instead his position is a historicised one: while once it might have been acceptable to refer to the author in the interpretation of an art work, now, in a post-modern world, it is not. Michel Foucault (1926–84) responded to Barthes (though not by name) in his paper 'What is an Author?' (1969). In it he discusses the value-laden term 'author' to qualify and retrieve something from Barthes's rather terminal 'Death of the Author'.

Activity 9

Please read Foucault's 'What is an Author?' now (Preziosi (1998), pp. 299–314). What are the implications of Foucault's argument for writing about Caravaggio's paintings?

Click to read Foucault's 'What is an Author?'

Foucault's caution seems of direct relevance to Caravaggio studies. Any search for the identity of the author or artist brings with it another set of expectations to the interpretation of art works: the name of an author (or an artist) represents more than an identity tag. The name is a signpost pointing to a certain identity or narrative or group of artworks attached to a particular individual. Equally, the individual can also be understood as a construction made up of works associated with him or her which, when combined, creates an author or artist.

Foucault asks how we decide where an author's work begins and where it ends: 'is everything he wrote and said, everything he left behind, to be included in his work?' (Preziosi, p. 302). Conversely, an author's name attached to certain works will impose a particular identity on those works. Thus, by implication, Foucault suggests that a name, like 'Caravaggio', is not simply a label. It is 'the equivalent of a description' (Preziosi, p. 303) of what he does and how work associated with him has been received and categorised by historians. What Foucault suggests is that the author (or 'author-function') is only one of many ways of defining a subject or artwork. The definition of an author and the meaning and reception of an artwork should be continually revisited. 'What matter who's speaking?' he concludes. The answer to this question will change continuously. How, for example, might a work of art be interpreted if the artist who created it were unknown?

2.6 Caravaggio's sexuality

'Caravaggio studies' often provide good, and sometimes extreme, examples of the ways in which an artist's identity can be bound up in his work and vice versa. In the case of Caravaggio it is difficult to avoid assumptions about his sexual orientation in any modern study of his art. Bold statements sometimes presume that this is a resolved issue: he was, for example, 'The one major painter of the late Cinquecento whose sexuality is otherwise freely expressed in his oevre' (Saslow, 1986, p. 200). But what has consideration of Caravaggio's sexuality got to do with the interpretation of his paintings?

John Gash, in his review of Langdon's *Caravaggio* for the *Burlington Magazine*, noted that the book avoids entering into discussions of the artist's sexuality even though this has long been an element of his artistic personality.

> … Langdon's strong resistance to any hint of homosexuality in Caravaggio's make-up is puzzling, for the early written tradition to that effect seems congruent with the evidence of some of the pictures. In the final analysis, what one misses in this biography is any attempt to plumb the recesses of Caravaggio's psyche and to build on the earlier psychoanalytical speculations of Rottgen and Hibbard – a difficult task admittedly, and one made more difficult within the narrative framework. But this is more than compensated for by the author's brilliant reconstruction of the many domains (material, cultural, and intellectual) of the world with which Caravaggio interacted, providing us with a rich and readily accessible array of information from which to make connections and draw our own conclusions.
>
> (Gash, 2000, p. 310)

Alan Jenkins, reviewing the book for the *Times Literary Supplement*, makes similar observations about what he refers to as Langdon's 'innocence':

> Her discussions of the pictures are sober and hugely informed, and her book is very fully and beautifully illustrated. But we miss the fine grain of Caravaggio's life and comings and goings, the blood and bone and sinew […] Langdon errs on the side of innocence. She places far too much trust in those variously unreliable witnesses, his first biographers, and seems primly determined to ignore the homoerotic or pederastic charge even of those pictures in which it is pre-eminent, and to deny Caravaggio himself his vulnerability to erotic entrancement by young boys.
>
> (Jenkins, 1999, p. 14)

Gash identified Langdon's 'narrative framework' as a constraint to the consideration of Caravaggio's psyche. A close reading of part of Langdon's book will consider her approach to this difficult issue. Chapters 6 and 8 of Langdon's *Caravaggio* focus on some of the most problematic issues and images of Caravaggio's oeuvre.

Activity 10

In the conclusion to his book, Howard Hibbard suggests that Caravaggio's art is a product of his own idiosyncrasies. Thus, for example, he views the *Victorious Cupid* (Langdon Plate 16 – see the Web Gallery of Art at http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/c/caravagg/04/index.html) as 'a preadolescent boy triumphing over the learned arts and sciences of Giustiniani and his kind, posing naughtily and exhibiting himself … a pagan, heterosexual symbol that has become a cliché into a boy of the streets and an object of pederastic interest' (Hibbard, 1983, p. 157).

1 How does Langdon account for these 'idiosyncrasies'? Can you explain why she reaches the conclusion she does? (You will find Chapters 6 and 8 of *Caravaggio* most useful here.)

2 What are the strengths and weaknesses of her empirical methodology in this context?

Langdon dismisses more recent assumptions that the pictures in these chapters betray Caravaggio's sexual orientation as the kind of 'colourful anecdote enjoyed by tourists' (p. 220). She cannot allow for Caravaggio's homosexuality because her empirical method will not allow her to. For Caravaggio to be homosexual she would require evidence of the fact or act itself – of Caravaggio's homosexual behaviour. Evidence implicit in his art of a possible homosexual perspective, such that 'queer theory' today posits, is not sufficient for her method.

Langdon is not alone. Creighton E. Gilbert in his book, *Caravaggio and His Two Cardinals*, similarly picks piece by piece through the evidence contemporary with his practice. He concludes that, 'we cannot be certain what the artist's personal sexual interests were, and it is also possible that, as a brilliant figure painter, he might have created imagery separate from his personal life' (Gilbert, 1995, p. 191).

Caravaggio's Secrets (Bersani and Dutoit, 1998) includes an interpretation of the Capitoline *St John the Baptist (Youth with a Ram)* (see Colour Plate 2 below). Bersani and Dutoit's reading of a Caravaggio painting is very different from Langdon's historical, literary and artistic contextualisation. They call upon the audience/viewer to bring to bear a Freudian psychoanalytic schema in the interpretation of the painting.

> Nudity here signifies very differently from the sense it projects in *Victorious Cupid* [Langdon Plate 16]. There the frontal pose, the well-lighted genitals, the centered pelvis, and the suggestive glimpse of Cupid's buttocks all encourage us to sexualize the gaze; the sexual nature of the message is confirmed by the prominence of the emblems of sexuality. In *St John the Baptist with a Ram*, the sexual nature of the enigmatic gaze is problematised by the comparative insignificance, pictorially speaking, of these same emblems. The only dead part of the painting is the youth's genitals and the shaded area of his body just above his genitals. Even the boy's spread legs have to be read less as an erotic provocation than as merely one in a series of fanlike structures opening outward, away from the youth's body. Three of these structures could also be read on a single vertical line, from the plant to the legs to the horns, a movement in which the most explicitly sexual element of the picture becomes a minor episode on the way.
>
> And yet the provocative address, with the suggestion of a secret (what do the youth's smile and gaze mean or intend?), has by no means disappeared. The persistence of the enigma, and the shift in its sense, are both nicely figured in the ram's horns. Inwardly, they confine space and point to the youth's face, thus confirming his gaze and smile as the painting's narrative center. But in the outward spread, the horns de-narrativise the picture, extending the youth away from himself, connecting him, as the other fanlike structures do, to a realm of being he can't contain, where there are no borders or figures, no beginning or end. This, then, is the youth's secret, one not of interiority but rather of infinite extensibility, a secret of unrepresented and unrepresentable, ontological affinities. The fact that the smile, the look, and the pose that designate that secret continue to be identifiable as erotically provocative does, however, suggest the sublimation or the erotic signifier may be an eroticised re-experiencing of it. In psychoanalytic terms, the renewed research into the trauma of an enigmatic sexuality dissipates the hidden sexual content of the trauma while reasserting its sexual energy. Painting makes visible the sensual grounds of a metaphysical fantasy.
>
> (Bersani and Dutoit, 1998, pp. 81–2)

Activity 11

Click to open Colour Plate 2 showing Caravaggio's St John the Baptist (Youth with a Ram),1602, oil on canvas, 132 x 97 cm, Musei Capitolini, Rome. Photo: SCALA, Florence.

In what ways does Bersani and Dutoit's interpretation of Caravaggio's *St John the Baptist (Youth with a Ram)* differ from Helen Langdon's interpretation of *Victorious Cupid* (pp. 213–21)? What assumptions lie behind these different sorts of interpretation?

According to Bersani and Dutoit, it is not Caravaggio but his painting that is eroticised. This points up a problem for the Freudian interpretation: is the psychoanalysis of the work a substitute for the analysis of the artist? If it is then it requires a leap of faith to associate the contents of the artist's unconscious with the contents of the work. If it is not, then the legitimacy of psychoanalysing an inanimate object rather than a mind becomes an issue. However, by adding a third element into the interpretation of a work

of art – the viewer – meaning becomes part of a dialogue, not between the artist and his art but between the artwork and the viewer. For Langdon even Symonds's 1649–50 notes are not a reliable source – they are no more than a 'colourful anecdote' (p. 220), though she accepts wholesale parts of other, later, 'Lives'. The empirical evidence seems to be her main concern here. The reception of the painting beyond the artist's lifetime and immediate context is not relevant in this biographical context. But Langdon does provide an interpretation that calls on classical and Renaissance literature. It is a very high-minded interpretation, as against Bersani and Dutoit's more 'get down and dirty' interpretation. Where they see eroticisation and expression of sexuality, Langdon sees a mockery of man's highest aspirations while still recognizing the 'disturbingly provocative' (p. 213) nature of the work: Cupid 'displays himself on the rumpled sheets of the bedroom, and both pose and expression are provocative, enticing… With one hand behind his back, he points suggestively to his buttocks, while displaying the softness of his thighs, and the V between his legs, to the spectator' (p. 215). Her language at least recognises the erotic nature of the work.

Perhaps Caravaggio was homosexual. Perhaps modern readings of his art are better able to explore this difficult area of his work because modern art historians are better equipped with Freudian and psychoanalytic understanding of the development of human identity. Or perhaps modern interpretations are not better but only different because writing about art has as much of a history as art itself. Perhaps the main issue being explored in the problematic issue of Caravaggio's sexuality is not so much to do with the historical artist but how the modern world explores its own identity by imposing its priorities or dilemmas on the past. The increased popularity of Caravaggio's painting in recent years is undoubtedly due to interest in human sexuality, homosexuality, and gay culture and politics. As a result, contemporary interpretations of Caravaggio's art seem remarkably complex in comparison to older, more conventional ones. Langdon's interpretation seems very convincing and straightforward in this context. Because she insists on finding empirical evidence for her analysis of artworks, rooted in 'contemporary' sources, she cannot permit – or she avoids – a 'queer' reading of his pictures. The main point here is that it is easy to confuse the reclamation or reinterpretation of paintings by Caravaggio with the recovery of Caravaggio himself.

2.7 Art, life and the interpretation of pictures

David Carrier's book, *Principles of Art History Writing* (1991) considers the way that Caravaggio has been constructed as an artistic personality (the relevant chapter is below). The objective of Carrier's book as a whole is to demonstrate that the 'appeal to the artist's intention adds nothing' to the interpretation of his artworks (recall the discussion of Wimsatt and Beardsley in Section 2.4), a difficult issue as so much art writing depends on exactly this approach. 'Because we know much about Caravaggio, it is natural to interpret his art in relation to his life'. Indeed, 'In principle, a uniquely correct re-creation of an artist's mental states should be possible. In practice, because the evidence is incomplete, that goal may not be achieved. The multiplicity of interpretations of an artwork reflects this unfortunate fact' (Carrier, 1991, p. 7).

Activity 12

Read Carrier's chapter now.

Click to read the chapter by David Carrier.

Note that Carrier uses the term ‘humanism’ in a very particular way: ‘For the humanist tradition, the goal of art history is to represent the mental states of the artist’ (Carrier, 1991, p. 6). This refers to the ‘humanity’ of art in general rather than to the Renaissance rediscovery of classical antiquity in general.

1 How do you think Carrier would judge Helen Langdon's interpretation of Caravaggio's painting?

2 Does her biography provide a structure or a ‘code’ (‘a distinctive way of describing an artwork’) for analysing art?

1 I think that Carrier would approve of Langdon's empirical approach to her subject, although the nature of biography automatically links the interpretation of artworks with the artist, something Carrier seeks to avoid.

2 Langdon's code – her insistence on primary sources – does impact on the way that artworks can be described in her biography. Boundaries between what is known and what is not are clearly established by recourse to the evidence, though, as considered earlier, there are problems with using ‘Lives’ as sources.

Carrier concludes that ‘how we understand the relation between early and modern art-writing depends on our interpretation of the early accounts’. The early accounts of Caravaggio's life are themselves problematic, subject to literary and cultural conventions. Arguably, all history consists of a dialogue between the past and the present. If it were simply a matter of reconstructing the past then only one book on any person, place or period might be necessary.

If there were such a thing as a complete, final, unquestionable history no one would ever write a book or an article about Caravaggio ever again. This is unlikely because arguably it is not in the nature of history to be complete, final and unquestionable.

2.8 Further reading

Gombrich, E.H. (1971) ‘Psycho-analysis and the history of art’ in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse* (2nd edn), London, Phaidon, pp. 30–44.

Iseminger, G. (ed.) (1992) *Intention and Interpretation*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press.

Shiff, R. (1996) ‘Originality’ in Shiff, R. and Nelson, R.S. (eds) *Critical Terms for Art History*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, pp. 103–15.

Soussloff, C.M. (1997) ‘The artist in myth: early psychoanalysis and art history’ in *The Absolute Artist: The Historiography of a Concept*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, pp. 112–37.

Spitz, E.H. (1985) *Art and Psyche: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Aesthetics*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

3 Interpreting works of art within and outwith

biography

3.1 Three interpretative methods

If the work of art has an existence beyond that of its maker, what are the limits of interpretation? This is a huge question, and possible limits and methods of interpretation are continually being propounded within the discipline. Helen Langdon chose to set Caravaggio's art within his life, with all the associations connected to the artist's biography. This course will look at ways in which the work of art can be interpreted within and outwith references to the artist who created that work.

If David Carrier's (1991) view that paintings should not be interpreted in humanistic terms, that is, with reference to the 'mental state of the artist' is correct, what alternatives are there? (Bersani and Dutoit (1998) provide one alternative model in which the viewer with a Freudian conceptual schema is introduced into the equation.)

In this section then, you will consider the relative merits of three interpretative methods applied to Caravaggio's work:

> *historical/cultural context* (Langdon), which relies on empirical evidence and observation from the artist's immediate contemporary vicinity;
>
> *style/formalism* (Freedberg), which sets Caravaggio's painting in a broader visual context;
>
> *subject/iconography* (Rudolph and Ostrow), which questions the meaning of a single artwork, according to its subject.

If the work of art has its own life beyond the narrow remit of the artist then several other methods of interpretation are available. How, for example, does Caravaggio's work relate to the art produced before and after him? Langdon writes that, 'In the middle years of the century … art was dull, and many painters limped haltingly along in the shadow of the divine Michelangelo' (Langdon, p. 51). It was only when the *Last Judgement* in the Sistine Chapel was unveiled and then considered that Michelangelo's 'godlike creativity' lost its attraction.

Michelangelo is a pivotal figure in the definitions of Renaissance art, partly due to the efforts of Vasari who idealised him. (Questioning and debating Michelangelo's status is a feature of current 'Renaissance' or 'Early Modern' studies.) Traditionally, the Renaissance period is defined as a reawakening of awareness of the significance of classical antiquity and human potential. The High Renaissance represents its culmination in figures such as Leonardo, Raphael and Michelangelo. But what happens after the High Renaissance?

Giorgio Vasari wrote his *Lives of the Artists* (1550 and 1558) on the assumption that the great Michelangelo had perfected art. According to Vasari, under the shadow of Michelangelo Italian artists rooted their art in 'nature' – nature perfected by the artist's intervention and study of antique models. Ernst Gombrich explains some of the implications of Michelangelo's shadow for subsequent artists:

> The main historiographic pattern which classical antiquity bequeathed to the Western tradition is that of progress towards an ideal of perfection. The advantage of this pattern in giving coherence to the history of art was demonstrated by Aristotle for the story of Greek tragedy, by Cicero for the rise of oratory and, of course, by Pliny for the rise of painting and sculpture. For the late-born critic, however, the pattern had a grave drawback. It lies in the nature

> of this conception of the gradual unfolding of an ideal that it must come to a stop once perfection is reached. Within the pattern the subsequent story can only be one of decline – which may be bewailed in general terms but hardly chronicled as an epic of individuals each making his contribution to this dismal story. There is only one way in which a great individual or group can be introduced into this post-classical sequence: by recourse to a second historiographic pattern of even more mythical origin, the idea of rescue and restoration, the return of the golden age through some beneficent agency.
>
> Clearly the only way to describe the history of art after Michelangelo was either in terms of decline and corruption or in terms of some new miraculous rescue … In the great new upsurge of painting in Rome a generation after Michelangelo's death, Caravaggio is cast in the role of the seducer and Carracci as the restorer of the arts to a new dignity.
>
> (Gombrich, 1966, pp. 100–1)

'Decline' after renaissance has been associated with both the Mannerist and Baroque styles which label the subsequent periods (Mannerism c.1510–20 to 1600; Baroque 1600–1750). In the following extract consider how one particular author, S.J. Freedberg in his book *Circa 1600* (1983), tried to define Caravaggio's role in Rome in terms of these style labels. Freedberg's book is more strictly academic than Helen Langdon's. It consists of three lectures which were presented to an academic audience in the USA in 1980. In the following extract about the *St John the Baptist (Youth with a Ram)* (below), now in the Capitoline Gallery in Rome, Freedberg treats Caravaggio's painting quite differently from Langdon.

Click to view Colour Plate 2, Caravaggio's St John the Baptist (Youth with a Ram),1602, oil on canvas, 132 x 97 cm, Musei Capitolini, Rome. Photo: SCALA, Florence.

> No other image of this moment in Italian painting makes so powerful an assault upon our sensibilities as Caravaggio's *St John the Baptist with a Ram* … A work of his early maturity, about 1602, it stands in an extreme degree for what, in the context of the recent past as well as Caravaggio's contemporary world, was radical and inventive in his art…
>
> The past reigning style of Mannerism offers its characteristic conception of the theme of the young Baptist in a painting by Agnolo Bronzino … Bronzino's nude [Plate 1] has a sharply defined verity of description in the parts of its anatomy; however, opposite to Caravaggio's nude, Bronzino's whole figure gives the effect not of actuality but of artifice. The very model Bronzino has chosen, to begin with, affirms his remove from ordinary reality; he is a high-bred youth, of fine and classicizing feature and, from all his evident power of body, no less fine and classicising anatomical form. Bronzino has defined that form by graphic means conjoined with the means of plastic modelling, as if he meant to recreate for us less a body of palpable flesh than the image of a sculpture… We are each moment made more aware of the operation in Bronzino's image of a complicated apparatus of intellect …
>
> In the art of Caravaggio's great near-contemporary, Annibale Caracci, intellection and idealisation remain prime operative powers … Even when, as in a study for one of the *Ignudi* [Plate 2], Annibale immediately confronts the model, his notation of what he looks at, for all its texture and aliveness, is from the beginning conditioned by a measure of intellectual arranging and

> idealization. What we may call 'realism' … is a basis and a starting point in Annibale's creative process, but in his mature art it is never its main end…
>
> Caravaggio's apprehension of the model's presence seems unimpeded in the least degree by any intervention of the intellect or by those conventions of aesthetic or of ethic that the intellect invents …
>
> Caravaggio's process of maturing was, as we have already noticed, not only an internal one … By the century's turn Caravaggio's new way had acquired the character of an aggression against his context of contemporary art and even more against the sources in the Cinquecento past of the present's persistent habit of idealism, conspicuous, for a prime example, in the art of Annibale Caracci [Plate 3]. There are deliberate episodes, of which the *Baptist* is the most explicit, of aggression toward the great deities of sixteenth-century painting, Michelangelo in particular. A deliberate translation into realist prose of overt classical sources on the sacred *Sistine Ceiling* … [Plate 4] the *Baptist* is not just anti-ideal; it is a derisive irony, and in a sense a blasphemy, which intends an effect of sacrilege and shock – to which its contemporary audience would have been more susceptible than we.
>
> (Freedberg, 1983, pp. 52–3 and 59)

Click to view Agnolo Bronzino's St John the Baptist, 1550–5, oil on wood, 120 x 92 cm. Galleria Borghese, Rome. Photo: SCALA, Florence.

Click to view Annibale Carracci's Model Study for an Ignudo of the Farnese Gallery, c.1595, pencil on paper, Louvre Paris. © RMN Photo: Gérard Blot.

Click to view Annibale Carracci's Triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne, 1595-1605, full fresco, Palazzo Farnese Gallery, Rome. Photo: SCALA, Florence.

Click to view Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling (detail), Ignudo (male nude on left above the Erythræan Sibyl), 1508-12, fresco, Sistine Chapel, Vatican. Photo: SCALA, Florence.

Freedberg clearly sets out to show how Caravaggio's art differed from that of the Mannerist painters. In terms of the pattern of rise–decline–rise suggested by Gombrich, Caravaggio had to be 'radical' and 'new'. He is also confirming what Caravaggio's early biographers wrote about his so-called naturalism. They too tried to explain Caravaggio's art in relation to a larger framework of the Mannerist 'movement' which fits the chronology between the High Renaissance 'perfection' of Michelangelo and Raphael and the reflowering of the arts in the so-called Baroque age in reaction to the ambiguity of the Mannerists. Langdon considers this Mannerist context in Chapter 3, in particular on pages 51–2.

Activity 13

You can find more details about the constructions and associations of these style labels – Renaissance, High Renaissance, Mannerist (or Late Renaissance), Baroque – in the *Grove Dictionary of Art* online at http://www.groveart.com.

1 Do you think Caravaggio is a High Renaissance, Mannerist or a Baroque painter?

2 How does Langdon's use of style labels and art historical periods compare with Freedberg's? You might compare her analysis of the same picture, the Capitoline *St John* which comes up in several places in the book.

1 Caravaggio clearly occupies a transitional period in art history and history. There are a number of reasons for associating Caravaggio with the Mannerists. The convention of the artist as a melancholic outsider has been identified. What evidence there is further places Caravaggio, and therefore his art, outside the norm. He 'fits' as the kind of outsider Gombrich identified as necessary to the post-Renaissance, post-Michelangelo rebirth of art. At the same time, features of Caravaggio's painting seem more Baroque, for their emphasis on effect as opposed to content.

2 Langdon avoids use of style labels and instead seems to prefer historical periods. Caravaggio's work is located within the ecclesiastical and cultural phenomenon of the Counter-Reformation. Art is not separated from its historical context. Because her focus is primarily on the artist rather than on the painting, she uses the Capitoline *St John* as evidence to make more general points about Caravaggio, his models and literary sources for example.

John the Baptist is one of the patron saints and a national symbol of Florence so he is a popular subject for artists working in the Florentine tradition. The domination of Florentine art is one of the reasons that Freedberg can compare a painting of John the Baptist by Bronzino (see above), a Florentine, with Caravaggio's Capitoline *St John*, because by implication, the subject of Caravaggio's painting is given a Florentine complexion. Caravaggio never worked in Florence but if he is to be associated with the canon he must be attached somehow to the Florentine tradition (which Vasari largely constructed).

To make Caravaggio appropriate to his comparison with the Mannerist Florentine Bronzino, Freedberg focuses on the treatment of the male nude and its varying degrees of artifice – a typically Mannerist feature. He then emphasises the 'effect of sacrilege and shock' which Caravaggio creates by referring back to Michelangelo but which seems more like Baroque intent. Caravaggio is, nevertheless, clearly an outsider to any movement, although he can be associated with both Mannerist and Baroque style.

Both Langdon and Freedberg refer to the Capitoline *St John* as being St John the Baptist. Identification of this particular saint contributes to their argument: Freedberg to fit Caravaggio into the Florentine tradition, and Langdon using it to identify the patron (p. 230). Moreover, the forward momentum of biography does not allow Langdon to stop to consider paintings in much detail beyond their relevance to the artist's life.

But what if this painting were not St John at all? This leads to another way of interpreting pictures outwith biography; iconography which concentrates on the subject of the picture. In the November 2001 volume of *Art History* there is an article by Conrad Rudolph and Steven F. Ostrow, *'Isaac Laughing:* Caravaggio, non-traditional imagery and traditional identification' (see plates below). You can find *Art History* online at the Open Libr@ry.

Click to view Colour Plate 2, Caravaggio's St John the Baptist (Youth with a Ram),1602, oil on canvas, 132 x 97 cm, Musei Capitolini, Rome. Photo: SCALA, Florence.

Click to view Caravaggio's Sacrifice of Isaac, c.1603, oil on canvas, 104 x 135 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Photo: SCALA, Florence.

Activity 14

Of these three very different ways of interpreting paintings – historical/cultural context (Langdon), style/formalism (Freedberg), subject/iconography (Rudolph and Ostrow) – consider why you find some more convincing than others.

Inevitably, the methods applied to the analysis of works of art depend on the objectives of the interpreter. Similarly, one method will result in different interpretations compared to any other. It is important to ask how a work of art is interpreted, and why it is so, to understand the conclusions reached.

The footnotes to Langdon's *Caravaggio* refer to a myriad of other debates that surround Caravaggio's paintings, who or what he was painting, for whom, when and why. (The commission and subject of the paintings for the Contarelli Chapel is a good example of this. See, for example, footnote 28 in Chapter 9, or footnote 40 in Chapter 7, and Puttfarken, 1998.) The very different priorities of Langdon's *Caravaggio* do not allow her to enter into most of these debates other than as extended footnotes.

Although they are very different, each of these three interpretative strategies relies on understanding Caravaggio's art in his contemporary context. Caravaggio himself is more or less present as a historical player choosing to paint how and what he did because of his patrons' wishes, his artistic context, or the wider literary or cultural context.

3.2 Interpretation beyond biography

The three interpretative strategies outlined in the previous section, and represented by Langdon, Freedberg, and Reynolds and Ostrow, largely rely on recreating the context contemporary with Caravaggio's painting. Other interpretations seem to have more to do with the context and priorities of the modern historian. If, therefore, the interpretation of a work of art is about more than the artist's particular intention regarding that work of art, then, as Martin Kemp asks,

> Are we willing, in effect, to say, retrospectively to protagonists in past cultures that we know more of what they were really doing than they did themselves?
>
> There are three main reasons … why we need not feel constrained by the scope of contemporary sources.
>
> The first, providing we assume that a reasonably representative group of sources has survived, is that the frameworks within which things were written down were limited to a set number of genres of literary production, and that each of these genres was itself limited in what it could say by its conventions and accepted terminology. There were … types of verbal transaction that were simply not recorded in writing. And we also need to allow for the likelihood that there were things of importance which could not be said because there was then no way of saying them.
>
> The second is that the visual possesses an inherent potential to operate in fields where the verbal cannot go. The challenges this property poses to the verbal involve the signalling of those special realms of competence for the visual and arriving at verbal means of heightening the spectator's ability to operate in these realms. Much of the history of writing about art has engaged in a perpetual quest to narrow the gap between what the visual can do and what the verbal can suggest. Modern modes of writing have found new ways of bringing word and image closer together, without ever suggesting that the gap will ever completely close. Indeed, the gap may best be seen in qualitative rather than quantitative terms.
>
> The third reason for moving beyond the primary source involves what is called historical perspective. Historical perspective has some definite advantages, as

> well as manifest shortcomings. At its simplest, our temporal remove gives us a chance of seeing the wood for the trees in a way that no contemporary could. Part of the strength of our later perspective is that we can see more clearly where events were going, though this formulation carries the strong danger that we may fall into the trap of inevitability; that is to say seeing trends as inexorably leading to particular end – and choosing to highlight those events which conform to the assumed trends.
>
> (Kemp, 1997, p. 257)

Helen Langdon deliberately constrains her analysis of Caravaggio's paintings to the scope of sources contemporary with the artist. In fact she does not write about Caravaggio's thoughts or other mental processes in her book because the source material does not allow her to do that. But what does 'writing about Caravaggio' mean? Does it mean only admitting information and sources contemporary with the subject? If the subject is a painting by Caravaggio rather than Caravaggio the person then a very different answer will be produced to these questions.

Activity 15

Around 1600 Caravaggio painted *Narcissus*, a painting Langdon describes as 'one of his most haunting works'. It is also a work that has attracted very different approaches and analyses from different art historians. Langdon explains the subject of the painting on pages 202–4. Read the passage now, making notes about the kind of evidence on which she builds her interpretation.

Narcissus (below) is clearly a complex painting about reality and illusion. Caravaggio illustrated a complex and thought-provoking classical myth. Langdon describes and analyses it in this context.

Click to view Colour Plate 3, Caravaggio's Narcissus, c.1597, oil on canvas, 110 x 92 cm. Galleria Nazionale D'Arte Antica (Palazzo Barberini), Rome. Photo: SCALA, Florence.

Since at least the fifteenth century the subject represented for artists the complexity of the reflective and deceptive relationship between art and nature. The humanist Leon Battista Alberti wrote in his treatise *On Painting* (1435) that the artist is better than the mere craftsman because he can change paint into nature. He illustrates his point with the story of Narcissus.

> For this reason, I say among my friends that Narcissus who was changed into a flower, according to the poets, was the inventor of painting. Since painting is already the flower of every art, the story of Narcissus is most to the point. What else can you call painting but a similar embracing with art of what is presented on the surface of the water in the fountain.
>
> (Alberti, 1991, p. 61)

This strange passage leaves the relationship between Narcissus's flower and the flower of painting unexplained. Narcissus was not an artist but his story says something about the complexities of the relationship between art, nature and the viewer. The message that the myth contains is extended by recent discussion of Caravaggio's painting. More than any other representation of the subject, it is Caravaggio's *Narcissus* that seems to invite most

discussion, due, no doubt, to the enigma of Caravaggio the artist that makes his painting so popular today.

Mieke Bal's book, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (1999), examines Caravaggio's painting, *Narcissus*, not for what can be discovered about its origins but for the effect that it has on the present. She considers, in particular, the ways in which Caravaggio's art has been quoted in the work of several modern artists. 'Like any form of representation', she explains, 'art is inevitably engaged with what came before it, and that engagement is an active reworking … This process is exemplified by an engagement of contemporary culture with the past that has important implications for the ways we conceive of both history and culture in the present' (Bal, 1999, p. 1). 'Quoting Caravaggio changes his work forever' (ibid.), declares Bal, and in doing so creates the self-reflexive discourse of the art which allows a 'reversible relationship' between past and present. Earlier, Gombrich had put it slightly differently:

> It is a frightening thought, and yet, I believe, true, that anything we say or write about a painting may change it in some subtle way. It reorganizes our perceptions, and no one can unscramble them or wipe away the accents which description and interpretation superimpose upon the picture.
>
> (Gombrich, 1966, p. 66)

If, for example, Caravaggio's Capitoline *St John* is in fact *Isaac Laughing*, there is good reason why it has taken so long for the title to be 'corrected'. The title effectively sets the description and interpretation of the painting in such a way that it is difficult to 'unscramble'. The analysis of Caravaggio's *Narcissus* by Mieke Bal below frames the consideration of the painting in very modern, fluid terms. Bal relies heavily on the complex psychoanalytic research of Jacques Lacan (1901–81) (the relevant part of which will be outlined below). She uses Lacan's reversible – or mirror – relationship between the viewer and the viewed to extend her argument about the interpretation of past art in modern terms.

> Narcissus, as the myth has it, died because, unlike Lacan's child, he did not recognize himself; nor did he perceive the mirror for what it was: a boundary between reality and fiction … As the quintessential story of mirroring, Narcissus belongs to the baroque sensibility that so fascinates contemporary culture … In a final examination of the reversible relationship between past Baroque and contemporary art, I read Caravaggio's *Narcissus* as a preposterous response to Lacan. Either the painting can be construed as that, or Lacan misquoted Caravaggio …
>
> If we only look at this figure's 'real' body, the image is horizontal, and the figure is shaped like a table. But if we ignore the water line – the surface of the represented mirror – and consider the double figure, the format becomes vertical, retaining the square and self-enclosed form …
>
> But as Narcissus' body gets to know itself, it loses its boundary. Something along the way of the boy's mirror stage went wrong. At the four corners of the austere, self-enclosing rectangle, the sleeves, especially in their reflected form, seem icons of the water the disturbance of which will make Narcissus' image disappear. As Caravaggio represented him, Narcissus is suspended between the solidity that imprisons and the fluidity that dissolves; he is framed by his own body.

> According to the story, Narcissus looks at his own reflection. The difficulties of seeing, which Lacan evoked with the phrases 'veiled faces' and 'the penumbra of symbolic efficacy,' are symbolised by the shadow that shades the eyes that see without recognizing, so much so that it is impossible to be sure whether the eyes are open at all … Who is reflecting whom? …
>
> The most striking oddity in this painting as we see it today is the naked knee. This knee embodies the spatial transgression most keenly … The knee was condemned to be odd from the start. Situated directly beneath the neck, whose form it symmetrically mirrors, and aside from the arms that signal deadness, the knee is the only part of the body that actually is reflected … The knee's detachment from the body signifies the 'fantasy of the body in bits and pieces,' which Lacan attributes to the child at the moment it 'cures' itself of that fantasy by the construction of a 'self-same body', through the mirror.
>
> (Bal, 1999, p. 237–43)

The self-reflexive discourse of the art which allows a 'reversible relationship' between past and present, allows Bal to base her analysis of *Narcissus* not on the artist's intention but on the viewer's interaction with it. Fortunately, Bal points directly to her method – the application of the theories of child development and the 'mirror stage' with which Lacan extended the work of Freud. In this explanation by Rosalind Minsky, it is obvious why Bal sought to link Caravaggio's *Narcissus* with Lacan's theories. The one rather neatly describes the other.

> [Lacan] uses the metaphor of a mirror to describe how the baby, at around the age of six months, first comes to perceive itself as a 'self' – through an integrated coherent image of itself in the mirror. The child who actually experiences itself as physically uncoordinated and overwhelmed by emotion and fantasies over which it has no control – in fact as 'all over the place' both physically and psychically – suddenly finds reflecting back from the mirror a highly satisfactory and seductive image of itself as a coherent whole – a thing with edges … But, of course, the baby's idea of itself is still of a very blurred, undefined and imaginary kind: the mirror image of the baby is both subject and object. But this experience is the baby's first encounter with a process of constructing itself – its identity – a sense of being centred on its own body, and Lacan argues that this taking of an identity from outside will form the basis of all its other identifications. The baby narcissistically arrives at some kind of sense of 'I' only by finding an 'I' reflected back by something outside itself and external – its (m)other.
>
> So we first take on board an identity from outside ourselves – an 'image' of ourselves – yet one which we feel to be part of who we are. We identify with something which looks like what we want to be, but something which is alien and separate from us. The mirror image splits us in two. We 'misrecognise' ourselves in the alienated image of what we want to be because it denies the chaos we feel in our own being … We are given a *sense* of identity but we think we are given an authentic identity. For Lacan, drawing on Freud's work on primary narcissism, the self, the ego, contains this narcissistic process which we use all our lives, by which we bolster our sense of ourselves with a fiction – a visual story we show ourselves – an illusion of self which depends on the view of ourselves we obtain from other people and objects throughout our lives.

(Minsky, 1992, p. 189)

Bal's interpretation of the painting could not be more different from Langdon's. Conveniently, Helen Langdon reviewed Mieke Bal's book and in her review explained why the two approaches are so very different.

> Bal's primary interest is not Caravaggio himself, but the powerful fascination which his pictures have exerted over a group of contemporary artists … whose work she describes as a new form of baroque. Her thesis is that the way in which these artists quote from Caravaggio changes his art forever, and, constantly reiterating the questions 'Who illuminates whom?', she suggests that works which appear chronologically first may be seen as after-effects of their recycling by later artists. To describe this reversal of linear history she coins a new phrase: 'preposterous history' … A discussion of the bare knee that stands out so strangely in Caravaggio's *Narcissus* concludes that this seventeenth-century painting is 'a preposterous response to Lacan'. Bal is uneasily aware that the effect of this knee is probably caused by overcleaning, but, leaving this aside, it is not quite clear why she did not simply offer a reading based on Lacan.
>
> (Langdon, 2000, pp. 468–9)

Activity 16

1 How does Langdon's explanation of the painting of Narcissus as a *vanitas* – 'a warning against the darkness and horror that follow the beauties and vain pleasures of love and youth' (Langdon, p. 204) – differ from that of Bal?

2 Do you think both kinds of interpretation are based on equally sound art historical methods?

The answer to both these questions relies on the intentions of the writers. For Langdon, *Narcissus* is part of Caravaggio's life and his direct context. Bal uses both Caravaggio and Lacan to make her point about the reversible inter-relationship between past and present art and culture. Bal does not 'simply offer a reading based on Lacan' because she is not writing specifically about Caravaggio, the artist, or about Lacan, the psychoanalyst. Both Caravaggio's and Lacan's work are used as a means to another end. Bal's use of Lacan illustrates two of Martin Kemp's points, that (i) some 'things of importance … could not be said because there was no way of saying them', and (ii) 'modern modes of writing have found new ways of bringing word and image together' (see Kemp, above).

But, as Kemp warned, there is a natural gap between an image and words which means that they will never be one and the same thing. Langdon's boundaries are defined by her desire to keep to the seventeenth-century sources and avoid 'twentieth-century myth and speculation as much as possible'. In the same chapter that Langdon considers *Narcissus* she goes on to look at other pictures such as the *Victorious Cupid* which can be linked to the contemporary popularity of emblem books – literary and pictorial mottoes which usually relied on classical sources. The sources Caravaggio probably employed for subjects such as Narcissus and Cupid were obviously complex, and would have been designed to appeal to and flatter the intellect of his patrons. (Similarly modern

interpretations of the same paintings are perhaps also primarily designed to show off the intellectual prowess of the writer.) There is a careful balance to be struck between the image and the interpreter.

In the 1546 edition of Andrea Alciati's *Emblematum liber* there is an emblem that illustrates the difficult and ultimately irreconcilable relationship between words and images. See below for the illustration from the book. The accompanying text reads as follows:

> Self-love
>
> Because your figure pleased you too much, Narcissus, it was changed into a flower, a plant of known senselessness. Self-love is the withering and destruction of natural power which brings and has brought ruin to many learned men, who having thrown away the method of the ancients seek new doctrines and pass on nothing but their own fantasies.
>
> (From Alciati's Book of Emblems, The Memorial Web Edition in Latin and English.)

Click to view Emblem 69 Self Love, reproduced in Alciato's Emblemata (Book Of Emblems), 1546, 49.8 x 38.6 cm. Glasgow University Library, Department of Special Collections.

If Caravaggio did rely on emblems for some of his subjects, then it is no wonder that modern scholars have not been able to define them exactly. That is not in the nature of the genre. Recourse to emblems as sources returns discussion of Caravaggio's art to the search for his original intentions – what was his source?

3.3 ‘Intentionality’

Is the work of art a free-standing artefact to be interpreted entirely on its own terms, extracted from its historical context, as Bal does it? Or can the artist and the artwork be brought back together again without committing the intentional fallacy?

Joseph Margolis makes several important points about the relationship of an artwork to its maker which has significant implications for the limits and possibilities of interpretation of works of art. Margolis puts it thus:

> [H]uman beings change over time as they grow from childhood to maturity; that's why we reinterpret their lives in the way we do. Nothing of that sort happens to artworks, and yet I say artworks are ‘like’ persons and because of this similarity are open to reinterpretation. How can I justify this claim?
>
> I offer two replies. First, the question pretty well shows that, in interpreting the ‘meaning’ of a life, it is common to assign to early behaviour, otherwise inaccessible meanings of what has gone before. I have no doubt, for instance, this is the right way to read Augustine's admission of the early theft of an apple, that is, in light of Augustine's own account of the providential import of the whole of human life – in accord with the master theme of the *City of God*. The meaning of the past is characteristically projected (and continually redefined) from our changing understanding of our own present. Second … what is common to selves and artworks is not biology but Intentionality: selves and artworks are materially embodied in different ways, but what is embodied are Intentional structures, and it is those structures that are affected in similar ways under interpretation. So there is nothing strange in saying that artworks are

> 'like' persons – without their being persons themselves. I don't deny that the similarity needs to be spelled out more fully.
>
> … Artworks acquire trailing histories of interpretation in terms of which (in various selective ways) future interpretations reconsider past phases of their interpreted careers … The similarity between selves and artworks lies in their sharing Intentional structure, not in their material embodiment. For, of course, what they share is the unity of expression and expressive agency, linked as structured precipitates and structuring energies within the same encompassing ethos. The history, the evolving career, the meaningful unity of life and art rests with what is defensibly affirmed within the narrative account of a life's or an artwork's persistent presence within our culture.
>
> The cultural world contains no principled disjunction between 'subject' and 'object' paradigmatically, we examine and interpret ourselves, and we do so by examining and interpreting the individuated utterances of individual and aggregated life. Those utterances will be deemed (as they must be) the expression of a collective ethos that is itself endlessly reconstituted in preparation for, and in response to, the utterances (past and future) of our evolving culture.
>
> (Margolis, 1992, pp. 135–7)

Margolis is making a point about a similarity between artworks and persons (including the artist). That similarity is the way they share intentional structures. These are structures that create 'aboutness', that is, what something possesses to be 'about' something. Just as we can take different perspectives on a human life over time, so we can present alternative interpretations of the artwork.

A biography is just such a 'defensively affirmed … narrative account'. In particular, the art historical biography brings together the intentional structures of both artist and his or her works.

Michael Baxandall uses a very similar notion of intentionality to Margolis. According to Baxandall, reconstructing the entire mental set of an artist and his context does not close down the interpretation of an artwork but deepens and broadens it. At the beginning of the essay on Picasso's *Portrait of Kahnweiler* in his important book *Patterns of Intention* (1985) Baxandall considers the important issue of 'intentionality' for the interpretation of artworks outside biography. Note that he distances himself from the Wimsatt and Beardsley discussion of intention in his reference to 'a poem'.

> A word must be said about 'intention', I suppose. I have declared an interest in addressing pictures partly by making inferences about their causes, this both because it is pleasurable and because a disposition towards causal inference seems to penetrate our thought and language too deeply to be excised, at least without doing oneself a quite disabling mischief. But since pictures are human productions, one element in the causal field behind a picture will be volition, and this overlaps with what we call 'intention'.
>
> I am not aligned or equipped to offer anything useful on the matter of whether it is necessary to appeal to an author's historical intention in interpreting a picture (or, of course, a poem). The arguments for doing so – that it is necessary if there is to be any determinate meaning in a work, that the relation between intention and actual accomplishment is necessary to evaluation, and so on – are often attractive, but they sometimes seem to refer to a slightly different sort

> of intention (a complex word) or to intention seen from a slightly different angle from what I feel committed to. The intention to which I am committed is not an actual, particular psychological state or even a historical set of mental events inside the head of Benjamin Baker or Picasso, in the light of which – if I knew them – I would interpret the Forth Bridge or the *Portrait of Kahnweiler*. [Benjamin Baker and the Forth Bridge was the subject of the previous essay in the book.] Rather, it is primarily a general condition of rational human action which I posit in the course of rearranging my circumstantial facts or moving about on the triangle of re-enactment. This can be referred to as 'intentionality' no doubt. One assumes purposefulness – or intent or, as it were, 'intentiveness' – in the historical actor but even more in the historical objects themselves. Intentionality in this sense is taken to be a characteristic of both. Intention is the forward-leaning look of things …
>
> So 'intention' here is referred to pictures rather more than to painters. In particular cases it will be a construct descriptive of a relationship between a picture and its circumstances. In general intentionality is also a pattern posited in behaviour, and it is used to give circumstantial facts and descriptive concepts a basic structure. In fact, 'intention' is a word I shall use as little as possible but when I do use it I do not know what other word I could use instead. 'Purpose' and 'function', and the rest present their own difficulties and anyway their force is different.
>
> (Baxandall, 1985, pp. 41–2)

There is a tension between the historical object as it was created and as it is now. According to some writers, such as Mieke Bal, that tension creates new artworks and ideas. Tension and constant reinterpretation, according to Michael Baxandall, are in the nature of the continuing dialogue that artworks naturally provoke.

> If one looks at the origins of modern art history and art criticism, which are in the Renaissance, it is noticeable that really it arose out of conversation. The germ even of Vasari's great *Lives of the Artists* lay in dinner conversation at Cardinal Farnese's, as he says himself, and … runs down to the workshop argument, two or three centuries of it. After all, why else than for dialogue do something as hard and as odd as attempting to verbalize about pictures? I shall claim inferential criticism is not only rational but sociable.
>
> (Baxandall, 1985, p. 137)

The kind of dialogue constructed around artists and their work will depend on the objectives of the viewer or writer who is studying them. A biographical monograph is one way of structuring the study of artists and their art and with it come a number of particular advantages and constraints on the subject matter.

Activity 17

If we conceive of Helen Langdon's book as articulating the intentional structure to the life of Caravaggio, does this place any limits on the interpretations of his work?

It seems that the intentional structure of an artist's life coherently presented in the art historical biography would limit the interpretation of the work.

Insofar as Helen Langdon's *Caravaggio* is an interpretation of his life (what it is about) in Margolis's terms, she imposes the intentional structure of his life on his painting. For example, the interpretation of the paintings she presents does not allow Caravaggio to have painted the dark pictures before he did – at the end of his life (p. 383).

3.4 Further reading

Baxandall, M. (1985) *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Interpretation of Pictures*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

Olin, M. (1996) 'Gaze' in Shiff, R. and Nelson, R.S. (eds) *Critical Terms for Art History*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, pp. 208–19.

4 Conclusion

The biographical monograph is probably one of the best ways of writing appealing and accessible art history. Helen Langdon's *Caravaggio* is an attractive and well-written narrative of the life and work of an important and allegedly infamous artist. We learn about a set of artworks in a particular context and at the same time get to know a 'new friend' whose personality and environment seem to speak through the illustrations. The biographical structure is also a convenient way of controlling a large quantity of material to form a coherent and tidy narrative of an artist's life – and a quick look at the range of sources and contextual material Langdon has used reveals the enormity of her task.

Although the biographical monograph is one of the most common – and popular – forms of art historical writing it is based on problematic assumptions that have prevailed in the discipline since before Vasari in the sixteenth century. The biographical structure conflates the life of an artist with his or her work in such a way that it seems that the only way to find the true meaning of a work of art is by recreating the artist's intentions. A psychoanalytic approach is an extreme way to unite the artist and his or her work, especially if the art historian's intention is to 'get inside the head' of the artist. This is clearly impossible, unless the art historian intends to embellish the history with fiction. That said, psychoanalytic approaches can still be useful if the artist and his or her work are separated – because the artwork has a life beyond that of the artist.

It has not been the intention in this course to do away with the biographical monograph as a way of writing art history. Rather is has been to deconstruct the method so that you can choose to use it, or not, fully aware of its possibilities and its limitations. Ask yourself, when you write about an artwork, are you in fact writing about the artist?

Do this

Now you have completed this course, you might like to:

- Post a message to the course forum.
- Review or add to your Learning Journal.
- Rate this course.

Try this

You might also like to:

- Find out more about the related Open University course.
- Book a FlashMeeting to talk live with other learners.
- Create a Knowledge Map to summarise this topic.

Keep on learning

Study another free course

There are more than **800 courses on OpenLearn** for you to choose from on a range of subjects.

Find out more about all our free courses.

Take your studies further

Find out more about studying with The Open University by visiting our online prospectus.

If you are new to university study, you may be interested in our Access Courses or Certificates.

What's new from OpenLearn?

Sign up to our newsletter or view a sample.

For reference, full URLs to pages listed above:

OpenLearn – www.open.edu/openlearn/free-courses

Visiting our online prospectus – www.open.ac.uk/courses

Access Courses – www.open.ac.uk/courses/do-it/access

Certificates – www.open.ac.uk/courses/certificates-he

Newsletter – www.open.edu/openlearn/about-openlearn/subscribe-the-openlearn-newsletter

References

Section 1

Barker, E. et al. (1999) *The Changing Status of the Artist*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press in association with The Open University.

Hibbard, H. (1983) *Caravaggio*, London, Thames and Hudson.

Kant, I. (1987) *Critique of Judgment* (trans. W.S. Pluhar), Indianapolis, Hackett.

Kris, E. and Kurz, O. (1979) *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

Langdon, H. (1998) *Caravaggio: A Life*, London, Pimlico Press (first published 1998, Chatto and Windus Ltd).

Langdon, H. (1999) 'Sources for the life of Caravaggio', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 30 April, p. 19.

Soussloff, C.M. (1990) '*Lives* of poets and painters in the Renaissance' in *Word and Image*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 154–62.

Soussloff, C.M. (1997) 'The artist in nature: Renaissance biography' in *The Absolute Artist: The Historiography of a Concept*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, pp. 43–72.

Thomas, G.M. (2002) 'Instituting genius: the formation of biographical art history in France' in Mansfield, E. (ed.) *Art History and its Institutions: Foundations of a Discipline*, London and New York, Routledge, pp. 260–70.

White, H. (1980) 'The value of narrativity in the representation of reality', *Critical Enquiry*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 5–27.

Wittkower, R. (1961) 'Individualism in art and artists: a Renaissance problem', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 291–302.

Woods-Marsden, J. (1998) *Renaissance Self-portraiture*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

Section 2

Barthes, R. (1977) *Image, Music, Text*, London, Fontana.

Berenson, B. (1953) *Caravaggio: His Incongruity and his Fame*, London, Chapman and Hall.

Bersani, L. and Dutoit, U. (1998) *Caravaggio's Secrets*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press.

Carrier, D. (1991) 'Caravaggio: the construction of an artistic personality' in *Principles of Art History Writing*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, pp. 49–79.

Freud, S. (1963) *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood* (trans. A. Tyson), Harmondsworth, Penguin Books.

Gash, J. (2000) 'Review of Helen Langdon's *Caravaggio*', *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 142, no. 1199 , pp. 310–11.

Gilbert, C.E. (1995) *Caravaggio and his Two Cardinals*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press.

Gombrich, E.H. (1971) *Meditations on a Hobby Horse* (2nd edn), London, Phaidon.

Hibbard, H., 1983. *Caravaggio*, London: Thames and Hudson.

Jenkins, A. (1999) 'Review of Helen Langdon's *Caravaggio*', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 9 April, p. 14.

Kemp, M. (1987) '"Equal Excellences": Lomazzo and the explanation of individual style in the visual arts', *Renaissance Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 1–26.

Kris, E. and Kurz, O. (1979) *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

Perry, G. (1999) *Academies, Museums and Canons of Art*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press in association with The Open University.

Rubin, P. (1995) *Giorgio Vasari: Art and History*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

Saslow, J.M. (1986) *Ganymede in the Renaissance: Homosexuality in Art and Society*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

Soussloff, C.M. (1997) 'The artist in nature: Renaissance biography' in *The Absolute Artist: The Historiography of a Concept*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, pp. 42–72.

Wimsatt, K. (1954) *The Verbal Icon*, Lexington, University of Kentucky Press.

Wimsatt, K. and Beardsley, M. (1946) 'The intentional fallacy', *Sewanee Review*, vol. 54, pp. 468–88. Reprinted in Wimsatt, 1954.

Section 3

Alberti, L.B. (1991) *On Painting*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Classics.

Bal, M. (1999) *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press.

Baxandall, M. (1985) *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Interpretation of Pictures*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

Bersani, L. and Dutoit, U. (1998) *Caravaggio's Secrets*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press.

Carrier, D. (1991) 'Caravaggio: the construction of an artistic personality' in *Principles of Art History Writing*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, pp. 49–79.

Freedberg, S.J. (1983) *Circa 1600: A Revolution of Style in Italian Painting*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.

Gombrich, E.H. (1966) 'Raphael's *Madonna della Sedia*', *Norm and Form*, London, Phaidon, pp. 64–80.

Langdon, H. (1998) *Caravaggio: A Life*, London, Pimlico Press (first published 1998, Chatto and Windus Ltd.).

Langdon, H. (1999) ‘Sources for the life of Caravaggio’, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 30 April, p. 19.

Langdon, H., (2000) ‘Review of Mieke Bal's *Preposterous History*’, *Art History*, vol. 23, no. 3, pp. 468–70.

Margolis, J. (1993) ‘Interpreting art and life’ in *Lectures on the Philosophy of Art*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press.

Minsky, R. (1992) ‘Lacan’ in *Knowing Women: Feminism and Knowledge*, Cambridge, Polity Press in association with The Open University Press, pp. 188–205.

Preziosi, D. (1998) *The Art of Art History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Puttfarken, T. (1998) ‘Caravaggio's *Story of St Matthew*: a challenge to the conventions of painting’ in *Art History*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 163–81.

Rudolf, C. and Ostrow, S.F. (2001) ‘*Isaac Laughing:* Caravaggio, non-traditional imagery and traditional identification’ in *Art History*, vol. 24, no. 5, pp. 646–81.

Acknowledgements

This course was written by Dr Carol Richardson

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following sources for permission to reproduce material in this course:

Course image: Francisco Antunes in Flickr made available under Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Licence.

Carrier, D. *Principles on Art History Writing*, 1991, pp. 49–79. Copyright © 1991 by The Pennsylvania State University Press. Reproduced by permission of the publisher.

Articles on Carel van Mander, Giulio Mancini, and Giovanni Pietro Bellori all from Hibbard, H. *Caravaggio*, 1983, pp. 343–87. © 1983. Reprinted by kind permission of Thames and Hudson Ltd, London.

Foucault, M. ‘What is an Author?’ (1969) from *Bulletin de la Societé Française de Philosophie* 63, no. 3 (1969). © Society of College of France.

Colour Plate 1: Front cover of Helen Langdon's *Caravaggio: a Life*, Chatto & Windus, 1998, hardback. Reprinted by permission of The Random House Group Ltd.

Colour Plate 2: Caravaggio, *St John the Baptist (Youth with a Ram)*,1602, oil on canvas, 132 × 97 cm, Musei Capitolini, Rome. Photo: SCALA, Florence.

Colour Plate 3: Caravaggio, *Narcissus*, c.1597, oil on canvas, 110 × 92 cm. Galleria Nazionale D'Arte Antica (Palazzo Barberini), Rome. Photo: SCALA, Florence.

Plate 1: Agnolo Bronzino, *St John the Baptist*, 1550–5, oil on wood, 120 × 92 cm. Galleria Borghese, Rome. Photo: SCALA, Florence.

Plate 2: Annibale Carracci, *Model Study for an Ignudo of the Farnese Gallery*, c.1595, pencil on paper, Louvre, Paris. © RMN Photo: Gérard Blot.

Plate 3: Annibale Carracci, *Triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne*, 1595–1605, full fresco, Palazzo Farnese Gallery, Rome. Photo: SCALA, Florence.

Plate 4: Michelangelo, *Sistine Ceiling* (detail), *Ignudo* (male nude on left above the Erythræan Sibyl), 1508–12, fresco, Sistine Chapel, Vatican. Photo: SCALA, Florence.

Plate 5: Caravaggio, *Sacrifice of Isaac*, c.1603, oil on canvas, 104 × 135 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Photo: SCALA, Florence.

Plate 6: Emblem 69, *Self Love*. Reproduced in Alciato's *Emblemata* (Book Of Emblems), 1546, 49.8 × 38.6 cm. Glasgow University Library, Department of Special Collections.

Caravaggio, *Sacrifice of Isaac*, c.1603, oil on canvas, 104 × 135 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Photo: SCALA, Florence.

Don't miss out:

If reading this text has inspired you to learn more, you may be interested in joining the millions of people who discover our free learning resources and qualifications by visiting The Open University - www.open.edu/openlearn/free-courses