

Howard Hibbard

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Giovanni Pietro Bellori, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori e architetti moderni* (Rome, 1672). The text printed here is that published by Evelina Borea (Turin, 1976). For Bellori, who was the outstanding art critic and archaeological writer of his age, see the introduction to Borea's edition by Giovanni Previtali and their extensive bibliography on Bellori (pp.lxxiv ff).

Michelangelo da Caravaggio

It is said that the ancient sculptor Demetrios was such a student of life that he preferred imitation to the beauty of things; we saw the same thing in Michelangelo Merisi, who recognized no other master than the model, without selecting from the best forms of nature – and what is incredible, it seems that he imitated art without art. With his birth he doubled the fame of Caravaggio, a notable town of Lombardy, which had also been the home of the celebrated painter Polidoro. Both artists began as masons and carried hods of mortar for construction. Since Michele was employed in Milan with his father, a mason, it happened that he prepared glue for some painters who were painting frescoes and, led on by the desire to paint, he remained with them, applying himself totally to painting. He continued in this activity for four or five years, making portraits, and afterward, being disturbed and contentious, because of certain quarrels he fled from Milan to Venice, where he came to enjoy the colors of Giorgione, which he then imitated. For this reason his first works are agreeably sweet, direct, and without those shadows that he used later on; and since of all the Venetian colorists Giorgione was the purest and the simplest in representing natural forms with only a few tones, Michele painted in the same manner when he was first studying nature intently. He went to Rome, where he lived without lodgings and without provisions; since models, without which he did not know how to paint, were too expensive, he did not earn enough to pay his expenses. Michele was therefore forced by necessity to work for Cavalier Giuseppe d'Arpino, who had him paint flowers and fruit, which he imitated so well that from then on they began to attain that greater beauty that we love today. He painted a vase of flowers sprinkled with the transparencies of the water and glass and the reflections of a window of the room, rendering flowers with the freshest dewdrops; and he painted other excellent pictures of similar imitations. But he worked reluctantly at these things and felt deep regret at not being able to paint figures. When he met Prospero, a painter of grotesques, he took the opportunity to leave Giuseppe in order to compete with him for the glory of painting. Then he began to paint according to his own inclinations; not only ignoring but even despising the superb statuary of antiquity and the famous paintings of Raphael, he considered nature to be the only subject fit for his brush. As a result, when he was shown the most famous statues of Phidias and Glykon in order that he might use them as models, his only answer was to point toward a crowd of people, saying that nature had given him an abundance of masters. And to give authority to his words, he called a Gypsy who happened to pass by in the street and, taking her to his lodgings, he portrayed her in the act of predicting the future, as is the custom of these Egyptian women. He painted a young man who places his gloved hand on his sword and offers the other hand bare to her, which she holds and examines; and in these two half-figures Michele captured the truth so purely as to confirm his beliefs. A similar story is told about the ancient painter Eupompos – though this is not the time to discuss to what extent such teachings are praiseworthy. Since Caravaggio aspired only to the glory of color, so that the complexion, skin, blood, and natural surfaces might appear real, he directed his eye and work solely to that end, leaving aside all the other aspects of art. Therefore, in order to find figure types and to compose them, when he came upon someone in town who pleased him he made no attempt to improve on the creations of nature. He painted a girl drying her hair, seated on a little chair with her hands in her lap. He portrayed her in a room, adding a small ointment jar, jewels and gems on the floor, pretending that she is the Magdalen. She holds her head a little to one side, and her cheek, neck, and breast are rendered in pure, simple, and true colors, enhanced by the simplicity of the whole figure, with her arms

covered by a blouse and her yellow gown drawn up to her knees over a white underskirt of flowered damask. We have described this figure in detail in order to show his naturalistic style and the way in which he imitates truthful coloration by using only a few hues. On a bigger canvas he painted the Madonna resting in the Flight into Egypt: here there is a standing angel who plays the violin, and St. Joseph, seated, holds a book of music open for him; the angel is very beautiful, and by turning his head in sweet profile, displays his winged shoulders and the rest of his nude body, which is covered by a little drapery. On the other side sits the Madonna who, with her head inclined, seems asleep with her baby at her breast. These pictures are in the palace of Prince Pamphilj; and another one worthy of similar praise is in the rooms of Cardinal Antonio Barberini, which shows three half-figures playing cards. He showed a simple young man holding the cards, his head portrayed well from life and wearing dark clothes, and on the opposite side there is a dishonest youth in profile, who leans on the card table with one hand while with the other behind him he slips a false card from his belt; a third man close to the young one looks at his cards and with three fingers reveals them to his companion who, as he bends forward over the small table, exposes the shoulder of his heavy yellow coat striped with black to the light. The color is true to life. These are the first strokes from Michele's brush in the free manner of Giorgione, with tempered shadows. Propsero [Orsi, 'delle grottesche'], by acclaiming the new style of Michele, increased the value of his works to his own advantage among the most important people of the court. The Cardsharps was bought by Cardinal Del Monte who, being a lover of paintings, set Michele up and gave him an honored place in his household. For this gentleman he painted the Concert of Youths portrayed from life in half-figures; a woman in a blouse playing a lute with the music sheets in front of her; a kneeling St. Catherine leaning on the wheel. The last two paintings are also in the same rooms but have a darker color, as Michele had already begun to darken the darks. He painted St. John in the desert, a naked young boy, seated, who thrusts his head forward embracing a lamb; this painting can be seen in the palace of Cardinal Pio. But Caravaggio (as he was called by everyone, with the name of his native town) was becoming more famous every day because the coloration he was introducing was not as sweet and delicate as before, but became boldly dark and black, which he used abundantly to give relief to the forms. He went so far in this style that he never showed any of his figures in open daylight, but instead found a way to place them in the darkness of a closed room, placing a lamp high so that the light would fall straight down, revealing the principal part of the body and leaving the rest in shadow so as to produce a powerful contrast of light and dark. The painters then in Rome were greatly taken by this novelty, and the young ones particularly gathered around him, praised him as the unique imitator of nature, and looked on his work as miracles. They outdid each other in imitating his works, undressing their models and raising their lights. Without devoting themselves to study and instruction, each one easily found in the piazza and in the street their masters and the models for imitating nature. With this easy style attracting the others, only the older painters already set in their styles were dismayed by this new study of nature: they never stopped attacking Caravaggio and his style, saying that he did not know how to come out of the cellar and that, lacking *invenzione* and *disegno*, without decorum or art, he painted all his figures with a single source of light and on one plane without any diminution; but such accusations did not stop the flight of his fame.

Caravaggio painted the portrait of Cavalier Marino, with the reward of praise from literary men; the names of both the painter and the poet were sung in Academies; in fact Marino in particular so praised the head of Medusa by Caravaggio that Cardinal Del Monte gave it to the Grand Duke of Tuscany. Because of his kindness and his delight in Caravaggio's style, Marino introduced the painter into the house of Monsignor Melchiorre Crescenzi, clerk of the papal chamber. Michele painted the portrait of this most learned prelate and another one of Virgilio Crescenzi who, as heir of Cardinal Contarelli, chose him to compete with Giuseppino [Cesari d'Arpino] for the paintings in the chapel of San Luigi dei Francesi. Marino,

who was the friend of both painters, suggested that Giuseppe, an expert fresco painter, be given the figures on the wall above and Michele the oil paintings. Here something happened that greatly upset Caravaggio with respect to his reputation. After he had finished the central picture of St. Matthew and installed it on the altar, the priests took it down, saying that the figure with its legs crossed and its feet rudely exposed to the public had neither decorum nor the appearance of a saint. Caravaggio was in despair at such an outrage over his first work in a church, when Marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani acted in his favor and freed him from this predicament. So, intervening with the priests, he took the painting for himself and had Caravaggio do a different one, which is now to be seen above the altar. And to honor the first painting more he took it to his house and later added the other three Evangelists by Guido [Reni], Domenichino, and Albani, three of the most famous painters of that time. Caravaggio used all his powers to succeed in his second picture; and in order to give a natural form to the saint writing the gospel, he showed him with a knee bent over the stool and his hands on the table, in the act of dipping his pen in the inkwell above the book. In so doing he turns his face from the left toward the angel who, suspended on his wings in air, talks to him and makes a sign by touching the index finger of his left hand with his right. The coloration makes the angel seem far away, suspended on his wings toward the saint, his arms and chest naked and the white fluttering veil surrounding him in the background darkness. Christ Calling St. Matthew to the Apostolate is on the right side of the altar. He portrayed several heads from life, among them the saint's, who, stopping to count the coins, with one hand on his chest turns toward the Lord. Close to him an old man is putting his eyeglasses on his nose, looking at a young man seated at the corner of the table who draws the coins to himself. On the other side there is the Martyrdom of the Saint himself, who is dressed in priestly garments stretched out on a bench. The nude figure of the executioner is brandishing his sword in the act of wounding him while the others withdraw in horror. The composition and movements in the painting, however, are insufficient for the narrative, though he did it over twice. These two paintings are difficult to see because of the darkness in the chapel and because of their color. He then painted the picture of the Cavalletti Chapel in the church of Sant'Agostino, with the standing Madonna holding the Child in her arms in the act of giving benediction; two pilgrims with clasped hands are kneeling before her, the first one a poor man with feet and legs bare, with a leather cape and a staff resting on his shoulder. He is accompanied by an old woman with a cap on her head.

People correctly hold in great esteem the Deposition of Christ in the Chiesa Nuova of the Oratorians, one of the finest works of Michele's brush. The figures are located on a slab at the opening of the sepulchre. In the middle we see the holy body. The standing Nicodemus holds it under the knees; in lowering the hips the legs jut out. On the other side St. John holds one arm under the Redeemer's shoulder, whose face is turned up and his chest deadly pale as one arm hangs down with the sheet: the nude parts are portrayed with the force of the most exacting naturalism. Behind Nicodemus we see the mourning Marys; one has her arms raised, another has a veil over her eyes, and the third looks at the Lord. In the church of the Madonna del Popolo, inside the chapel of the Assumption, painted by Annibale Carracci, the two pictures on the sides are by Caravaggio; the Crucifixion of St. Peter and the Conversion of St. Paul, in which the history is completely without action. He continued to be favored by Marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani, who commissioned various pictures such as the Crowning with Thorns and St. Thomas putting his finger into the wound in the Lord's side. Christ holds St. Thomas's hand and exposes his chest from the shroud. In addition to these half-figures he painted the Victorious Love with an arrow raised in his right hand while arms, books, and various trophies lie about on the ground at his feet. Other Roman gentlemen vied with each other in admiring his works, and among them, Marchese Asdrubale Mattei, for whom he painted the Taking of Christ in the Garden, also in half-figures. Judas is shown after the kiss with his hand on the Lord's shoulder; a soldier in full armor extends his arms and his ironclad hand toward the chest of the Lord, who stands still, patiently and

humbly, his hands crossed before him, as John runs away behind with outstretched arms. Caravaggio rendered the rusty armor of the soldier accurately with head and face covered by a helmet, his profile partially visible. Behind him a lantern is raised and we see the heads of two other armed men. For the Massimi he painted an *Ecce Homo* that was taken to Spain; for the Marchese Patrizi he painted the *Supper at Emmaus*, with Christ in the center in the act of blessing the bread: one of the two seated Apostles extends his arms as he recognizes the Lord and the other one places his hands on the table and looks at him with astonishment. Behind are the innkeeper with a cap on his head and an old woman who brings food. He painted a quite different version for Cardinal Scipione Borghese; the first one is darker, but both are to be praised for their natural colors even though they lack decorum, since Michele's work often degenerated into common and vulgar forms. For the same cardinal Caravaggio painted St. Jerome, who is shown writing attentively and extending his hand to dip his pen into an inkwell; and another painting, the half-figure of David, who holds the head of Goliath by the hair, which is his own portrait. He holds the sword and is shown as a bareheaded youth with one shoulder emerging from his shirt; it is painted with the deep dark shadows that Caravaggio liked to use in order to give strength to his figures and compositions. The cardinal, pleased with these and other works, introduced Caravaggio to Pope Paul V, whom he portrayed seated and by whom he was well rewarded. For Cardinal Maffeo Barberini, who became Pope Urban VIII, in addition to a portrait, he painted the *Sacrifice of Abraham*, in which Abraham holds a knife to the throat of his son, who screams and falls.

But Caravaggio's preoccupation with painting did not calm his restless nature. After having painted for a few hours in the day he used to go out on the town with his sword at his side, like a professional swordsman, seeming to do anything but paint. And during a tennis match with a young friend of his, they began hitting each other with their rackets. At the end he drew his sword, killed the young man, and was also wounded himself. Fleeing from Rome, without money and being followed, he found refuge in Zagarolo under the protection of Duke Marzio Colonna, where he painted Christ in Emmaus between the Apostles and another half-figure of Magdalen. Afterward he went to Naples, where he immediately found employment, since his style and reputation were already known there. He was commissioned to do the *Flagellation of Christ* at the column in the Di Franco Chapel of the church of San Domenico Maggiore. In Sant 'Anna de' Lombardi he painted the *Resurrection*. In Naples, the *Denial of St. Peter* for the Sacristy of San Marino is thought to be among his finest works. It shows a servant girl pointing at Peter, who turns around with open hands in the act of denying Christ; it is a nocturnal scene with other figures warming themselves at the fire. In the same city for the church of the Misericordia he painted the *Seven Acts of Mercy*, a picture about ten *palmi* high; one sees the head of an old man sticking out through the bars of a prison, sucking milk from the bare breast of a woman bending down toward him. Among the other figures you can distinguish the feet and legs of a corpse carried to burial; and the rays from the light of the torch held by one of the men who bears the body spread over the priest with a white surplice, revealing the color and giving life to the composition.

Caravaggio was eager to receive the Cross of Malta, which is usually given *per grazia* to honored men for their merit and virtue. He decided to go to that island, where he was introduced to the Grand Master Wignacourt, a French gentleman. He painted him standing dressed in armor and seated without armor, in the habit of Grand Master; the first is in the Armory of Malta. The Master rewarded Caravaggio with the Cross. In the church of San Giovanni he was ordered to paint the *Beheading of St. John*, who has fallen to the ground while the executioner, almost as if he had not killed him with his sword, takes his knife from his side, seizing the saint by his hair in order to cut off his head. Herodias looks on intently, and an old woman is horrified by the spectacle, while the prison warden, dressed in a Turkish garment, points to the atrocious slaughter. In this work Caravaggio put all the force of his brush to use, working with such intensity that he let the priming of the canvas show through the half-tones. As a reward,

besides the honor of the Cross, the Grand Master put a gold chain around Caravaggio's neck and made him a gift of two slaves, along with other signs of esteem and appreciation for his work. For the same church of San Giovanni, in the Italian Chapel, he painted two half-figures over two doors, the Magdalen and St. Jerome in the act of writing. He painted another St. Jerome with a skull, in meditation on death, which is still in the palace. Caravaggio was very happy to have been honored with the Cross and for the praise received for his painting. He lived in Malta in dignity and abundance. But suddenly, because of his tormented nature, he lost his prosperity and the support of the Grand Master. On account of an ill-considered quarrel with a noble knight, he was jailed and reduced to a state of misery and fear. In order to free himself he was exposed to grave danger, but he managed to scale the prison walls at night and to flee unrecognized to Sicily, with such speed that no one could catch him. In Syracuse he painted the altarpiece for the church of Santa Lucia in the port outside the city. He painted the dead St. Lucy blessed by the bishop; there are also two men who dig her grave with shovels. He then went to Messina, where he painted the Nativity for the Capuchin Fathers. It represents the Virgin and Child before a broken-down shack with its boards and rafters apart. St. Joseph leans on his staff, with some shepherds in adoration. For the same Fathers he painted St. Jerome, who is writing in a book, and in the Lazzari Chapel, in the church of the Ministri degl'Infermi, he painted the Resurrection of Lazarus who, being raised from the sepulchre, opens his arms as he hears the voice of Christ who calls him and extends his hand toward him. Martha is crying and Magdalen appears astonished, and there is a figure who puts his hand to his nose to protect himself from the stink of the corpse. The painting is huge, and the figures are in a grotto with brilliant light on the nude body of Lazarus and those who support him. This painting is very highly esteemed for its powerful realism. But misfortune did not abandon Michele, and fear hunted him from place to place. Consequently he hurried across Sicily and from Messina went to Palermo, where he painted another Nativity for the Oratorio of San Lorenzo. The Virgin is shown adoring her newborn child, with St. Francis, St. Lawrence, the seated St. Joseph, and above an angel in the air. The lights are diffused among shadows in the darkness.

After this he no longer felt safe in Sicily, and so he departed the island and sailed back to Naples, where he thought he would stay until he got word of his pardon allowing him to return to Rome. And hoping to placate the Grand Master, Caravaggio sent to him as a present a half-figure of Herodias with the head of St. John the Baptist in a basin. These efforts did not succeed. Indeed, one day at the doorway of the Osteria del Ciriglio he was surrounded by armed men who attacked him and wounded him in the face. Thus, as soon as possible, although suffering the fiercest pain, he boarded a *felucca* and headed for Rome, having by then obtained his freedom from the pope through the intercession of Cardinal Gonzaga. Upon his arrival ashore, a Spanish guard, who was waiting for another knight, arrested him by mistake, holding him prisoner. And when he was finally released he never again saw his *felucca* or his possessions. Thus, in a miserable state of anxiety and desperation, he ran along the beach in the heat of the summer sun. Arriving at Porto Ercole, he collapsed and was seized by a malignant fever that killed him in a few days, at about forty years of age, in 1609. This was a sad year for painting, since Annibale Carracci and Federico Zuccaro also died. Thus Caravaggio ended his life on a deserted beach while in Rome people were enthusiastically waiting for his return. But the unexpected news of his death arrived in Rome and saddened everyone. His very good friend, Cavalier Marino, mourned his death and honored his funeral with the following verses:

Death and Nature made a cruel plot against you, Michele;
 Nature was afraid
 Your hand would surpass it in every image
 You created, not painted. Death burned with indignation,
 Because however many more

His scythe would cut down in life,
Your brush recreated even more.

Without doubt Caravaggio advanced the art of painting, for he lived at a time when realism was not much in vogue and figures were made according to convention and *maniera*, satisfying more a taste for beauty than for truth. Thus by avoiding all pettiness and falsity in his color, he strengthened his hues, giving them blood and flesh again, thereby reminding painters to work from nature. Consequently, Caravaggio did not use cinnabar reds or azure blues in his figures; and if he occasionally did use them, he toned them down, saying that they were poisonous colors. He never used clear blue atmosphere in his pictures; indeed, he always used a black ground, and black in his flesh tones, limiting the highlights to a few areas. Moreover, he claimed that he imitated his models so closely that he never made a single brushstroke that he called his own, but said rather that it was nature's. Repudiating all other rules, he considered the highest achievement not to be bound to art. For this innovation he was greatly acclaimed, and many talented and educated artists seemed compelled to follow him, as is the case of Guido Reni, who adopted much of his manner and demonstrated himself a realist, as we see in the Crucifixion of St. Peter in the church of the Tre Fontane; and so did also Giovan Francesco [Guercino] da Cento. Such praise caused Caravaggio to appreciate himself alone, and he claimed to be the only faithful imitator of nature. Nevertheless he lacked *invenzione*, decorum, *disegno*, or any knowledge of the science of painting. The moment the model was taken from him, his hand and his mind became empty.

Nonetheless many artists were taken by his style and gladly embraced it, since without any kind of effort it opened the way to easy copying, imitating common forms lacking beauty. Thus, as Caravaggio suppressed the dignity of art, everybody did as he pleased, and what followed was contempt for beautiful things, the authority of antiquity and Raphael destroyed. Since it was easy to find models and to paint heads from life, giving up the history painting appropriate for artists, these people made half-figures, which were previously uncommon. Now began the imitation of common and vulgar things, seeking out filth and deformity, as some popular artists do assiduously. So if they have to paint armor, they choose to reproduce the rustiest; if a vase, they would not complete it except to show it broken and without a spout. The costumes they paint consist of stockings, breeches, and big caps, and in their figures they pay attention only to wrinkles, defects of the skin and exterior, depicting knotted fingers and limbs disfigured by disease.

Because of his style Caravaggio encountered dissatisfaction, and some of his paintings were taken down from their altars, as we saw in the case of San Luigi. The same thing happened to his Death of the Virgin in the Chiesa della Scala, which was removed because he had shown the swollen body of a dead woman too realistically. The other picture, of St. Anne, was also removed from one of the minor altars of St. Peter's because of the offensive portrayal of the Virgin with the nude Christ child, as we can see in the Villa Borghese. In Sant'Agostino we are presented with the filthy feet of the pilgrim; in Naples, in the picture of the Seven Works of Mercy, a man is depicted raising his flask in the act of drinking, with his mouth wide open as the wine flows coarsely into it. In the Super at Emmaus, in addition to the vulgar conception of the two Apostles and of the Lord who is shown young and without a beard, the innkeeper wears a cap, and on the table is a dish of grapes, figs, and pomegranates out of season. Just as certain herbs produce both beneficial medicine and most pernicious poison, in the same way, though he produced some good, Caravaggio has been most harmful and wrought havoc with every ornament and good tradition of painting. It is true that painters who strayed too far from nature needed someone to set them on the right path again – but how easy it is to fall into one extreme while fleeing from another. By departing from the *maniera* in order to follow nature too closely, they moved away from art altogether and remained in error and darkness until Annibale Carracci came to enlighten their minds and restore beauty to the imitation of nature.

Caravaggio's style corresponded to his physiognomy and appearance; he had a dark complexion and dark eyes, and his eyebrows and hair were black; this coloring was naturally reflected in his paintings. His first style, sweet and pure in color, was his best; he made a great achievement in it and proved that he was a most excellent Lombard colorist. But afterward, driven by his own nature, he retreated to the dark style that is connected to his disturbed and contentious temperament. At first he had to flee Milan and his homeland; then he was compelled to flee from Rome and Malta, to hide in Sicily, to be in danger in Naples, and finally to die miserably on a beach. We cannot fail to mention his behavior and his choice of clothes, since he wore only the finest materials and princely velvets; but once he put on a suit of clothes he changed only when it had fallen into rags. He was very negligent in washing himself; for years he used the canvas of a portrait for a tablecloth, morning and evening. Caravaggio's colors are prized wherever art is valued. The painting of St. Sebastian with his hands tied behind his back by two executioners, one of his best works, was taken to Paris. The Count of Benevento, who was Viceroy of Naples, took the Crucifixion of St. Andrew to Spain; the Count of Villamediana owned the half-figure of David and the portrait of a Youth with an Orange Blossom in his hand. In the church of the Dominicans in Antwerp is the painting of the Rosary, which brought great praise to Caravaggio. In Rome in the Ludovisi Gardens near the Porta Pinciana, they attribute to Caravaggio the Jupiter, Neptune, and Pluto in the casino of Cardinal Del Monte, who was interested in chemical medicines and adorned the small room of his laboratory, associating those gods with the elements with the globe of the world placed in their midst. It has been said that Caravaggio, reproached for not understanding either planes or perspective, placed the figures in such a position that they appear to be seen from sharply below, so as to vie with the most difficult foreshortenings. It is indeed true that those gods do not retain their proper forms, and are painted in oil on the vault, since Michele had never painted in fresco; just as all his followers prefer the easy way of oil painting when portraying the model. Many were those who imitated his style of painting from nature and were therefore called naturalists. And among them we shall note some who gained a great name.

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