

## **BIOGRAPHY OF CARAVAGGIO (MICHELANGELO MERISI) 1571-1610**

Unquestionably one of the most “revolutionary” artists of all time for a groundbreaking style so distinct from the theories and techniques of his time, Michelangelo Merisi, universally known as Caravaggio, had a peculiar destiny - early glory, an adventurous life and a premature, solitary and miserable end - that has made him a legendary, fascinating and damned figure, that has resonated over three centuries, even if he himself contributed to the creation of a romantically simplified image. Only recently, thanks to important Italian and foreign scholarship - above all that by Hermann Voss, Lionello Venturi, Roberto Longhi and René Jullian - has it become possible to correct and be more precise about many aspects of his life and to significantly modify the evaluation of his work.

Thanks to an extraordinary recent discovery, in the Archives of the Diocese of Milan, we now have the certificate of baptism of the painter which has enabled us to determine, after eighty years in which hypotheses were based on clues alone, that Michelangelo Merisi, the son of Fermo and Lucia Aratori, was born in Milan on 29 September 1571 and baptised the following day in the parish church of Santo Stefano in Brolo. For many years it was assumed that he had been born in Caravaggio, in the Bergamo area, from which the name he has become known by derives.

His artistic vocation must have become evident early on. Given that, at thirteen, he became a pupil in the workshop of the Bergamo painter Simone Peterzano, who liked to define himself as “Titani alumnus” (pupil of Titian), to underline his connection to the Venetian master.

Around 1591-1592 he went to Rome where most of his work was completed, initially concentrating on still life – which turned out to be fundamental in all of his painting – before moving on, following his introduction to the influential Cardinal Del Monte, to work of a more profound and demanding kind, such as “Rest on the Flight into Egypt”, “Saint Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy” (circa 1594) and “Fortune Teller” (circa 1596).

In 1597 he was commissioned to paint a series of canvases for the Contarelli Chapel in San Luigi dei Francesi: this resulted in the “Saint Matthew Stories” (“The Calling of Saint Matthew”, “The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew”, “Saint Matthew and the Angel”), that would make him both celebrated and contested, as a result of a number rather unconventional choices, such as the rejection of any kind of idealism in the representation. In particular, “Saint Matthew and the Angel” was rejected by the priests of San Luigi (and the artist was obliged to supply another version), because, as we learn from the contemporary historian, Bellori, “the figure had neither the decorum, nor the aspect of a saint, given that it was seated with crossed legs and with his feet roughly exposed to view”: all of which are clear examples of the main characteristics of Caravaggio’s “revolution”, or rather, the rejection of the traditional identification of the beautiful with the good, and the ugly with the bad.

In the following years, up to 1606, Caravaggio’s history is marked by a series of often overlapping grim and violent events. If, on the one hand, he continued to produce numerous paintings of lasting importance that underline his creative strengths - between 1600 and 1601 he would paint “The Crucifixion of Saint Peter” and “The Conversion of Saint Paul” for the Santa Maria del Popolo church in Rome; in 1604 “The Madonna of Loreto”, in 1605 “The Death of the Virgin” - on the other, in the same years, he would be repeatedly charged for disturbance, behaviour that was the result of a violent and impulsive temperament.

In 1605, after wounding a chancellor of the court, Caravaggio escaped to Genoa. The following year, he fought a duel in which his opponent, Ranuccio Tommasoni da Terni was killed and he himself injured, and his life as a fugitive began. The rest of his life would be marked by both success and misadventure. In 1607 he moved to Naples, where he completed a number of masterpieces for churches and convents, including “The Flagellation of Christ” and “Seven Works of Mercy”; in 1608 he sailed to Malta, where he had received a commission to paint the “Beheading

of Saint John the Baptist”, which remains in the cathedral of Valletta.

Invested into the order of the Knights, he was once again obliged to flee when the reasons for his exile became known.

This time he moved to Sicily, where he remained for around a year, and left numerous examples of his genius: including, “The Burial of Saint Lucia”, painted in Siracusa for the church of the same name; the “Resurrection of Lazarus” and the “Adoration of the Shepherds”, now held by the Regional Museum of Messina.

He returned to Naples in October 1609, where he was attacked and severely wounded, while his Roman protectors attempted to have him pardoned. While still convalescing, he fled from Naples to Rome. After being stopped for controls at Palo, he was imprisoned and was only released after payment of a sum of money and, after wandering along the beaches in a vain search for the ship on which he had left three of his paintings, he died of a fever, in total solitude, on 18 July 1610, at just thirty-nine years of age, and only a few days before the announcement, in Rome, that his pardon had been approved.

## Bibliography

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