READING 1.1 OLD REPORTS ABOUT CARAVAGGIO, IN THE ORIGINAL AND IN TRANSLATION

Howard Hibbard


The texts that follow are the basic early writings concerning Caravaggio, ranging from Van Mander’s short notice published in 1604 to Susinno’s manuscript Life dated 1724. [...]

1 Carel van Mander

Van Mander (1548–1606), born in Flanders, was in Italy from 1573 to 1577 and settled in Haarlem in 1583. He was the first Netherlandish theoretician of art and made an effort to collect accurate biographical material about painters from his native land. He also wrote lives of Italian artists, including the earliest coherent notice of Caravaggio, in ‘Het Leven der Moderne oft dees-tejsche doorluchtighe Italiaensche Schilders ... Het tweedde Boeck van het Leven der Schilders,’ which forms Part III of Het Schilder-Boeck ... (Haarlem, 1604, 191 r). Van Mander’s manuscript is dated Alkmaar, 1603, which gives the latest date for his information. See Helen Noë, Carel van Mander en Italië (The Hague, 1954; Caravaggio’s Life is on her pp.292–294). The reference to paintings in San Lorenzo in Damaso by Giuseppe Cesari seems to be correct; but the story of Caravaggio’s dwarf nearby is erroneous. It may signal a confusion with the frescoes by Cesari in the Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, where Caravaggio added side paintings that were unveiled in July 1600.

There is also a certain Michelangelo da Caravaggio, who is doing extraordinary things in Rome; like Giuseppe [Cesari d’Arpino] previously mentioned, he has climbed up from poverty through hard work and by taking on everything with foresight and courage, as some do who will not be held back by faint-heartedness or lack of courage, but who push themselves forward boldly and fearlessly and who everywhere seek their advantage boldly. This enterprise deserves no blame if it is undertaken with honest propriety and discretion, for Lady Luck will rarely come to those who do not help themselves, and usually we must seek her out and prod her on. This Michelangelo has already [overcome adversity to] earn reputation, a good name, and honor with his works. He painted a history in San Lorenzo in Damaso, next to one by Guiseppe, as described in his Life. But in it he painted a dwarf or midget who sticks out his tongue at Giuseppe’s painting, making it seem as if in this way he wanted to ridicule Giuseppe’s work: he is one who thinks little of the works of other masters, but will not openly praise his own. His belief is that all art is nothing but a bagatelle or children’s work, whatever it is and whoever it is by, unless it is done after life, and that we can do no better than to follow Nature. Therefore he will not make a single brushstroke without the close study of life, which he copies and paints. This is surely no bad way of achieving a good end: for to paint after drawing, however close it may be to life, is not as good as following Nature with all her various colors. Of course one should have achieved a degree of understanding that would allow one to distinguish the most beautiful of life’s beauties and select it. But one must also take the chalk with the grain: thus, he does not study his art constantly, so that after two weeks of work he will sally forth for two months together with his rapier at his side and his servant-boy after him,
going from one tennis court to another, always ready to argue or fight, so that he is impossible to get along with. This is totally foreign to Art; for Mars and Minerva have never been good friends. Yet as for his painting, it is very delightful and an exceptionally beautiful style, one for our young artists to follow.

*Appendix attached to a later edition:* I have been misinformed that Michelangelo Caravaggio made fun of the work of Giuseppino by painting that dwarf.

### 2 Vincenzo Giustiniani

Marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani, Letter to Teodoro [Dirck van] Amayden. Undated. First published 1675; republished in *Raccolta di lettere ...*, ed. G. Bottari (VI, Rome, 1768, pp.248–253), and by Bottari & Ticozzi, *Raccolta di lettere ...* (VI, Milan, 1822, pp.121–129). For possible textual emendations, see Longhi (1951, p.50, with earlier references). Translated by Enggass (Enggass-Brown, 1970, pp.16 ff.). The letter is often dated c.1620–1630 (Giustiniani died in 1637), but Haskell (1963; 1980, p.94, n.3) concluded that it dates from well before 1620. The only real clues are the citations of artists, and the more prominent artists of the 1620s are all omitted. The original versions (followed by Cinotti and Enggass) mention ‘Romanelli’ (c.1610–1662), who is wholly out of place. Longhi substituted ‘il Pomarancio,’ the nickname of Cristofano Roncalli; since Giustiniani traveled with him in 1606 (see Banti, 1942), his name makes good sense (though ‘Roncalli’ seems a more likely correction for ‘Romanelli’ than does ‘Pomarancio’). The names that date the letter latest are presumably those of Jusepe de Ribera, Hendrick Terbrugghen, Gerrit van Honthorst, and Dirck van Baburen, all Caravaggisti known in Rome in the period c.1615. Terbrugghen, who was back in Utrecht in 1614, was not particularly known in Rome (he was not mentioned by Mancini), and his being mentioned by Giustiniani could point to a rather later date; Terbrugghen might have returned c.1620/1621, but we do not know. Ribera was in Rome in 1615 and received loquacious notice from Mancini soon afterward (I, pp.249–251). Giustiniani may have become an enthusiast by this time; his inventory of 1638 lists thirteen canvases by Ribera. Giustiniani also had paintings by Honthorst and Baburen, who were in Rome until 1620/1621. Honthorst became prominent c.1617 and was well known to Mancini; Mancini also knew works in progress by Baburen but did not get his name. As these painters were only coming into prominence c.1619–1620, it would be odd if Giustiniani knew much about them before that time. Thus a date of c.1620 might be about right for his famous letter, and it seems unlikely that it was written many years before that. Had it been written in the mid 1620s or later it seems inconceivable that the prominent new artists (not including Romanelli) would have been altogether omitted: Pietro da Cortona, Poussin, Andrea Sacchi. Nevertheless the letter is not an anthology of artists; Giustiniani omits Lanfranco, for example, who was already famous in the second decade.

The fifth method is to know how to portray flowers and other small things ... and above all it requires great patience. Caravaggio said that it was as difficult for him to make a good painting of flowers as one of figures.

... The twelfth method is the most perfect of all because it is the most difficult: to combine the tenth with the eleventh just described, namely, to paint with style, and with nature in front of one, as did the most excellent painters of the first rank, famous all over the world. And in our time Caravaggio, the Carracci, Guido Reni, and others, among whom some