CARAVAGGIO IN MALTA
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Seldom in the history of painting has the reputation of an artist of any standing been handed down to posterity enveloped in such a dense fog of misrepresentations and detractions, suggestions of falsehood and suppressions of truth, as has that of Michelangelo da Caravaggio. Even the principal dates of his life, including those of his birth and death, have only recently been published, as a result of intense, though belated, research (1). Many reasons may be given for this, the first being that, like many another before him and since, his work was often misunderstood and even rejected by his contemporaries, and it is only recently that he has been reinstated and acknowledged for the Master that he undoubtedly was. Another is that his early biographers delighted in reproducing the unkindest remarks of his critics and, unfortunately, the latter had abundant material for their attacks in the artist’s private life, which was, to put it frankly, repulsive.

Michelangelo Merisi, or Merisi, as he is usually called, was born in Caravaggio, in Lombardy, in 1573. At the early age of eleven he was apprenticed in Milan to one Simone Peterzano, a pupil and imitator of Titian (2). Four years later he went to Rome where he worked for short periods with the cavalier Giuseppe d’Arpino (1563-1640) and with a certain Prospero Orsi, known as Prosperino dalle Grottesche, two mediocre artists soon to be outclassed by their pupils. Not long afterwards, he was found chafing at this intolerable state of affairs by Cardinal del Monte, who took him under his protection, enabling him, in 1590, to embark on the series of paintings in San Luigi dei Francesi which are generally considered to be his masterpieces and which were completed in about 1599. During the next decade or so he continued to produce those works which were destined to exert such a strong influence on contemporary art, and which attracted the admiration of the younger set and the undisguised envy of the older artists.

“In some ways,” says the late Dr. Borenius, author of one of the most illuminating pages on Caravaggio ever to appear in English (3), “the emergence of Caravaggio in Rome may be said to mark the beginning of a wholly new epoch in the history of art. He can, quite accurately, be described as the ‘first modern artist’ in the sense that his oppositional tendencies sweep the art world like a whirlwind and make people take up positions violently for or against.”

In 1606 he was obliged to fly from Rome. He lived for a year or so in Naples, where he painted various pictures, amongst which his “Madonna del Rosario” and “Sette opere di Misericordia”. In 1608 he came to Malta where he was received with open arms by the Knights. It is with this last period of his life that we are particularly concerned, not only because of its local historical value, but also because it happens to include one of the highlights of his chequered career and what might have been the turning point in his art, had he been allowed to live longer.

The reason why he actually came to Malta has never been satisfactorily explained. Local tradition, so quick to fill the vacancies of history, has invented a story which, though romantic, is not only untrue but hardly even plausible. It is best retold as it appears in bold print in Ferris’ description of St. John’s Co-Cathedral: “Having had an altercation with another painter, the cavalier d’Arpino, Caravaggio challenged him to a duel; but the cavalier would not accept a challenge from one whom he did not consider his peer. Caravaggio therefore betook himself to Malta in order to

(3) TANCRED BORENIUS, Later Italian Painting; Avalon Press, London, 1946.
become a knight, and to be able to fight with his adversary... Having been made a knight, Caravaggio returned to Italy to meet his rival. But, travelling on foot to Civita-vechchia, at the height of the summer, he was taken ill and died" (4).

The least that can be said about this story is that, since his short stay with d'Arpino nearly twenty years previously, Caravaggio had not only risen far above his old teacher as an artist, but was then moving in the best social circles of the day; so that it was hardly likely that, even if he had desisted to pick a quarrel with d'Arpino, he would have taken the trouble to legalize his position before setting about him. Even accepting this improbable hypothesis, it is a known fact that, when Caravaggio left Rome, he did not come straight to Malta, but spent more than a year in Naples, which does not make him appear in any hurry to fight duels.

The truth of the matter, as shown by a recently published document from the Criminal Archives of Rome, is that, in 1600, a series of disreputable nightly brawls in which our hero was in the habit of taking part, culminated in the murder of one Ranuccio Tomassoni (5). It was then that Caravaggio fled to Naples and, whilst waiting for the affair to blow over, he was probably contacted by an emissary of the Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt (1601-22) who, at that time, was on the lookout for artistic talent which was urgently required in connection with the interior decoration of the new Conventual Church.

What, then, is the origin of the duel story? To my mind it is to be found in G.P. Bellori's life of Annibale Caracci, of Bologna. At a certain period of Caracci's career, we are told that: "Il Cavaliere Giuseppe d'Arpino havendo veduto ch'egli haecuea biasimato una sua opera, lo sfidò con la spada: pigliò Annibale il pennello, e disse io ti disfido" (6). Nothing is more natural than for the two surnames, which have a certain assonance, to have got mixed up and for the story, thus elaborately embellished, to have been handed on until it was put down in black and white by Ferris.

Bellori also describes our artist's short but hectic stay in Malta, with a wealth of detail and with barely repressed disapproval. As he is usually well-informed, though rather inclined to be censorious, we may as well take up his story at this point. We find that, on his arrival in Malta, Caravaggio was introduced before the Grand Master, whom he portrayed at full length in armour and seated unarmed, the first portrait being kept in the Armoury. He was thereupon granted the Cross of the Order and commissioned to paint the Beheading of St. John for the Conventual Church, which pleased Wignacourt so much that he gave the artist a valuable gold necklace and granted him a couple of slaves and other favours. Caravaggio then painted a "St. Jerome" and a "Maddalena" for the Chapel of St. John's, and another picture of St. Jerome with a skull for the Palace. For some time he lived in comfort and decorum, until, having quarrelled with a knight, he fell into disfavour and was thrown into prison. He managed to escape at great personal risk and fled to Sicily before he could be captured. After a short period in Sicily he returned to Naples where he spent some time in the hope of obtaining a free pardon and being able to return to Rome. In the meantime he also tried to mend his quarrel with the Grand Master, and sent him a painting of Herodias with the head of St. John in a basin; but to no avail (7).

As a basis from which to start a systematic research, Bellori's history is useful in the extreme; and it is astonishing how, until quite recently, even the most easily checked

(4) Cav. A. Ferris, Il Maggior Tempio di S. Giovann Battista in Malta, Malta, tip. "La Gazzetta di Malta", 1900; footnote (3) on page 89.
(5) ANTONIO MUQUO, Roma Barocca, Bestetti e Tumminelli, Milano-Roma, 1919; pages 386-88.
(6) GIO PIETRO BELLORI, Le vite de' pitori, scultori et architetti moderni, R. Ist. d'Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte, 1931; fac-simile dell'edit. di Roma del 1672; page 73.
statements it contains were entirely ignored. On the other hand, not a little confusion has resulted from the habit of accepting as unaltered to this day circumstances which were first described nearly three centuries ago.

Bellori starts by mentioning the portrait of Wignacourt "in piedi armato", adding that it is kept in the Armoury at Malta. As a matter of fact, a portrait of Wignacourt is still to be seen in the Palace Armoury, as also is another in one of the Palace drawing-rooms, showing the Grand Master clothed in the magnificent, gold-inlaid suit of armour which is exhibited in the same room. In 1836 both pictures were sent to London by the Governor, Sir J. Lintorn Simmons, and were restored by Messrs. Seguier and Smart (8). Up to that time, the drawing-room picture was thought to be a copy of the one in the Armoury; but, when they were cleaned, it was found that the shields were different and, on account of this and other minor details, Mr. Seguier decided that they were two distinct portraits each taken from life. The restoration does not seem to have done them any good, as the canvas has been pressed so flat that the original brushwork is lost.

There is no doubt, however, that neither of these two pictures was painted by Caravaggio. The style, the general flatness and lack of imagination in the presentation of the subject, and what is left of the brushwork, testify with one accord against any such authorship. In the absence of any documentary evidence, and even against the official records, it may be safely accepted that at least one of the portraits, probably that in the Armoury, was painted by Lionello Spada (1576-1622) of Bologna, who accompanied Caravaggio on many of his wanderings, and finally to Malta, where he stayed after his companion had fled. In the little XVIIth Century Church of St. Paul's Bay which was demolished by a bomb in 1942, there existed an altar-piece of singular fascination representing the landing of St. Paul, which contained a portrait of the donor, Alof de Wignacourt, and a self-portrait of the artist, Lionello Spada (9). The similarity of the head and the general treatment of the picture are sufficient for it to be established beyond doubt that the Armoury portrait was executed by the same artist.

Caravaggio's portrait of Wignacourt, on the other hand, is in the Louvre, where it has been for a considerable time (10). Here, the Grand Master wears a totally different suit of armour, and is attended by a page carrying his plumed helmet and who, more than the principal subject, proves this picture to be a work of Caravaggio. Apart from any technical consideration, it is difficult even to believe that the two pictures are supposed to represent the same person. The figure in the Louvre is powerfully built, though squat, with a heavy, fleshy face and, though standing at ease, there is no doubt of the authority and strength of will expressed in the casual sidelong glance. The figure in the Valletta Armoury, on the other hand, is taller and slimmer, with a much narrower face and a rather equivocal smile which it is difficult to connect with one of the most energetic and uncompromising rulers of the Order. As Maindon says, it is impossible to attribute this canvas to Caravaggio, unless it is to be accepted as a clumsy caricature (11). Strange as it may seem, some modern critics are now even denying the authorship of the Louvre portrait to Caravaggio, and are actually doubting the sitter's identity, simply because he is not wearing his own suit of armour. This curious piece of reasoning is all the more deplorable because Wignacourt is wearing his own armour in the Valletta portrait and anybody with the slightest knowledge of the artist's character, let alone his style, would know that

(8) Blanch Lintorn Simmons, Description of the Governor's Palaces in Malta, Malta, Government Printing Office, 1885: page 114.

(9) E. Sammut, San Paolo il Bokar, in The Sunday Times of Malta, 22nd March, 1942.


(11) Gabriel Roches, La Peinture au Musée du Louvre, écoles Hollandaise, XVI, XVII, XVIII siècles, publié par L'Illustration, Paris, s.d.: page 57.
Caravaggio would never for an instant have countenanced reproducing the minute and elaborate details of the Grand Master’s black and gold suit. Wignacourt was therefore portrayed in a suit he borrowed from the Grand Commander Jean Jacques de Verdelin (1590-1673) a handsome but much simpler piece of work attributed to Lucio Piccinino of Milan, which is still to be seen in the Valletta Palace.

The whereabouts of the second portrait of Wignacourt mentioned by Bellori have so far never been discovered; so that, unfortunately, it may be considered as lost, though there is some possibility that it may be one of the numerous portraits attributed to “unknown masters” which adorn the less accessible apartments of the Palace.

In return for these works, says Bellori, the Grand Master conferred the Cross of the Order on him, and commissioned him to paint the Beheading of the Saint for the Church of St. John.

In volume 456 of the “Libri Bullarum” of the Archives of the Order of St. John we find an entry dated the 14th of July, 1603, and headed “Receptio in fratrem Militem obedientiae pro Magnifico Michaele Angelo de Caravaggio” (12). From this we gather that, having learnt that Caravaggio had expressed the desire to receive the habit and insignia of the Order, and having considered that Malta should honour her adopted pupil and citizen no less than Coos had honoured her Apelles, Frater Alofius de Wignacourt, custos universis etc., by virtue of a Papal Authority especially granted for the occasion, received the said Michael Angelo into the Order with the rank of brother of obedience. This probably gave the artist the right to wear at least the six-pointed Cross, which was one of the privileges of the Donati (13).

We may as well accept without discussion Bellori’s

statement that the other works which we know Caravaggio to have painted during his stay in Malta were all executed after this date, and that the first he undertook was the awe-inspiring “Beheading of St. John” for the Oratory of the Conventual Church. This picture, which was “restored” by Call at the turn of the century and again cleaned by the Museum authorities after being moved to the country during the last War (14), is so blackened with the accumulated grime of ages and with the smoke of the thousands of candles that have been burnt before it that wellnigh two thirds of it have been obliterated and it is impossible to study the original brushwork. This is doubly a pity, as Bellori tells us that the artist “uso ogni potere del suo pennello, avendomi lavorato con tanta fierazza, che lascio in mezzo tinte l’imprimitura della tela.”

From every other point of view it is a remarkable piece of work, marking as it does the final, and perhaps the most important stage in the art of Caravaggio. What immediately leaps to the eye in this picture is its unusual composition, which may well mark the climax to the artist’s third manner, which is first noticeable in the paintings he executed in Naples after his flight from Rome. The five figures in this picture are placed in a well-knit group forming a perfect semi-circle at one side, with the oblique lighting leading the eye to the centre of attraction, the head of St. John held in the grip of the executioner. Nearly three quarters of the canvas, however, are left practically blank. To the left of the group is a barred window through which dim figures can be discerned peering at the gruesome scene; whilst behind it, serving as a dropscape for the compact but sordid drama, is a massive arched doorway which might easily be one of the side entrances to St. John’s itself.

This treatment of the background is a new departure for Caravaggio; but not unjustifiable, as a recent writer

(12) Archives of the Sovereign Military Order of Jerusalem, Royal Malta Library, Valletta.
(13) Codice del Sovrano Militare Ordine di Malta, Stat. XLVI.
would have it (15). To my mind, it is a further logical step in the development of his art. It is evident that, having mastered the use of light in all its intricacies as one, and probably the most important, of his *dramatis personae*, he is here impressing the whole atmosphere of the scene into his service to enhance the psychological effect of his painting. In fact, nobody who has seen the massive stone walls of our buildings, which make even our Churches, and particularly St. John’s before Preti’s structural alterations, look like so many fortresses, can deny the overpowering effect of these huge piles of masonry.

Caravaggio’s next works were his “San Geronalmo” and “Maddalena” for the Chapel of the Langue of Italy in the Conventual Church. The former is a powerful piece of work demonstrating the artist’s use of light to emphasise composition and to draw out the salient points of his subjects. For a long time it was attributed to Spagnoletto and has only recently been restored to our artist (16). In compensation, it was exhibited in the Castello Angioino of Naples in 1938 in the “Mostra dei Tre Secoli di Pittura Napoletana.”

The “Maddalena”, a patched and feeble-looking composition which hangs opposite St. Jerome, with the arms of the Malaspina in the left corner, is obviously not the original picture, which was probably purloined a long time ago. In official catalogues it is described as being “after Correggio”. Nothing is known of the other St. Jerome “con un teschio nella meditazione della morte,” which Bellori mentions. However, the antecedents of a painting of this subject which hangs in the dining room of San Anton Palace might be enquired into with profit. It is significant that after having been labelled “Flemish school”, it is now being ascribed to Ribera.

At the back of a painting of a sleeping Cupid, or infant Bacchus, in the Galleria Pitti of Florence, we read that it was done in Malta in 1608 (17). Though it is not mentioned by any contemporary writer, there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of this work, which contains all the most important stylistic and technical elements of Caravaggesque art of that period.

For a few short months, whilst he worked at the pictures we have been describing, the newly-dubbed Brother of Obedience lived like a lord, waited upon by slaves and flattered by the attentions of the younger members of the Order. It is even said, and we would be the last to deny it in the absence of any proof one way or the other, that he was also entrusted with the decoration of the interior of St. John’s. However, all good things come to an end, and for our hero the end came, as was to be expected, through one of his usual escapades for which he was shut up in the Castle of St. Angelo. Not even the massive bastions of that grim fortress were strong enough to hold him, and it was not long before he had fled, thus breaking yet another of the regulations of the Order.

The alarm was first officially sounded on the 6th of October 1608, when, at the instance of the Fiscal Procurator of the Order, Don Hieronymo Varayz, a Criminal Commission, composed of the Knights Jean Honoret and Blasio Suarez, was set up by the Grand Master and ordered to collect all possible information on the matter and to report to the Venerable Council (18). Shortly afterwards, probably on the 21st of November, the Grand Master in Council, having seen the report of the aforesaid Commissioners, and having taken the vote of the said Council, ordered the holding of a Public Assembly in which, *servata forma statutorum*, Michelangelo Marrese de Caravaggio was to be deprived of the habit (19).

On the 1st of December, 1608, barely four and a half

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(16) We owe this identification to Chev. Vincenzo Bonello, lately Curator of Fine Arts in the Museum.
(18) *Liber Consiliorum*, vol. 103, fol. 13 a tergo; in Archives of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, Valletta.
months after Caravaggio's reception, by decree of the Grand Master a Public Assembly of the Venerable Bailiffs, Priors, Preceptors and Knights was held "ad sonum campanae, secundum antiquas et laudabiles consuetudines Sacrae Religionis Hospitalis Hierusalem," in the Church and Oratory of St. John the Baptist, Patron of the Order, at the very foot of the immense painting of the Beheading, magnificent in its vivid reds and warm yellows hardly dry upon the canvas, for which the artist had been granted so many honours a few short weeks before; and there Don Hieronimo de Guevara, Master of the Hospital and Procurator of the aforesaid, most Illustrious and Reverend Grand Master, moved his formal indictment.

Whereas the holding of the Sgurdium having been duly authorized according to the Statutes and the same legally convened, and the information gathered by the Fiscal Procurator having been examined, it had been learnt that the aforesaid Michael Angelo, whilst undergoing detention in the prison of the Castle of St. Angelo, had thrown off the yoke of obedience and, without the permission of the Grand Master, had absconded from the Convent "junibus scalando dictum castrum," in violation of Statute 13, de Prohibitionibus et penis.

Moreover, having examined the report of the Magister Scutifer who had searched for the said Michael Angelo with the customary diligence, citations and proclamations in public places of the Convent, and finally, after the aforesaid Magister Scutifer had that very day repeated his summons calling upon the said Michael Angelo in a loud voice "per primam, secundam, usque ad tertiam et quartam superabundantem citationem" to appear personally, which he failed to do, he was condemned by the unanimous vote of the Assembly to be unfrocked.

Sentence was thereupon passed by the Reverend President of the Assembly, whereby Frater Michael Angelo Marrese de Caravaggio was deprived of the habit and
"extra Ordinem et consortium nostrum, tanguam membra
putridum et foetidum ejectus, et separat us fuit" (20).

It was the beginning of the end. From Malta Caravaggio
fled to Sicily, where he remained for about a year and pro-
duced the "Burial of Santa Lucia", which hangs in the
Church of the same name in Syracuse, and the "Nativity"
for the Oratory of the Compagnia di San Lorenzo, in Palermo.
From there, according to Bellori, he returned to Naples,
hoping to obtain a reprieve which would enable him to
return to Rome. In the hope of patching up his quarrel with
the Order, he sent Wignacourt a painting of Herodias with
the head of St. John in a basin; but to no avail. Nothing
is known today of this picture and, whether it was taken
abroad in the turbulent years following the departure of
the Order, or still adorns the "dark unfathomed caves" of
some jealously guarded mansion, it is impossible to discover.

Shortly afterwards he travelled further north and, after
various misadventures, he died of a fever in the Maremma,
just when it appeared that his powerful friends in Rome had
persuaded the authorities to let bygones by bygones and
were preparing to receive him with open arms (21).

Michelangelo Marresi died at the comparatively early
age of 37 and, even at the risk of being called profane, I
will repeat the old adage that "whom the Gods love die
young". Although the chronicle of his intimate life may
seem appalling, it should be remembered that he lived in
what was probably the toughest period recorded in history;
and, from the comfortable perspective of a more tolerant
age, we may trust that the artist of the "Vocation of St.
Matthew" and of the "Madonna di Loreto" will not be judged
as harshly by his Maker as he was by his fellowmen.

Feast of the Beheading of St. John.

29th of August, 1948.

(20) Ibid., fol. 32 a verso et 33.