Caravaggio's *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* in Focus

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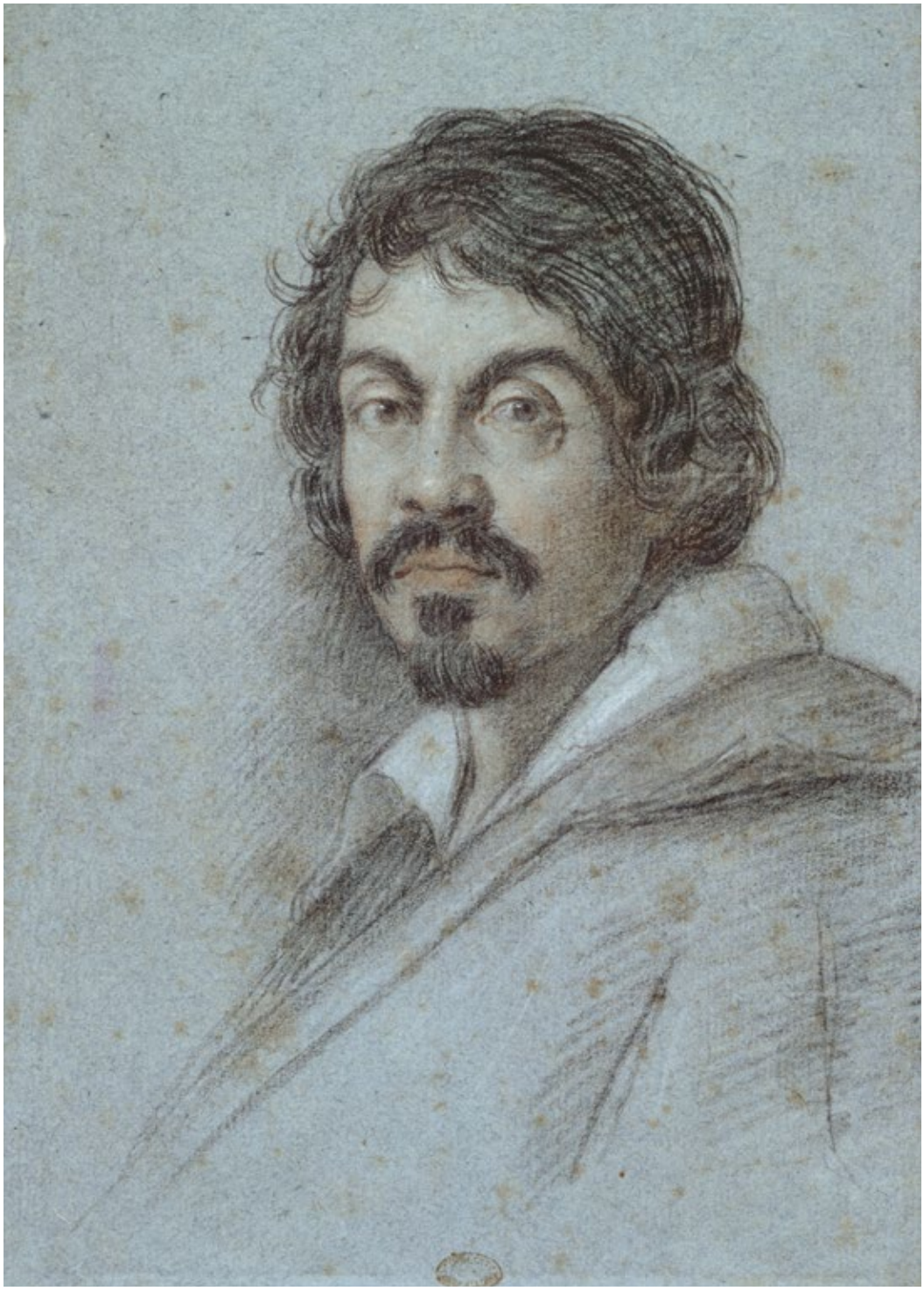
Michelangelo Merisi, called Caravaggio

Michelangelo Merisi (1571–1610) grew up in the town of Caravaggio, in the northwest Italian region of Lombardy, and trained in Milan, where he learned a tradition of artistic naturalism that stretched back to Leonardo da Vinci's work in the city a century earlier. Caravaggio was nonetheless a young and untested artist when he moved to Rome around 1595. He was not an immediate success—he experienced extreme poverty and frequently needed to change lodgings and workshops in his first years in the city—but during a stint working in the studio of Giuseppe Cesari, Caravaggio began to devise a new approach to painting, one that merged his training in Lombard naturalism with a radical rethinking of what art might be. Instead of presenting the work of art as an illusion of another world, he celebrated the artifice of the studio. In the *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, he depicted neither a god nor a saint, but rather an artist's model, captured on canvas and, like the fruit in the boy's basket, offered for viewers to behold. It is a painting about the art of painting.

Such works brought Caravaggio to the attention of important collectors and patrons, leading to important ecclesiastical commissions in Rome, including the Contarelli

Chapel in San Luigi dei Francesi and the Cerasi Chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo. Yet, Caravaggio lived a violent and tumultuous life. Even as he was transforming the nature of Italian painting, he was repeatedly arrested for brawling and other crimes, and then, after killing Ranuccio Tomassoni in a duel in May 1606, he was forced to flee the city. Caravaggio spent the last four years of his life on the run, moving to Naples, Sicily, and Malta, eventually dying at age thirty-eight while trying to return to Rome.



Ottavio Leoni, *Portrait of Michelangelo Merisi, Known as Caravaggio*, ca. 1621. Chalk on blue paper. Biblioteca Marucelliana, Florence. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY.

Caravaggio, *The Calling of St. Matthew*, 1599–1600. Oil on canvas. Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY.

The *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* in Focus

While the *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* opened the way for Caravaggio's audacious, revisionist approach to Italian painting, there were precedents and inspirations for his work. The paintings on view here by Marco d'Oggiono and Giuseppe Arcimboldo, for example, reveal how Caravaggio's art built upon Leonardo da Vinci's legacy of bold naturalism in Milan—and on the genre-bending inventiveness of Lombard painters. Moreover, Caravaggio was not alone among artists of his generation who emphasized the need for direct observation of the world and for techniques that made this fresh approach tangible to the viewer. Works by Annibale Carracci and Cristofano Allori demonstrate that similar impulses were underway in Bologna and Florence. To highlight these parallels is not to lessen the importance of Caravaggio's painting but rather to put it in context, while also making clear the distinctiveness of his art.

Caravaggio's works captivated artists from across Europe, and the strong chiaroscuro and visual and psychological realism of his dramatic compositions became the model for a Baroque style that spread throughout Italy and into Spain, France, and the Netherlands. A generation of Caravaggesque artists, the Caravaggisti, bore witness to his impact. Surprisingly, though,

very few of these artists actually met Caravaggio or saw him paint, and even fewer adopted one of his most distinctive techniques: the practice of working directly on the canvas, without producing preparatory drawings. Yet, even when making drawings in a traditional mode, the Caravaggisti often aimed for the effect of his style, as seen here in the studies by Rutilio Manetti and Francesco Rustici.

Michelangelo Merisi, known as Caravaggio (1571–1610)
***Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, ca. 1595**
Oil on canvas
Galleria Borghese, Rome

Scipione Borghese and the Galleria Borghese

Since 1607 Caravaggio's *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* has been part of the Borghese collection, housed from 1613 in the beautiful villa that is today the Galleria Borghese. The collection rests upon the works amassed and commissioned by Cardinal Scipione Borghese (1577–1633). Following the ascent of his uncle to the papal throne as Paul V in 1605, Borghese became an ambitious—even rapacious—collector. He acquired, for example, seventy-one paintings from Cardinal Paolo Emilio Sfondrato in 1607, including Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* (ca. 1515–16) and *Portrait of Julius II* (1545–46), and organized the removal of Raphael's *Deposition* (1507) from the convent of San Francesco a Prato in Perugia under cover of night in 1608. The cardinal also commissioned a remarkable series of sculptures from Gian Lorenzo Bernini. One of his greatest coups, however, was the confiscation of more than one hundred paintings from the studio of the painter Giuseppe Cesari, known as the Cavaliere d'Arpino. These included several early works by Caravaggio, including the *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*. Caravaggio had painted the work around 1595, when he was employed in Cesari's studio, producing canvases to sell on the open art market then newly developed in Rome.

Top and bottom: Galleria Borghese, Rome. Photos: Courtesy Galleria Borghese.

Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680)
***Portrait of Cardinal Scipione Borghese*, ca. 1632**
Red chalk over graphite
The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan, 1909; IV, 176

When commissioned to execute a portrait, Bernini would ask his sitters to converse, having them talk, move, and gesture while he made sketches, such as this famous example. The cardinal's lips are parted in speech, and the redrawn lines of his profile also suggest movement. The drawing was done in preparation for Bernini's marble portrait of Scipione Borghese, but it is not a precise model for the bust; it is instead an effort to capture the cardinal's character and likeness. Although Bernini likely produced similar drawings for all his portraits, this is one of only two such "speaking sketches" to survive, presumably kept because of Scipione's importance.

Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Portrait of Scipione Borghese* (first version), 1632. Marble. Galleria Borghese, Rome. Photo: Courtesy Galleria Borghese.

Attributed to Marco d'Oggiono (ca. 1467–1524)
***Girl with Cherries*, ca. 1491–95**
Oil on panel
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Marquand Collection, gift of Henry G. Marquand, 1890

The lasting influence of Leonardo da Vinci dominated painting in Milan in the sixteenth century, an impact that is evident in this work by one of Leonardo's close followers, perhaps Marco d'Oggiono. Richly dressed, crowned with ivy, and wearing an inscrutable smile reminiscent of the *Mona Lisa*, the young woman in the painting has at times been considered an image of Pomona, the Roman goddess of fruit, although it may also be a wedding portrait, for ivy was a symbol of marital fidelity. Both this ambiguity of subject matter and the naturalistic technique were lessons Caravaggio learned during his artistic training in Milan.

Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1527–1593)
***Four Seasons in One Head*, ca. 1590**
Oil on panel
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Paul Mellon Fund

The combination of naturalism, still-life detail, physiognomic study, and allegorical portraiture that can be seen in the works of Leonardo and his followers in early sixteenth-century Milan was taken in unexpected, fantastic directions by Arcimboldo, who invented a type of portrait composed *of* still-life elements. Arcimboldo spent much of his career in Prague, working for the Holy Roman Emperor, but around 1590 he returned to his native city of Milan. This painting dates to that moment, and it was much discussed by critics at the time, which was also just the moment when Caravaggio was an artist-in-training in the city. The seasons are represented by flowers (spring), grain and cherries (summer), grapes and apples (autumn), and the gnarled trunk and bare branches (winter).

Annibale Carracci (1560–1609)
***A Boy Drinking*, ca. 1583**
Oil on canvas
Private collection

Just as painters in Milan were exploring the limits of naturalism, so too the Carracci family of Bologna invented a new kind of painting toward the end of the sixteenth century, based on the close observation of the natural world. This included the depiction not only of gods, saints, and allegorical figures but also of "ordinary" subjects such as butchers in their shop or a boy drinking with flushed cheeks and an open shirt. A work like this demonstrates that naturalism did not require a precise finish but could instead be conveyed through rougher brushwork that seems to capture the world in a forthright, spontaneous, and almost unmediated depiction.

Simone Peterzano (1540–1599)
***Head of a Bearded Man*, ca. 1580–90**
Black and white chalk on blue paper
Collection of Elizabeth and Jean-Marie Eveillard

Born in Bergamo and trained in Venice, Peterzano moved to Milan in the 1570s and quickly became one of the leading painters in the city—for which reason, he was the artist chosen to serve as the master of the aspiring young painter Michelangelo Merisi. Peterzano worked in a very traditional manner and made extensive use of drawings to study elements for his paintings. He surely trained Caravaggio to work in this manner as well, though famously, Caravaggio would reject the practice of preparatory drawings and would instead work directly on the canvas, seeking thus a more direct observation of the world. This typical example of Peterzano's draftsmanship is in the style he used in the 1580s when Caravaggio was his pupil, although it has not been connected to a specific painting.

Giuseppe Cesari, known as the Cavaliere d'Arpino (1568–1640)
***Study of a Young Man*, ca. 1594–95**
Black chalk
The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of Janos Scholz; 1979.47

During his first years in Rome, around 1595, Caravaggio spent time in the workshop of Giuseppe Cesari, and this drawing has been linked to one of Cesari's projects from that period, an *Adoration of the Shepherds* fresco in the Aldobrandini chapel at S. Maria in Via. Cesari's drawing is a powerful but sensitive study of anatomy, and one can imagine that a painting like Caravaggio's *Sick Bacchus* responds to figures like this in the work of his one-time master—despite the very different end results of the two artists.

Caravaggio, *Self-Portrait as Bacchus* (known as the *Sick Bacchus*), ca. 1596. Oil on canvas. Galleria Borghese, Rome. Photo: Mauro Coen © Galleria Borghese.

Cristofano Allori (1577–1621)
***Head of a Youth in a Hat*, ca. 1600–1610**
Red chalk
Tobey Collection, New York

Cristofano Allori was the son of Alessandro Allori, who led one of the most important painting workshops in Florence in the later sixteenth century, but Cristofano rejected the academic and self-conscious precision of his father's Mannerist style and, like other artists of his generation, chose instead to embrace a more straightforward naturalism. The *Head of a Youth in a Hat* has the frank immediacy found in the work of other early Baroque masters like Caravaggio and Annibale Carracci: as the inscription at lower right reveals, this study was once believed to be by Carracci himself.

Rutilio Manetti (1571–1639)
***A Life Study: A Monk Sleeping Against a Pile of Books*, ca. 1616**
Red chalk
The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased on the Fairfax Murray Society Fund; 2019.102

The leading artist in Siena in the early seventeenth century, Rutilio Manetti was trained by Francesco Vanni, who instilled in him an admiration for the work of the Carracci—above all for their practice of basing paintings on drawings of live models. Manetti was also, however, the first artist in Siena to emulate Caravaggio's still more radical naturalism. These multiple influences are manifest in this study, preparatory for Manetti's altarpiece of *The Death of the Blessed Antonio Patrizi*. Although there are some minor changes from drawing to painting, Manetti's altarpiece includes a depiction of Patrizi that is unmistakably based on this drawing of a studio assistant dressed in monastic robes and apparently asleep against a stack of books.

Rutilio Manetti, *The Death of the Blessed Antonio Patrizi*, 1616. Oil on canvas. Church of Sant'Agostino, Monticiano.

Francesco Rustici, called Rustichino (1592–1626)
***Head of a Youth*, ca. 1620**
Black and white chalk on light brown paper
The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of Janos Scholz; 1979.50

Along with Rutilio Manetti, Rustichino was responsible for bringing Caravaggesque style into Sienese painting, particularly after spending time in Rome, where he studied the works not only of Caravaggio but also of Caravaggio's first generation of followers. As in Caravaggio's paintings and in drawings by other Caravaggesque artists, Rustichino's study highlights the fiction of art: this is a study for a painting showing young acolytes praying with St. Luigi Gonzaga (1568–1591), but the drawing is also clearly a portrait of a real-life model.

Bartolomeo Cavarozzi (1587–1625)
***Basket of Fruit*, ca. 1620**
Oil on canvas
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, bequest of Errol M. Rudman, 2020

While the naturally painted still life was a central element of Caravaggio's *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, Caravaggio also created one of the first pure still-life paintings, with no figural subject: his *Basket of Fruit*, now at the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan. It is unlikely that Cavarozzi knew that painting directly, for it had been taken to Milan in the first years of the century when Cavarozzi was still a youth, but it is not hard to imagine that others in Rome, such as Cavarozzi's patron Marchese Giovanni Battista Crescenzi, remem-bered the work and suggested the subject to the younger artist.

Caravaggio, *Basket of Fruit*, ca. 1597–1600. Oil on canvas. Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan. Photo: Mauro Ranzani © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana / Mondadori Portfolio.