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**Self Destruction or Self Promotion? Violence, Sexuality, and Decorum in
Caravaggio's Religious Works**

A Thesis Presented

by

Danielle Patrice Cipolla

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Danielle Patrice Cipolla

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the
Master of Arts degree, hereby recommend
acceptance of this thesis.

Joseph Monteyne – Thesis Advisor
Assistant Professor, Department of Art

Anita Moskowitz – Chairperson of Defense
Professor, Department of Art

This thesis is accepted by the Graduate School

Lawrence Martin
Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract of the Thesis

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The artist Caravaggio has infused some of his religious paintings with intense brutality and perverse sexuality, at times provoking shock and rejection in the social milieu of early modern Rome. The focus of this thesis is the variety of interpretations prompted by these paintings and their ability to transcend the boundaries between the sacred and profane. In order to reconcile the seemingly disparate concepts of violence, sexuality, and deep religiosity I have made use of a variety of sources that range from the accounts of contemporary biographers of the artist to monographs and articles written by modern art historians and theorists. The conclusion of this thesis is that Caravaggio intentionally endowed his paintings with ambiguities that deny a single interpretation and work to cultivate his notorious persona.

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Self Destruction or Self Promotion? Violence, Sexuality, and Decorum in Caravaggio's Religious Works

I. Introduction

The artist Caravaggio has infused some of his religious paintings with intense brutality and perverse sexuality, at times provoking shock and rejection in the social milieu of early modern Rome. The focus of this study is the variety of interpretations prompted by these paintings and their ability to transcend the boundaries between the sacred and profane. Moreover, the issue of spectatorship and how the meaning of a painting is affected by the presence of a painted figure who directly addresses the viewer is also considered, as well as the significance of the artist including his self portrait as a historical or biblical actor within the larger narrative scheme. In order to reconcile the seemingly disparate concepts of violence, sexuality, and deep religiosity I have made use of a variety of sources that range from the accounts of contemporary biographers of the artist to monographs and articles written by modern art historians and theorists. As I hope to demonstrate by a close reading of the paintings, as well as a critical consideration of previous scholars' observations and analyses, Caravaggio intentionally endowed his paintings with ambiguities that deny a single interpretation and work to cultivate his notorious persona.

II. The Cruelty of Sacrifice

The biblical story depicted by Caravaggio in *The Sacrifice of Isaac* alludes to the story in Genesis of the elderly Abraham and his wife Sarah who waited for many years for the birth of their son Isaac, promised to them by God. Sarah did not conceive Isaac until she was ninety years old and both parents loved him not only because his birth was a miracle, but also simply because they had desired a son for so long. Yet, as a test of Abraham's faith, God demanded that his only son Isaac be sacrificed as a burnt offering in His honor on Mount Moriah, which was a three-day journey from the town. Without revealing his intentions to Sarah or Isaac, Abraham set off to do as God had bid him. Only once during their voyage did Isaac question his father about their lack of a sacrificial lamb, to which Abraham replied that God would supply it when the time came. Upon arriving at the site preordained by God, Abraham set up wood for his offering, bound Isaac, and placed him on a makeshift stone altar to slit his neck. However, just before Isaac's blood was to be spilt, an angel of God cried out to Abraham from above proclaiming that God had only been testing his loyalty to Him. Instead, He provided a ram whose horns were caught in a thicket to be sacrificed in Isaac's place. For Abraham's unquestioning faith, God promised that he would be the father of many more children and would be prosperous in the future.

Caravaggio has chosen to depict this story in his painting (figure 1) at the height of the narrative action in which Abraham holds down Isaac, the knife poised by his throat. The angel appears behind Abraham and firmly holds the wrist that clutches the knife and with his other hand points to the sacrificial ram. The diagonal line from the angel's arm to Abraham's hand to Isaac's head is powerful and adds to the drama of the

scene. Abraham looks back at him with a confused determination, frozen in the moment just before he was to commit the horrendous act of slitting the throat of his own son. Caravaggio has depicted the figures close to the picture plane to heighten the psychological intensity and emotional drama of his figures with emphasis given to their facial expressions and gestures. Behind the figures is the dark outline of trees and foliage, and further in the distance a vista opens up that displays a town, other mountains, and the sky beyond. Isaac lies presumably nude and partially on his stomach on the stone altar with his hands bound behind him, a dreadfully agonizing look on his face, and a moan appears to emit from his open mouth. Since his father's hand and body restrains Isaac, he is helpless to free himself from this uncomfortable and life threatening situation. Instead, it appears that he has contorted his body in a feeble attempt to twist free drawing his backside and legs upward in resistance to his father's steady grip. His pained eyes engage the viewer directly, seeming to plead with him or her to intervene on his behalf. Abraham tightly grips both the knife and his son over whom he is hunched. His jaw is firmly set and his eyebrows furrow as though he is reluctant to take what the angel says to be the truth. Much as he grips Isaac, the angel grips Abraham's wrist restraining his intended action. The relationship between these figures is thoroughly explored by the artist who gives prominence to where they physically overlap, which develops their spatial connection, as well as their integration within the narrative.

Caravaggio's violent and sexualized treatment of certain biblical stories in some of his paintings certainly calls for a variety of interpretations. His treatment of biblical subject matter in paintings like *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, *David with the Head of Goliath*, *St. Matthew and an Angel*, *The Doubting Thomas*, and *St. John the Baptist* is infused with

the seemingly strange combination of violence, sex, and deep religiosity. Paintings such as these are the focus of this study, and their ability to transcend boundaries and push the limits of what was considered acceptable in Counter Reformation imagery will be examined throughout the course of this paper. Shared by these works, and characteristic of many of Caravaggio's others, is a sense of bringing the religious subject down to earth, grounding them in contemporary reality, and humanizing religious figures through the use of familiar and mundane features and gestures. When compared to paintings of similar subjects by other artists, Caravaggio's work demonstrates both departures from and concessions to the conventional that may prove to be revealing of his artistic motivations. Also significant for the comprehension of these particular religious paintings is an examination of Caravaggio's other related works that take up similar themes or make use of the same models. A broader look at Caravaggio's social milieu in early modern Italy, including the level of violence in society, the reaction to sexuality and homosexuality, and how his work was received, seems pertinent, as well. Furthermore, digressions into Caravaggio's troubled and violent life can, at times, give insights to the psychological makeup of his work. Altogether, as will become clear, many different factors need to be examined to gain a more complete understanding of these works.

For example, though violence is an inherent part of the story of *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, Howard Hibbard, accredited author of a monograph about Caravaggio, has noted of the artist's work that, "his interpretation seems unnecessarily cruel."¹ We can see that Isaac not only has his hands bound and twisted behind his back, he is also held in place by Abraham's hand that secures the back of his neck with his thumb digging painfully into Isaac's cheek. Since Isaac is being held flat on his stomach, he has little chance for

¹ Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1983), 166.

escape, as Abraham seems to have anticipated the struggle and positioned his son so that he would be most helpless to resist. The pathetic look on Isaac's face and his gaping mouth indicate how vulnerable he must feel and the shock of being handled so roughly by his own father. Adding to the tension is the fact that Abraham has not loosened his grip on Isaac despite the angel's declaration that his sacrifice would no longer be necessary. Abraham looks utterly intent on carrying through with his promise to kill Isaac. His upright knife glints in the sun and looks ready to do the job. Its central position in the composition and closeness to the picture plane suggests that the viewer is somehow also at risk to Abraham's violence, and perhaps serves as a warning to those who feel sympathy with Isaac and wish to help him.

Additionally, Isaac seems to be appealing to the viewer seeking some kind of response by making direct eye contact. In his contribution to Florike Egmond and Robert Zwijnenberg's book *Bodily Extremities*, which underscores the way the early modern preoccupation with the body is manifested in the epoch's art, Harald Hendrix discusses the phenomena of the tortured subject of a painting making eye contact with the viewer. Specifically referencing Jusepe de Ribera's depictions of *The Martyrdom of St. Bartholomew* (figure 2) and *Apollo and Marsyas* (figure 3), he writes of the unsettling and horrific effects the piercing gaze of those depicted suffering painful torment produced in the viewers of an art that maximized the pain of pain. He concludes that artists who use these devices in their paintings "consciously explore the outer limits of what art is able to accomplish," and "in showing that a skillful imitation has the power to make even repulsive things attractive, they not only conform to an ancient Aristotelian concept and show off their own qualities, they also emphasize the power of artistic

representation as such.”² Caravaggio makes use of this device in his painting with the realistically depicted, yet horrific, expression on Isaac’s face directly confronting the viewer, drawing him or her in, and giving Isaac a real sense of presence.

As Isaac’s eyes desperately seek out the gaze of the viewer, or anyone who may be willing to help him, it also seems that this stimulates the viewer to form a connection with him. The art historian Robert Mills discusses such occurrences by examining images in which the gaze of tortured martyrs is directed beyond the confines of the pictorial surface. Upon making eye contact, the viewer is invited to identify with the tortured body, which “encapsulates the fantasy that pain is transferable and that it can be shared” so that the pain could be symbolically relocated onto them.³ Though experiencing pain is not something that would reasonably be thought of as desirable, in the case of Christian martyrs the pain and suffering experienced by the earthly body would give way over time to a spiritually-derived pleasure granted by God for having endured such torment for the sake of one’s faith. However, though the viewer may wish to experience some of the martyr’s pain thereby reaping his rewards, Mills points out that this “functions as a space of fantasy that enables the beholder to enjoy the pleasures of recognition, self-affirmation and belief that experiences of pain offer, while not threatening the beholder’s body in actuality.”⁴ In this way, the viewer is allowed to also derive some pleasure from this kind of viewing, as he or she can perhaps share Isaac’s

² Harald Hendrix, “The Repulsive Body: Images of Torture in Seventeenth-Century Naples,” in *Bodily Extremities: Preoccupations with the Human Body in Early Modern European Culture*, ed. Florike Egmond and Robert Zwijnenberg (England: Ashgate, 2003), 90.

³ Robert Mills, “Of Martyrs and Men,” in *Suspended Animation: Pain, Pleasure, and Punishment In Medieval Culture* (London: Reaktion, 2005), 162.

⁴ Mills, “Of Martyrs and Men,” 169.

pain, but in such a limited way that he or she is in no danger of actual physical pain. The rest of Caravaggio's figures are involved with each other and pay the viewer no mind, yet Isaac's attention makes it seem as though we are also bearing witness to the scene. His gaze implies our spectatorship and the burden of responsibility. Are we to stand back and allow the life of this young boy to be taken? However, Abraham's knife serves as a potent reminder of what may happen to those who try to interfere.

When speaking of this work Hibbard also points out that, "Isaac has become little more than an animal sacrifice."⁵ Important is the proximity of Isaac's head to that of the ram that will be his surrogate for the sacrifice. Since they are visually equated with one another their surrogate relationship is made clear with the ram in effect saving Isaac's life. René Girard argues that acts of human sacrifice and the use of animals as surrogate victims in religious ceremonies was necessary for primitive societies, serving as an outlet for pent up violent impulses so that these would not be unleashed in an uncontrolled way that would risk societal self-destruction. Girard cites a discussion by Joseph de Maistre indicating that sacrificial animals were chosen specifically for their similarity to the humans whose place they would be taking, and this resemblance was essential for the sacrifice to carry meaning and not merely be senseless slaughter. He writes that these animals were "the gentlest, most innocent creatures, whose habits and instincts brought them most closely into harmony with man."⁶ The ram in Caravaggio's paintings seems to embody this notion as he literally sticks his neck out for Isaac, as he stretches himself protectively over Isaac's head and gazes up at Abraham as though trying to get his

⁵ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 166.

⁶ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977), 2-3.

attention. Interestingly, Girard's argument indicates the essential link between violence and religion, as it was the responsibility of sacred rites to determine legitimate displays of aggression.

The violence of Caravaggio's painting becomes especially apparent when compared with Rembrandt's handling of the same subject (figure 4). Rembrandt shows Abraham with a hand covering Isaac's face, tilting his head back to reveal his neck, but also so he does not have to look upon his face when performing the task God required of him. Also telling is the facial expression of Rembrandt's Abraham, who seems genuinely shocked and upset as though realizing how close he had been to taking the life of his son. Art historian Michael Zell reflects that Rembrandt's painting focuses more on Abraham's inner struggle and spiritual anguish with an "emphasis on the patriarch's profound, blind faith."⁷ Another point of contrast between Caravaggio and Rembrandt's version of *The Sacrifice of Isaac* is Abraham's knife. In Rembrandt's painting Abraham does not have a steady grip on the knife, as was the case in Caravaggio's depiction. Instead, Abraham has released his hold of the knife, immediately after the angel has grabbed his wrist and administered the warning to stop. The knife is shown frozen in mid air in the process of falling with Abraham's open hand still directly above it. This suggests that Abraham's grip on it was never very tight, which may signify that he was not resolved to completing the sacrifice, as well as suggesting the burden of having to make such a decision and the relief of having that burden lifted. Likewise, in Donatello's sculpture (figure 5), Abraham seems ready to carry out the deed with his knife resting near Isaac's neck, but he has his head turned up and away from the sight of his son, so that he does not have to

⁷ Michael Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 190.

look at him when performing God's command. Caravaggio's Abraham does not show such concern or sadness about the upcoming loss of his son. Instead he appears stern and stubbornly set on sacrificing his son.

Another noticeable difference between Caravaggio's painting and those of other artists is that many tend to characterize Isaac as more accepting of his fate to be a sacrifice. Paintings by Jacopo da Empoli (figure 6) and Lodovico Cigoli (figure 7) both depict Isaac with hands bound, but there seems to be little need for this. Isaac rests upright on the altar with little intervention from Abraham, whose hand merely rests on his son, seemingly only to steady him, not restrain him. In the painting by Jacopo da Empoli, Isaac gazes skyward perhaps praying to God, while in the painting by Lodovico Cigoli Isaac's head is bowed over in silent contemplation of his fate. These depictions of a composed Isaac, who exhibits self-control and acceptance, seem to add to the devotional quality of the images. They indicate that this is a family that trusts in God and each other and possesses a deep unshakable, spirituality. They invite the viewer to forget about the upcoming death of Isaac, and instead consider Abraham and Isaac's commitment to God. Caravaggio, however, ensures that the viewer does not gloss over the technicalities of the story and realize that this was an instance in which a father intended to murder his son in the name of God without the compliance of Isaac. In Caravaggio's painting the twisting body and tortured face of Isaac are a testimony to the real struggle that would have taken place if the events of this story were carried out. While the depiction of Isaac's suffering may take away from the sacred atmosphere of the painting, it does however, serve to ground Caravaggio's work in the real. It just seems more credible that a young boy in Isaac's position would behave in this manner, marking

Caravaggio's commitment to emotional truth, violent though it may be, as well as the truthfulness of portraying a model realistically.

Of course, violent themes were not new to Caravaggio. Abraham's near cutting of Isaac's throat recalls several of Caravaggio's other paintings that take the act of cutting a throat one step further to full-blown beheading. The paintings *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, *Medusa*, *David and Goliath*, *The Death of St. John the Baptist*, and *Salome with the Head of St. John the Baptist* all deal with the recently beheaded, with great emphasis put on the spurt of blood that either sprays or drips from the severed neck. Hibbard observes that these "decapitated heads with their streaming blood and horror-stricken faces also belong to Caravaggio's private world of fears and fantasies," decapitation being symbolically equated with the fear of castration.⁸ In contrast to these paintings in which the beheading has already been completed or is in the process of being carried out, in *The Sacrifice of Isaac* decapitation remains a distant threat, but that threat seems to lurk in the painting nonetheless. All these paintings seem to elicit an enjoyment in viewing the replication of violence, yet "the representation of violence is frozen, and the scene is enjoyed, visually, at a distance, purified of the disorder that was its promise, the source of its appeal."⁹ Thus, as the viewer is thwarted by Caravaggio's scenes of violent beheadings, in which the events are distant from the viewer, in *The Sacrifice of Isaac* the violent act never progresses beyond the threat, leaving the viewer equally unsatisfied. Not only is the painting frozen in mid-action, but those who know the story also know that no harm will come to Abraham and Isaac.

⁸ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 69.

⁹ Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Caravaggio's Secrets* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1998), 93.

III. The Artist as Victim and Witness to Violence

In Caravaggio's painting *David and Goliath* (figure 8) the recent aftermath of a violent beheading is the subject and emphasis of the painting. The biblical theme is a fairly standard one, having been portrayed many times by Renaissance and early modern artists. The story comes from the first book of Samuel and describes how the young handsome shepherd, David, in the course of bringing bread to his older brothers, who were engaged in the Israelite conflict with the Philistines, witnessed taunting by the nine foot tall Goliath. Angered that Goliath had on a daily basis insulted the Israelites and their God without contestation, and hearing about the wealth the commander King Saul would bestow on anyone who brought the giant down, young David decided to accept his challenge. Saul dressed David in his own armor, but David declined them since he was not used to them and instead went into battle with nothing but a staff, his sling, and a few stones. But most importantly, David knew he had the support of God, who had previously delivered him from lions and bears who had attacked his flock of sheep. Once engaged in combat with Goliath, David slung a stone into the giant's forehead causing him to fall facedown to the earth. Then David took Goliath's own sword, killed him with it, and decapitated him so that he could present the head to Saul. Meanwhile, the Philistines had started to retreat since their great hero was dead, and the Israelites pursued them to victory. David would go on to become a great warrior for the Israelites, leading them to many victories with the support of God, and he eventually became their king.

In his painting Caravaggio has depicted none of the self confidence, or even perhaps arrogance, that David is described with in the Bible. Instead, David is shown with a somewhat sorrowful, contemplative expression on his face as he knits his brow

and gazes at the severed head of the giant, which he holds at arm's length by the hair. That he has only recently killed Goliath is evident by the fact that David still holds the sword in his right hand and blood streams profusely from the neck of the severed head. The expression on the decapitated head is one of receding agony captured as the life of the giant ebbs away. His brow is still knitted and his mouth hangs open, perhaps after emitting his last groan of pain, and his eyes are out of focus and slightly glazed, clearly containing no more life. A real sense of the weight of the head is communicated by the artist, since David does not hold it out level with his sightline, but instead the heaviness of the head has caused his arm to sag and his gaze follows it downward. The dramatic focus of the painting is heightened because David is shown fairly close up, only from the groin upward. It is also focused by the dark background that is only broken by the head of Goliath and the figure of David, whose arm nearly disappears entirely into the blackness and whose face remains partially obscured by shadows. This focusing in on only the two main figures with no background distractions encourages the viewer to identify with the emotional content of the painting and to contemplate the young hero, who presumably ponders death and the murderous act he has just committed. The supple treatment of David is notable and arguably sexually suggestive. He wears a classical garment that leaves one of his shoulders bare revealing his softly toned upper body. The garment bunches up at the cinched waist suggestively forming a phallic-like appendage while the sword seems to point directly to his groin. Additionally, the way Caravaggio has painted the highlights on the glinting blade of the sword suggests that there was some emphasis intended in this area.

Adding to the ambiguity of this image, Caravaggio has painted his own self-

portrait (compare to figures 9 and 10) on the head of Goliath, likening himself to the monstrous giant, opposed to God and victim of the violence of David. This move on the part of the artist to represent himself as a dripping severed head with a facial expression marked by the throes of death has invoked a myriad of interpretations as to the precise meaning of this work. Laurie Schneider has investigated the erotic overtones of biblical stories and artistic representations of them by analyzing them psychoanalytically in her article about decapitation. She argues that in stories like the account of John the Baptist's death and decapitation at the request of Salome's mother Herodias or the apocryphal account of the beheading of Holofernes by Judith there is a gender dynamic in which these females, through their sexual prowess, were capable of decapitating, and symbolically castrating, their male counterparts. She continues that "the erotic potential of a story in which one man decapitates another," the scenario of the story of David and Goliath, has "been less widely acknowledged," but presumably in some artistic depictions of this subject, like Caravaggio's, the erotic overtones that characterize the conflicts between the male and female actors in other stories of decapitation are still explored.¹⁰ Combining her theory with Manili's statement that the figure of David was a portrait of the artist's "Caravaggino," interpreted as a term indicating Caravaggio's young lover, Schneider implies that Caravaggio unconsciously imposed his fears about their relationship onto the characters in this story, in which his lover/David symbolically castrates him/Goliath.

Creighton Gilbert attempts to move the interpretation of this work away from heavily theoretical arguments of psychoanalysis and ground it in the probable intentions

¹⁰ Laurie Schneider, "Donatello and Caravaggio: The Iconography of Decapitation," *American Imago* 33 (1976): 77.

of Caravaggio in his book about the artist. He argues of theories like the one proposed by Schneider that, “regardless of their validity, for a plausible reading they do at least need to be supplemented with factors the seventeenth-century artist might have been conscious of, because he [Caravaggio] certainly had some intent.”¹¹ Thus, Gilbert rightly attempts to situate Caravaggio’s motivations within the context of his life and historical setting. He maintains that the decapitated head of Holofernes for Caravaggio was likely building on Michelangelo’s inclusion of his self-portraits on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the guise of Holofernes or on the flayed Bartholomew. He lists several other instances where artists have included self-portraits on figures who, like Goliath, do not necessarily possess traits that one would normally wish to associate with oneself. He concludes that in this context, where Caravaggio could have been just adding his face to a long line of other artists who made use of this motif, perhaps no further explanation of his motivations is needed. In this way, Caravaggio could be attempting to paint his way into the company of great masters like Michelangelo by making a claim to his own greatness, or he could be simply emulating the formula of another artist that he greatly admired and with whom he shared his name. In either case, this form of artistic “quotation” seems to have been the primary motivation for Caravaggio to paint himself as Goliath.

John Varriano offers an alternative explanation for the meaning behind Caravaggio’s painting of *David and Goliath* in his book. Presuming that this painting was produced when the artist was in exile from Rome after having killed Ranuccio Tomassoni, Varriano argues that this image was intended to win a pardon from Pope Borghese for his crime. He writes, “thus the work may have been conceived as a form of

¹¹ Creighton Gilbert, *Caravaggio and His Two Cardinals* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 25.

pictorial penance addressed to the pope, who held the painter's fate in his hands."¹²

Therefore, according to this interpretation, it would seem that Caravaggio would be literally offering the pope his head in return for his forgiveness and a pardon, and the reason the artist painted his own portrait on the head of a man such as Goliath would be to admit to his guilt and sin; as the giant acted in an unchristian and hence barbaric manner, so too did Caravaggio. Along similar lines is Hibbard's stronger statement that Caravaggio's rendering himself as Goliath is "an explicit self-identification with Evil," that implies a "wish for punishment."¹³ Hibbard cited both Caravaggio's murderous action, as well as his supposed sexual transgressions as the reason for Caravaggio's guilt, since both violence and sexual innuendoes are included within this painting. He attributes the sad, contemplative look of David to the artist's fear that he was, at this point in his life, beyond salvation. However, it would likely have been difficult for the pope or anyone else to decipher the message of this painting correctly along the lines that Varriano and Hibbard have put forward. If this image was, in fact, intended to demonstrate Caravaggio's penitance for his sinful actions and that his return from exile depended on this, one would think that the artist would not invest the work with so much ambiguity, thus obscuring the clarity of his intended message.

Art historian David Stone, however, contests the interpretation of the image as penitent entirely, instead arguing that stylistically it appears to have been painted before Caravaggio's exile in the year 1606 while he still resided in Rome. He contends that Caravaggio probably appropriated the composition of the painting from a statue of *Apollo*

¹² John Varriano, *Caravaggio: The Art of Realism* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 83.

¹³ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 262.

with the Flayed Skin and Head of Marsyas (figure 11) that was owned by the Marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani, the great patron of Caravaggio, and definitely viewed by the artist who had at one point resided in his household. The sculpted figure of Apollo does resemble Caravaggio's David in the downward tilt of the head, the serious facial expression, and especially in the contrapposto stance defined both by the round curve of the left hip and the jutting out of the right leg away from the body. The figure of Apollo also holds a head at arms length but he holds it higher than Caravaggio's David and does not appear to gaze at it. Perhaps it was the intention of Caravaggio to lower the arm of his figure so that his gaze would meet the severed head, while still closely emulating the pose of the statue. The consequences of giving this work a Roman date indicates, according to Stone, that in the context of his everyday residence, his circle of friends and patrons would more easily be able to decipher the work's "allusions, conceits, homoerotic in-jokes, and persona-building," although they are puzzling to viewers today.¹⁴ The issue of context and for whom the painting was intended is a crucial question to understanding the meaning of any painting, and Stone's argument about the work's production in Rome is attractive, given the existence of a probable model on which Caravaggio based his David. Yet, it seems a stretch on the part of the author to write off the homosexual implications of the painting as nothing more than a "joke," given the number of works by Caravaggio that are pervaded by similar sexual allusions.

Stone also doubts, given what is known about Caravaggio's personality, whether he would actually be remorseful enough about his actions to include a painted apology in this work. Nor does he accept the notion favored by Hibbard that the artist

¹⁴David M. Stone, "Self and Myth in Caravaggio's *David and Goliath*," in *Caravaggio: Realism, Rebellion, Reception*, ed. Genevieve Warwick (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2006) 39.

subconsciously, or otherwise, identified himself with the figure of Goliath out of some need to be punished for a life of sin. He writes, “the shocking quality of his work – his so-called identification with death and evil – is not “bubbling up” from some repressed area of his personality,” but instead, “Caravaggio is very much in control of his discourse here.”¹⁵ Stone implies that the need to display originality in both painting and personality may have been one of the artist’s primary concerns, and one that is visually manifested in this work. To claim that Caravaggio self-consciously manipulated his persona and formed his own mythology, instead of it being forced upon him by his biographers and critics, is to give the artist the kind of agency that perhaps he deserves, given the hidden innuendo and wit that he has incorporated in his paintings. He concludes that the artist’s active involvement in creating his self image, “does not mean, of course, that a psychoanalytical inquiry into the artist and his work would not be fruitful, but it suggests that we need to consider a different set of symptoms – his arrogance, narcissism, and playfulness – rather than fixations on death and decapitation.”¹⁶ In all likelihood, a number of these factors were probably in play when Caravaggio created the *David and Goliath* painting.

Interestingly, it seems that Caravaggio has included his self-portrait in various guises in many of his paintings. Relevant to this discussion is Caravaggio’s inclusion of himself at the martyrdom of St. Matthew, as well as, the betrayal of Christ, and symbolically at the beheading of St. John the Baptist. In the Martyrdom of St. Matthew (figure 12) Caravaggio can be seen to the left of the central group with the saint and his supposed killer, appearing to exit the scene but also looking backwards at the main

¹⁵ Stone, “Self and Myth,” 38.

¹⁶ Stone, “Self and Myth,” 38.

action. He does not seem to react with shock and revulsion like some of the other figures and it does not seem as if he is leaving the scene out of fear, leading some art historians to conclude that this figure that bears the artist's portrait was likely a co-conspirator to the saint's murder. Hibbard has argued that the Caravaggio figure is actually meant to represent King Hirtacus, who called for St. Matthew to be killed after the saint voiced his disapproval of the king's marriage.¹⁷ Yet, art historian Thomas Puttfarcken has offered a more likely interpretation for the identities of the figures within the painting by closely examining the details and looking at the scene, "not as part of the traditional schemes of art history," where the most important part of the narrative would be compositionally delineated for the sake of the viewer's comprehension, "but as an accurate visual record of a real event [...] where we are asked to reconstruct, from the factual evidence available, a sequence of events which has led to the scene taking place in front of our eyes."¹⁸

He asserts that the central figure who holds the sword above St. Matthew is not his murderer, but one of the neophytes, of which there are two others, who was about to be baptized by the saint. The near nudity of these figures set them apart from all the others who are fully clothed, more appropriate for their location within a church setting. Puttfarcken also points out that this lack of clothing of the would-be murderer contrasts with the written account from the *Golden Legend*, a book containing a collection of apocryphal accounts of the lives of the saints, that specified that the king's soldiers were responsible for killing the saint. Instead, he has pinned the murder on the four men,

¹⁷ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 108.

¹⁸ Thomas Puttfarcken, "Caravaggio's 'Story of St. Matthew': A Challenge to the Conventions of Painting," *Art History* 21, no. 2 (June 1998): 176,179.

including Caravaggio, who are armed with swords and hurriedly exit the scene, noting that one of these figures appears to be putting his sword back into his sheath, as though he has just used it and no longer has need for it. Most important to this discussion, however, is that the figure with Caravaggio's facial features not only glances backwards, but also leaves his outstretched hand trailing behind him as though he has forgotten something; the sword that the central figure now holds in his hand. These details, easily overlooked by a cursory viewing of this painting, indicate that Caravaggio has depicted himself as the murderer of St. Matthew, and is reminiscent of the artist's self depiction as the murderous giant in his painting of *David and Goliath*. Though he occupies a less visible position, nearly lost behind the action radiating out from the dying saint at the center of the composition, the artist has still arguably given himself a prominent role in the story as the catalyst to the saint's martyrdom.

In the painting of *The Betrayal of Christ* (Figure 13), Caravaggio is not assigned a prominent role in the story, but he does appear as a curious bystander amidst the soldiers that are grabbing ahold of Christ. He is the figure at the right of the composition who holds up a lantern to illuminate the action, perhaps securing himself a better view. As was the case in the previously discussed work, this figure is also irreputable as he is eager to gawk at the seizure of Christ and quick to take advantage of someone else's misery to satisfy his own curiosity. He looks as though he has pushed his way into the group of soldiers, since he is the only figure at the right side of the composition who does not wear a soldier's uniform, and he appears as though he has stood on his toes to see around them with his head craning forward and mouth hung agape. This figure provides a stark contrast to the one on the left who runs away from the scene with his hands outspread and

raised above his head and with his mouth open in a cry of terror. This bystander, like the figure in the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* painting, bears witness to important biblical events. Though compositionally these figures do not stand out as the Goliath self portrait does, the artist's presence can still be felt in his work.

This presence can similarly be felt in Caravaggio's *Beheading of St. John the Baptist* (figure 14), though not through a self portrait; for in this painting the artist has signed his name in the spilt blood of the Baptist as it pools into a large puddle in the street. Though difficult to discern from a distance, this bloody signature, the only known one of his career, appears in the most prominent part of the painting in the foreground. This painting was commissioned by the Knights of Malta, to which Caravaggio briefly belonged before he was expelled. Therefore, his signature could be read as an indicator of the artist's desire to be incorporated within this group, and even to stand out prominently among its other members. Thus, Caravaggio has not only projected his presence at the time St. John was murdered, in fact he indicated that he was close enough to form his own name in the Baptist's draining life force; indeed, he also would continually be present in the Oratory of San Giovanni in La Valletta where the painting hung as an altarpiece under which criminal trials for deviant knights occasionally took place.¹⁹ It seemed very important for Caravaggio to reveal his presence, which was a decidedly self conscious act on the part of the artist, especially in these scenes marked by violence and death, and his insistence of this presence marks these four paintings.

Perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of Caravaggio's various self-portraits is that through them he has found a way to incorporate himself within historical or biblical narratives by making it appear as though he was actually an eyewitness to the

¹⁹ Varriano, *Caravaggio: The Art of Realism*, 49.

event. Therefore, in a move that is decidedly self-reflexive, he has taken on two roles in relation to his narrative paintings that include his own image; he is both the creator of the work of art, as well as a spectator to the event taking place before his eyes. For example, masterfully evoking the concept of *mis en abyme*, when Caravaggio stood before his own canvas he saw the events of St. Matthew's martyrdom, but he also saw his painted self seeing the events of the martyrdom. The same can be said of the artist's relationship to his painting of *The Betrayal of Christ*, in which his role as the spectator of the events within the painting aligns him with the actual viewer of the painting.

Though Caravaggio clearly was not present at the historical or biblical moments he represents in his paintings, the works act as a continuing testimony of his ability to create the truth, verified symbolically by his actual or implied presence in the painting at the event, which he has seen with his own eyes.²⁰ Therefore, Caravaggio wishes to insinuate to his viewers that just as the painted detail in his works are true to reality, so too is his representation of past events. Though this device is purely fictitious, it can shed light on Caravaggio's attitude towards his paintings that were rejected by patrons. It is almost as though he were claiming to possess authentic knowledge of the past as a safeguard against the kind of criticism that he faced, and perhaps this device was adopted by him to counteract the claims of his critics. Yet, the truth Caravaggio attempts to present is one of a different strain; it is truth produced without the classical definition of decorum. As the lack of decorum becomes the focus of the contemporary viewer because of its palpable deviation from the norm, these paintings work to deconstruct any notion of truth in art. Since it is not possible to possess a truthful understanding of past events,

²⁰ Catherine Puglisi, "Caravaggio's Life and *Lives* Over Four Centuries," in *Caravaggio: Realism, Rebellion, Reception*, ed. Genevieve Warwick (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2006) 24.

Caravaggio has revealed that no historical or biblical painting could possibly be completely truthful nor could the depiction of the subject be untainted by the interests of the painter. In this case, Caravaggio's inclusion of self-portraits in historical guises could also be read as indicating that no interpretation of the past should be favored over any other one, and thus, Caravaggio could be insinuating that the rejection of his paintings or anybody else's work on the basis of truth or decorum was unfair.

Likewise, Caravaggio has incorporated aspects of his world into these works, whether through contemporary costume mixed with historical garb, contemporary figures in the guise of biblical figures or as bystanders to historical events, or the atmosphere of violence that permeated early modern times being used to stand in for a historical period. The violence in Caravaggio's art is often connected to his violent and troubled personal life. Much of his biography is gleaned from court and police records that reveal that Caravaggio carried a sword with him at all times and was quick to draw it if he felt his honor was being questioned. He is cited, among many other incidents, as having thrown a plate of artichokes at a waiter after he made a snide comment in a restaurant, of throwing rocks at his landlady's house after she seized his property because of late rent, and of having killed a man in a duel over a wager that was owed from a tennis game. His life was constantly being interrupted by these infractions and subsequent exiles, as he moved around Italy frequently to avoid punishment. Writer Stephen Koch characterizes him as "a man whose life, in his maturity, was torn to pieces by violent and, it seems, entirely unmastered feelings of rage," and "although he subdued his furies in his convulsive art – one cannot imagine that art without his rage."²¹ However, in examining

²¹ Stephen Koch, "Caravaggio and the Unseen," in *Writers on Artists*, ed. Daniel Halpern (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1988), 74.

his biography, one should not overlook the fact that Caravaggio lived in the violent society of early modern Rome. Varriano suggests that, “given the clinical observation that underlay every other aspect of his art, it is unlikely he would have passed up the opportunity to portray the effects of violence firsthand,” so that his art contained an “empirical study of the violent world around him.”²²

In his characterization of Caravaggio’s milieu, Varriano describes violent acts that were perpetrated for honor and revenge, not for profit, and a penal system that emphasized retribution, not rehabilitation, which often took the form of public punishment that was infused with further violence.²³ As noted above, Caravaggio incorporated the violence and punitive practices he saw every day in Rome with the inherently violent Old Testament stories and the martyrdoms of the New Testament. For example, Varriano has noted that in Caravaggio’s painting of *David and Goliath*, the figure of David has assumed the position of a contemporary executioner holding up the head of a recently decapitated criminal so that it can be seen by the on-looking crowd. He argues that “anyone who had attended an execution could hardly fail to see the visual analogy between the two.”²⁴ In addition, the dreadful expression on the giant’s face could have been drawn from Caravaggio’s actual experience in closely examining the expressions of the recently beheaded at the executions he attended. Likewise, in the painting of *The Beheading of St. John* Caravaggio has included a contemporary prison building, as well as allusions to contemporary practices. The ropes hanging from the

²² Varriano, *Caravaggio: The Art of Realism*, 78.

²³ Varriano, *Caravaggio: The Art of Realism*, 76-78.

²⁴ Varriano, *Caravaggio: The Art of Realism*, 83.

building indicate the common practice of hanging criminals and then dismembering, or quartering, them postmortem, which would require both the sword and the knife possessed by St. John's executioner, and the additional detail of the old woman covering her ears adds a disturbing touch of reality by reminding the viewer of the horrific sounds that would accompany the searing of a sword through human flesh and bones.²⁵

Another way that Caravaggio incorporated his everyday reality into his art was by realistically depicting common people seemingly without idealization. One of his early biographers, Pietro Bellori, wrote about this saying that:

There is no question that Caravaggio advanced the art of painting because he came upon the scene at a time when realism was not much in fashion and when figures were made according to convention and manner and satisfied more the taste for gracefulness than for truth. Thus by avoiding all prettiness and vanity in his color, Caravaggio strengthened his tones and gave them blood and flesh. In this way he induced his fellow painters to work from nature... Moreover, he followed his model so slavishly that he did not take credit for even one brush stroke, but said that it was the work of nature. He repudiated every other precept and considered it the highest achievement in art not to be bound to the rules of art.²⁶

Though Bellori has surely exaggerated Caravaggio's desire to stay absolutely truthful to nature and the model, his statements are still revealing. Caravaggio's close attention to the features of his models gave them a greater sense of tangibility, presence, and a more direct emotional intensity. The believability of the expressions on the faces of the figures in *The Sacrifice of Isaac* and *David with the Head of Goliath*, especially in the faces of the individuals experiencing pain or death, is exemplary of Caravaggio's careful observation of his human models, and gives the paintings sincerity.

Genevieve Warwick has argued that Caravaggio has "conceived of his subject as

²⁵ Varriano, *Caravaggio: The Art of Realism*, 84.

²⁶ Pietro Bellori, "Michelangelo da Caravaggio," in *Caravaggio Studies*, ed. Walter Friedlaender (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 252.

a performance of history staged in the present,” and thereby “make[s] the stories of the Bible powerful through identification and consequent empathy.”²⁷ These devices work to break down the barrier between these long past events and the everyday reality of the contemporary viewer, making the subjects and their situation more comprehensible and accessible. Caravaggio’s paintings that specifically dealt with biblical subject matter, especially those that functioned as altarpieces, could be considered as another scholar, Joseph F. Chorpenning, has argued, spiritual aids to viewers through their ability to bring the supernatural close to them, “almost to the degree of physical tangibility,” helping to focus their prayer and devotion.²⁸ But what is one to make of paintings that do not seem to emphasize a fully spiritual message, that can, in fact, have multiple interpretations and are laced with violence or sexuality? This ambivalence could obscure the clarity of the biblical message, and indicates that perhaps Caravaggio incorporated too much of his contemporary life and setting into his religious art.

The Death of the Virgin (figure 15) elicited such a controversy as the model for the Virgin was purported to be Lena, “a dirty whore from the Ortaccio, a disreputable quarter” of Rome, and lover of Caravaggio.²⁹ If the model for the Virgin was actually a prostitute, it would seem that the artist was making a witty comment in this painting insinuating that the “immaculate conception” was nothing but trickery on the part of the supposed Virgin. That she was recognized as such by the viewers would distract them from pious contemplation of death and ascension in favor of a discussion of gossip and

²⁷ Genevieve Warwick, *Caravaggio: Realism, Rebellion, Reception*, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2006) 19.

²⁸ Joseph F. Chorpenning, “Another Look at Caravaggio and Religion,” *Artibus et Historiae* 8, no.16 (1987): 154.

²⁹ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 202.

rumors. On the other hand, the use of this model could have been employed by Caravaggio out of practicality. If they were romantically entangled, he could have secured her as his model relatively cheaply. Either way, the result would have been the same, as the painting was rejected by the Carmelite church of Santa Maria della Scala. Apparently, the realistic portrayal of models from contemporary society in the guise of religious figures was not always considered a comfortable mix by church authorities, especially when the figures were recognizable. Another detail that was considered too realistic was that this Virgin looked to be very dead, with no emphasis given to any transcendental themes of the story. Thus, Caravaggio sought to bring the religious down to earth in his paintings, not only through his use of unidealized models, but also by downplaying the supernatural elements of the story.

This lack of transcendentalism is apparent in many of Caravaggio's other paintings, including *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. Here, the wings of the angel of God have been marginalized and cut off by the border of the painting, and the angel resembles the typical male youths favored by Caravaggio in many of his earlier paintings. In fact, upon first glance the religious elements of this painting are not immediately noticeable. Furthermore, the angel relates to Abraham on down-to-earth, human terms. He does not descend from on high, but rather approaches Abraham from behind and grabs ahold of his wrist. Though the biblical story describes the angel's contact with Abraham being limited to an oral warning, Caravaggio has, in this regard, followed art historical tradition by making him visually manifest, not only to the viewers of this painting, but to Abraham, as well, whom the angel directs with his pointing finger. In addition, as has been noted, the angel makes physical contact with Abraham, demonstrating the solidity

of his flesh evidenced by his firm grip on Abraham's wrist. Though the visual depiction of the angel seems necessary in a painting to make the story clear, and is a feature of paintings by other artists that depict this subject, it is notable that Caravaggio has chosen to literally ground his angel, while many others depict him swooping down from the sky, as is the case in the painting by Jacopo Ligozzi (figure 16), for example.

IV. Caravaggio's Indecency

The lack of transcendentalism and the mixture of the sacred with the profane in Caravaggio's paintings often caused critics and biographers of the artist to proclaim his work indecent. His desire to reconcile the religious with the everyday is seen overtly in the painting of *St. Matthew and the Angel* (figure 17) commissioned as an altarpiece for the Contarelli Chapel in the Church of San Luigi dei Francesi that was apparently removed from the chapel very shortly after its installation. In this painting the relationship between the angel and the saint is far more intimate due to their close proximity and the way their limbs and bodies visually and physically overlap. It is set within a dark room sparsely furnished only with a chair and the two titular figures, the dark background serving to bring out these figures as the main and only focus of the painting. St. Matthew is shown casually sitting in a chair with his left leg crossed high over his right knee in order to prop up a book that presumably contains the scriptures that the angel is inspiring him to write. Adding to his casual appearance is his informal dress and loose drapery, his bare feet and exposed legs, the somewhat doxy look of confused surprise on his face complete with knitted brows, and a viewpoint that allows the spectator to gander at the prominent expanse of baldness on the top of the saint's head. In contrast to the middle-aged and rather frumpy saint, the treatment of the angel by the artist is rather sensuous with its body draped in a form-clinging sheer material through which its navel can clearly be seen, and it bunches up noticeably in the shadowed area of the angel's groin. The angel seems to epitomize all that characterizes the beauty of youthfulness, and its extremely soft feminized body, smooth face with slightly parted lips, and delicately curly hair combined with the gently muscled legs and arms renders it

fairly androgynous. The angel stands behind Matthew with its body gently curving in a sinuous position with one leg daintily bent at the knee while its upper body leans inward towards the saint and seems to rest lightly on his arm and open book. Its wings, the only sign of the religious nature of this figure, are partially extended, one of which seems to envelope the saint within an embrace. Since both the angel and St. Matthew are slightly bowed over the book, Matthew's head visually overlaps that of the angel so that it almost looks as though their heads are resting on one another. The angel also reaches a fully extended arm across the book in Matthew's lap, resting on the saint's left arm before culminating at the most central part of the composition where its fingers rest on top to the saint's right hand, physically guiding it across the page with its own.

This work was intended to sit between two other paintings on the subject of St. Matthew previously completed by Caravaggio for the Contarelli Chapel; *The Calling of St. Matthew* (figure 18) and *The Martyrdom of St. Matthew*, both of which were accepted by the patron. Though there are documents from Caravaggio's contemporaries and early biographers that reference the rejection of this altarpiece, the actual reason or combination of reasons for its removal are still debatable. In Baglione's brief discussion of the painting he mentions "simply because it was the work of Caravaggio" that "Giustiniani also took for himself the picture of a certain *St. Matthew* which had been destined for the altar of San Luigi, but which no one had liked."³⁰ In addition to being problematic for not including a specific reason for its removal, this account clearly begs the question of who Baglione was referring to when he said the painting was liked by no one. Giustiniani, must have seen something of merit in the work when he bought it so

³⁰ Giovanni Baglione, "La Vita di Michelagnolo da Caravaggio," in *Caravaggio Studies*, ed. Walter Friedlaender (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 235.

quickly regardless of the fact that Caravaggio had painted it. Bellori is more specific in his account when he writes:

Then something happened which greatly disturbed Caravaggio and almost made him despair of his reputation. After the central picture of St. Matthew had been finished and placed on the altar, it was taken away by the priests who said that the figure with his legs crossed and his feet crudely exposed to the public had neither decorum nor the appearance of a saint.³¹

Yet despite Bellori's greater specificity, it is unclear if this would have been reason enough for the painting's removal or if this was the only motivating factor. It is notable in these accounts that there is no mention of the sensuousness of the angel nor its close relation to St. Matthew, even though their increased separation from one another is one of the most conspicuous differences in the second version of the subject painted by Caravaggio, entitled *The Inspiration of St. Matthew* (figure 19).

A comparison between Caravaggio's two depictions of this same subject with careful attention to what the artist changed may provide the best evidence as to what was deemed unacceptable in the first version. In *The Inspiration of St. Matthew* the angel no longer makes physical contact with the saint and, in fact, is not even on the same level. Instead, the angel seems to have swooped suddenly into the room occupied by the saint and begun dictating the gospel, ticking off the points on its fingers, as the saint rushed furiously to the desk below so as not to miss the angel's dictation. Lost with the greater distance between the two figures is the guiding touch of the angel on the hand of the saint; for in this painting the inspiration is strictly aural. Also missing, along with the contact between the angel and the saint, is the feeling of intimacy between the two, as well as the possibility for a sexualized reading. Jacob Hess observes a similar sentiment

³¹ Pietro Bellori, "Michelangelo da Caravaggio," 248.

in his article on the Contarelli chapel, and notes that certain artistic elements have been lost, as well, writing of the figures that, “during the process of becoming respectable they have grown slightly commonplace, and their intercourse carries no conviction, no longer being represented in the form of a perfectly harmonious group.”³² The tone of this painting is one of seriousness and gravity, which is appropriately reserved for religious contemplation. This is best seen in St. Matthew’s response to the angel’s appearance. It seems as though he had immediately run to his desk, the stool on which he rests teetering perilously on edge from the sudden weight of the saint who has not even taken the time to sit properly, but instead is precariously balanced with one knee on the stool with his other leg fully extended while his foot remains on the ground. The saint looks up, perhaps fearfully to the angel, with the hand holding his pen poised above the book.

Though this St. Matthew commands much greater respectability than the one depicted by Caravaggio in his first version of the painting, partially a result of the saint’s serious facial expression and grave commitment to capturing everything the angel has to say, he is clothed similarly to how he was in the rejected painting with a loose flowing robe and bare feet. Admittedly less of the saint’s body is revealed in the second painting and his foot does not project into the viewer’s space as it did in the first painting, resulting in an image that can be defined as altogether more decorous. Yet if, according to Bellori, the main reason for the painting’s rejection was the appearance of the saint and the crudely exposed feet, then one would think that the artist would have gone to greater pains to alter this part of the painting instead of leaving it unchanged and altering nearly everything else, sometimes drastically, resulting in an entirely different painting.

³² Jacob Hess, “The Chronology of the Contarelli Chapel” *The Burlington Magazine* 93, no. 579 (June 1951): 197.

Therefore, Bellori's explanation is not satisfactory by itself to explain why Caravaggio's first painting of *St. Matthew and the Angel* was rejected, leading one to conclude that a combination of factors is really behind the rejection of this painting. Essentially, after looking back on past artworks dealing with either the same or similar subjects, certain aspects of Caravaggio's first depiction of *St. Matthew and an Angel*, in isolation, do not appear as unconventional as they initially seemed, nor does the depiction of the saint seem to be entirely in conflict with Counter Reformation doctrine.

In fact, there were several artists who, prior to Caravaggio, made use of the same motif in which the foot of a depicted figure extends beyond the painted surface into the viewer's space, breaking down the barrier between painted and actual reality. Gilbert argues that both Raphael in his *Transfiguration* (figure 20) and Annibale Carracci in his *Assumption of the Virgin* (figure 21) have made use of the same protruding foot motif without creating an incident or stirring up controversy. Instead, Gilbert notes that the *Transfiguration* was "a supreme work," the two aforementioned painters were respectively considered the "most honored of painters" and "the most respectable of artists," and he suggests that the motif was largely "traditional" at the time Caravaggio painted *St. Matthew and the Angel*.³³ In the case of the *Transfiguration*, the figure depicted with a protruding foot is St. Matthew, located at the bottom left of the canvas, and with the *Assumption*, the figure in question is St. Peter, also located at the bottom of the canvas, but this time located on the right side of the canvas with his leg with the protruding foot extended across nearly the full width of the painting.

Gilbert does not, however, point out that both of the works he mentions made use of more complex compositions with a greater number of figures, in stark contrast to the

³³ Gilbert, *Caravaggio and His Two Cardinals*, 172.

bare composition of Caravaggio that only contains the two main figures. Furthermore, in neither the case of Raphael nor Carracci does the foot belong to one of the main figures, as is the case in Caravaggio's *St. Matthew*. The protruding foot could be lost in the greater compositional confusion in Raphael's and Carracci's paintings, or at least, if the detail was stumbled upon it could be attributed less significance when viewed in the context of the larger compositional whole of the painting. The focus of these paintings is unmistakably elsewhere, as the viewer's sight is drawn to the supernatural events taking place in the upper portion where respectively Christ and Mary soar into the sky. Also, when compared side by side with the similarly sized canvas of Carracci's *Assumption*, the scale of the figures in relationship to the canvas size dictates that when one views Caravaggio's painting, one is simply confronted by a larger foot. That is not to say that Gilbert's argument is without merit. He is correct when he argues that this motif was previously used without receiving the response that Caravaggio's painting did, even during the same time period, as is the case with Carracci's painting. Yet, it is also true that in Caravaggio's painting the foot plays a much larger role in the overall painting, not only in size, but also because it belongs to the main figure of the composition, and undoubtedly the figure who commands the viewer's main attention. That simply is not the case with Gilbert's two main examples.

Gilbert also makes brief mention of a painting that is thematically and compositionally very much like Caravaggio's own painting of *St. Matthew and the Angel*, which undoubtedly would be the best evidence for his argument. An engraving of *St. Matthew* (figure 22) by Agostino Veneziano based on a lost painting by Raphael seems to be a source of primary influence on Caravaggio when composing his painting of the same

subject. The engraving depicts a muscled saint in a loose, flowing garment in the same (but reversed) cross-legged position with bare feet, one of which projects from the picture plane. Likewise, the angel is shown kneeling besides the saint on the same ground that the latter inhabits with similarly translucent drapery that reveals the angel's navel and leaves its chest exposed. In addition, the sex of the angel is ambiguous, like Caravaggio's angel, in that it appears to have the breasts of a young woman and its face and curly hair are in accord with femininity, while the more developed muscles of the exposed knee and forearms can be read as typically belonging to male subjects. The titular figures are the only subjects present in the composition, as is the case in Caravaggio's work, and they also seem to share a close relationship since compositionally there is no space discernable between their bodies, they gaze into each others eyes, and their fingers seem on the verge of touching as both put a supporting hand around the saint's inkwell into which Matthew is shown dipping his pen. If Caravaggio was in despair over the rejection of his painting, as Bellori said he was, one could surely sympathize with the artist and perhaps share his surprise since he appropriated some of the major elements of the painting from no less than one of the great Renaissance masters.

However, there is an important distinction between Caravaggio's painting and the engraving after Raphael. In the engraving, St. Matthew is afforded the utmost respectability by virtue of his location in the heavens. He is depicted seated on a throne of clouds loftily located in the sky with a burst of heavenly rays resonating from his and the angel's form. This could not possibly be more distant from the basement-like setting of Caravaggio's painting where the figures are secluded from sight within the interior,

and practically isolated from the light itself because of the darkness of the composition and the heavy shadows all around them. Caravaggio's figures are alone in a private setting, which makes the intimacy of their relationship suspect, while the saint and angel in the engraving are out in the open, evidently capable of being viewed by much of the earth below them, which lends to them an innocence that is lacking in Caravaggio's work. It also seems worth pointing out that while Caravaggio's angel inhabits the same earthly space of the saint, Raphael's saint has been promoted to the same spiritual realm as the angel, indicating that context is a significant aspect of this work that may have played a part in its rejection. Therefore, while in both Caravaggio's and Raphael's treatment of the subject the saint and the angel occupy the same ground level, in the engraving after Raphael this is an illustrious, heavenly position in which man has been elevated to the sphere of divinity, while in Caravaggio's painting the angel has been brought literally down to earth to inhabit the space of humans, and thus could be suspected of harboring the same lowly desires of man.

Besides the protruding bare foot of the saint, which one can see was employed commonly enough in other paintings of the time, Bellori also indicated that there was a more general issue with St. Matthew's appearance in Caravaggio's painting in that he lacked decorum and did not have the proper appearance of a saint. One could interpret his statement as including a number of factors contributing to the saint's overall appearance including his dress, his facial expression, and his body positioning. Yet, it seems the most common criticism waged against Caravaggio's St. Matthew, besides his bare feet, is that he appears to be ignorant, or even illiterate, since he looks in surprise at the book before him as though struggling to comprehend its meaning. An example of this

viewpoint can be found in Irving Lavin's text in which the saint is said to "not look like an author at all," and instead is described as "a homely individual whose gross and vulgar appearance is matched by his illiteracy."³⁴ Interpreting St. Matthew this way would indicate that the angel is doing all the hard work that the saint is simply incapable of doing for himself, i.e. not a particularly flattering representation of the evangelist. On the other hand, some authors interpret St. Matthew differently, instead suggesting the possibility that the saint's appearance was intended to demonstrate his humility and humanity, traits that were in perfect harmony with Counter Reformation doctrine.

Troy Thomas has argued in his article that St. Matthew is not "merely ignorant," but rather, his "intense expression" is a result of a sudden "instant of miraculous insight," in which God's message has become clear to him.³⁵ According to this interpretation, Caravaggio has represented the moment when St. Matthew has gone from merely transcribing the message of the angel to being filled with the divinity of God and comprehending His word, which permitted the great evangelist to pen an entire chapter of the Bible. He concludes that Caravaggio has depicted him "as an ordinary mortal, trying to comprehend divine mysteries," but "in conceiving Matthew as humble, he subverted the rules of decorum by inviting the viewer to identify with, to sympathize with, and perhaps even to be amused by Matthew rather than to venerate him."³⁶ Therefore, according to Thomas, the reason for the painting's rejection had nothing to do with the modern critiques that St. Matthew was depicted as ignorant or illiterate. Instead,

³⁴ Irving Lavin, "Divine Inspiration in Caravaggio's Two St. Matthews," *The Art Bulletin* 56, no. 1 (March 1974): 66.

³⁵ Troy Thomas, "Expressive Aspects of Caravaggio's First Inspiration of St. Matthew," *The Art Bulletin* 67, no. 4 (December 1985): 640.

³⁶ Thomas, "Expressive Aspects of Caravaggio's First Inspiration of St. Matthew," 643.

Caravaggio's treatment of the saint was too mundane and down to earth for a subject that was intended to contain an elevated spirituality and inspire the respect of its viewers. Although the greater readability and accessibility of the image was desirable in Counter Reformation paintings, perhaps it was thought that Caravaggio's depiction of St. Matthew crossed a certain line. By showing the saint as an "amusing" figure that one could encounter in everyday life, the contemporary viewer could have been encouraged to conceive of him as an ordinary person, like him or herself, with access to God's divinity, instead of as a deeply spiritual and pious figure who chose to lead the humble life of an ordinary citizen. This is a distinction that could have been damaging to the Church's authority; for if St. Matthew was an ordinary man whose spirituality allowed him access to divinity, perhaps other common folk did not need the help of the Church to communicate with God, as well.

Gilbert has proposed an alternative theory that attempts to explain the removal of the painting from the Contarelli Chapel without relying on any pictorial or thematic evidence of indecency. He instead evokes the fate of Jacob Cobaert, the artist who had previously been commissioned to create a sculpted group of St. Matthew and an angel for the altarpiece. After the first figure of the group, St. Matthew, was completed and placed in the chapel, it was promptly removed for being unsatisfactory and, according to Baglione, "boring."³⁷ The contract with Cobaert was terminated, though the artist still received payments for the half of the commission that he did submit, and the remaining funds were used to secure a painter to complete the altarpiece. Gilbert argues that though the execution and style of the sculpture was considered mundane, it did not inspire dislike on the part of Francesco Contarelli, who was left in charge of the Contarelli estate. The

³⁷ Gilbert, *Caravaggio and His Two Cardinals*, 181.

latter still paid Cobaert for his work without protest and he commissioned another artist to sculpt an angel to complete the sculptural group. The sculpture was still in his estate at the time of his death, and, finally, he bequeathed it to another church.³⁸ Rather, Gilbert suggests that the sculpture was not considered suitable for the chapel, which was ultimately intended to glorify his ancestor; a mediocre work would simply not do.

Therefore, Gilbert argues that it is worth considering whether the same did not happen to Caravaggio when his first version of *St. Matthew and the Angel* was installed in the chapel. Having been removed, for whatever reason, Giustiniani perhaps saved the day by purchasing the rejected painting, allowing the terms of the contract to be met without requiring additional funds for a new painting, since the money left by Matthieu Contarelli (or Cointrel) to furnish his chapel was at this time nearly depleted. It may be significant to this argument that, after all, a new artist was not sought after, as had been the case when Cobaert's sculpture was rejected. In fact, there is no evidence that anyone involved in the decoration of the Contarelli Chapel, including the priests and Matthieu's ancestors, were displeased with the other two paintings Caravaggio had already finished under contract for the sidewalls of the chapel. The best evidence for their satisfaction was that after these paintings were in place Caravaggio was granted the commission for the altarpiece. Furthermore, the composition of Caravaggio's *St. Matthew and an Angel* certainly does not seem as dramatic or innovative as those between which it would have sat, and perhaps this was not realized until the work was actually put into place and seen in context. The calm serenity of the scene with its emphasis on the intimate relationship between saint and angel is in marked contrast with the sudden entry of Christ into the dark room of *The Calling* as he beckons Matthew to follow him, or the chaotic confusion

³⁸ Gilbert, *Caravaggio and His Two Cardinals*, 181.

of *The Martyrdom* as every figure seems to recoil in shock from the dying saint at the center of the composition. The implied movement of the swooping angel and fear-struck saint to his desk in Caravaggio's second version of the painting actually seems to be a better fit when compared to the style and character of the other two paintings already in place in the chapel (figure 23).

Altogether, it seems that a combination of factors contributed to the rejection of Caravaggio's painting that perhaps in isolation would not have caused any particular controversy or been enough to warrant its removal. Perhaps the appearance of the slovenly dressed saint with bare feet exposed like a simple peasant could have been overlooked on its own. But when combined with the doubt of this man's ability to read, the fact that his bare foot would have been directly above those who prayed in the chapel, and the contrast with the other two scenes already in place, maybe the painting was considered too iconographically problematic to remain as the altarpiece. In addition to these potential sources of controversy, there is also contained in this painting the possibility that the relationship between the saint and the angel was not strictly platonic. Hibbard suggests that this undercurrent of sexuality may have remained "unvoiced and even unconscious," but he cites the "alluring, seductive angel snuggling up to an old man" as one of the primary reasons for the painting's rejection.³⁹ The movement of the angel from the ground next to the saint in the first painting to the space above the saint in the second version is one of the most noticeable ways that Caravaggio changed his treatment of the subject. Yet, the fact that he made several other revisions indicates that there were many issues that needed to be resolved after his first attempt at the painting was rejected. Therefore, though Caravaggio preferred to humanize the relationship

³⁹ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 258.

between the supernatural and humans, the rejection of his first St. Matthew painting may have caused the artist to try to give more respect to the boundaries between the divine and mere mortal in his future works. Though it seems that he still enjoyed toying with this motif, perhaps he realized it was in his own best interest to use more subtlety in his work. For example, in *The Sacrifice of Isaac* the angel and Abraham make contact and they relate to one another on human terms, but their relationship is also put at a distance by the angel's admonishing message and the glare Abraham gives him in return.

Yet, the viewer may also sense something of the homoerotic in *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, an aspect that is attributed to much of Caravaggio's earlier work. Isaac's body, though ambiguously concealed in this painting by his father's body hovering over his, is still apparently nude and depicted appealingly by the artist. His vulnerability and passivity could also bolster masochistic pleasure upon viewing. Furthermore, the position of father and son seem to be intentionally sexually stimulating. The shadowed area that contains Isaac's genitals is, in fact, directly behind Abraham's hand, and the way Abraham leans over Isaac would position his genitals near Isaac's rear quarters, evocative of the position for anal sex. These points of contact between father and son open up the possibility of a sexualized reading of this painting. In terms of their positioning, and disregarding the religious story behind the painting, the scene could be interpreted as one of rape at knifepoint of a young boy by an elderly man. The angel could be regarded as an intervening youth, perhaps trying to save a friend, and the ram could be read symbolically as the virility and sexual prowess of the older man. Though the religious aspect of this painting is undeniable and no contemporary viewer would have been ignorant of the narrative, the fact that the scene could arguably be

misinterpreted by one ignorant of the biblical story indicates the ambiguity Caravaggio infused into this work.

In his discussion of Christian martyrs, Mills argues that the portrayal of passive male nudes about to be, or in the process of being, tortured works to reconfigure their gender roles, in which their masculinity is diminished by their disempowered position and, more literally, when they are divested of traditional masculine symbols through decapitation, disemboweling, and flaying.⁴⁰ The diminishing of their masculinity, once again, makes the male body more feminized, thereby subverting conventional sexuality and rendering the body with gender ambiguity (the work by Lodovico Cigoli especially reveals the fusion of the masculine and feminine in that Isaac's upper body seems to exhibit the budding breasts of a young woman). This androgynous body is subversive to the viewer in that both men and women can desire it, yet the presence of male genitals on this ambiguous body elicits specifically homoerotic desire on the part of male viewers.

The theme of *The Sacrifice of Isaac* seems to have often been used by artists to display their skill at depicting the nude male body and the story dictates that this body will also be passive. The version done by Juan de Valdés Leal (figure 24) is especially exhibitionistic in the way the body of Isaac is laid out on the stone altar for the viewing pleasure of the audience. The fact that Isaac is also blindfolded prevents him from acknowledging the gaze of the viewer and rebuking it in contrast to Caravaggio's painting. By exhibiting Isaac's body in this manner, the artist has made it resemble the carcass of a slaughtered animal. Mills also deals with this in his book writing that, "the reconfiguration of the saint's body as meat also aligns him with modes of fleshly passivity," which not only augments the deconstruction of the body's gender, but also

⁴⁰ Mills, "Of Martyrs and Men," 173.

works to objectify the body further linking it to the role typically reserved for the feminine body.⁴¹ In Caravaggio's work, despite the high degree of ambiguity and the homoerotic mood, the body of Isaac is ironically more concealed than seen in the work of other artists who take up the subject, like Juan de Valdés Leal. This may be the result of Caravaggio's lack of confidence in his ability to depict the full-length figure. It is notable in his painting that the body of both the angel and Isaac are compositionally concealed, with the body of the angel literally cropped by the composition, while Isaac's body is partially hidden by the hulking figure of his father that hangs over him. Abraham's body is concealed by his drapery that oddly seems to waste away and diminish below his waistband. Yet, if the diminutive lower body of Abraham is intended to suggest his inability to perform sexually, the phallic upright knife seems to suggest otherwise. Mills attributes the "exaggerated signifiers of male power – phallic weapons, prurient looks and insulting jeers" employed by the tormentor in scenes of torture to the performance of "an extravagant masquerade of masculinity."⁴² Therefore both the figures of Isaac, with his ambiguously gendered body, and Abraham, with his exaggerated masculinity, work to reveal gender as a social construct that can be performed and reconfigured.

Another of Caravaggio's paintings that embody this sexual uneasiness is the *Doubting Thomas* (figure 25). According to the New Testament book of John, after Jesus arose from the dead he appeared to his disciples, but Thomas was not among them at the time of this visit. When the others told him what they had seen, Thomas replied that he would not believe unless he saw the holes in Jesus' hand, touched them, and put his hand into his side. A week later Christ appeared to the disciples again and provided Thomas

⁴¹ Mills, "Of Martyrs and Men," 173.

⁴² Mills, "Of Martyrs and Men," 173-174.

with the proof that he required. After touching and seeing Christ he cried out Jesus' name in recognition, provoking Christ to comment, "because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."⁴³ Caravaggio has shown the moment in which Thomas is sticking his finger into the wound of Christ with a clear look of surprise on his face as two other disciples look on with rapt attention. With one hand Christ has drawn back his robe exposing his nude upper body, and with the other He guides Thomas' hand towards and into Him. Thomas seems to probe the wound of Christ excessively, since much of his finger has disappeared into Christ's body, and he is hunched over, nearly at eyelevel with the wound to get the best possible viewpoint. Thomas seems to have drawn his other hand up to his own hip, which he tightly clenches, perhaps empathetically feeling the pain that Christ suffered, made uncomfortably apparent to him firsthand by his finger's presence inside His body. Other signs of Thomas' tension include his wrinkled furrowed brow and the veins that stand out strongly on his neck.

This work is often given a sexualized reading as the focus of attention is the deep penetration of Christ's body by the saint. Despite the slightly off center position of the penetration of Christ's wound in the canvas, the fact that it has the attention of every painted figure in this work focuses the viewer's attention on it, nonetheless. Additionally, this moment represents the narrative climax of the *Doubting Thomas* narrative. The repulsiveness of the naturalistically depicted wound, and the way in which it is violated, both draws the viewer in for a closer look, as is the case with the background disciples, but also repels them. Hibbard writes that, "the surgical detail of

⁴³ John 20:19-29 New International Version.

the picture is unbearable,” yet it seems that one cannot help but to look.⁴⁴ The rendering of this religious subject to allude to the sex act is decidedly homosexual as all the participants are male, but the body of Christ is feminized by the vagina-like opening of the wound being probed by Thomas’ phallic finger. The expression on the face of Thomas with his wide eyes and shocked expression also conveys the notion that more is going on here than meets the eye, a notion that is supported by the way the saints behind him hunch over to get a better look of the action. Read in this way, the tension exhibited by Thomas seems decidedly sexual and may represent mounting sexual excitement and his eagerness to penetrate Christ’s body further.

Mieke Bal has argued that the sexuality transmitted by this painting takes on a more specific character with three older men, the disciples with their age signified by various levels of baldness, wrinkles, and lined faces, competing for access to a younger man, Christ. She writes, “now that Jesus has simultaneously become the younger man over whose favors (access to the hole in his body) the three other men vie, the teacher who shows what lies under the skin, and the connoisseur of the beauty of the flesh, the painting becomes full of holes, folds, and creases.”⁴⁵ She points out that Thomas’s finger that penetrates Christ is visually echoed by Christ’s own fingers disappearing into the creases of his robe, and the rip on Thomas’ robe is visually similar to the wound of Christ. Apparently Caravaggio has incorporated many bodily orifices in this work, as well, with the carefully detailed slightly opened mouth of Christ and one of the disciples, the ear holes of the figures that are seen mostly in either profile or three quarter view, and

⁴⁴ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 166.

⁴⁵ Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 37.

the nostrils of the figures which are seen from below. This presence of many holes in this work calls attention to the boundaries of the body and its receptiveness to be penetrated. Richard Spear has made a similar point working with the phenomenon of the passive male nude in the work of Guido Reni, and specifically his *St. Sebastian* (figure 26), in which the saint's body is very much the object of homoerotic display, but also pierced with arrows.⁴⁶ This penetration of the male body is evocative of the viewer's desire to penetrate the body, and of the painted subject's willingness and readiness to be penetrated. In *Doubting Thomas* this desire to be penetrated is made clear by Christ who actively guides the hand of Thomas into his wound.

Additionally, Bal has linked the desire of the disciples who wait for physical access to Christ's body to their desire for visual access, as they lean forward to try to view the spectacle more clearly. She clarifies the "intricate connection between desire and vision" by evoking the notion that "difficult visual access is stimulating: it enhances desire, and visual attention."⁴⁷ Likewise, Bersani and Dutoit point out that in some of Caravaggio's works the open mouth of male figures signify this readiness to be penetrated, as well.⁴⁸ The emphasis on the exposed wound of Christ or the open mouth of Isaac can, therefore, be read as an erotic zone, an area that reveals the inside of the male body, perhaps substituting for the concealed orifice, the anus, that is hidden from the viewer. If this is the case, Caravaggio displays a playfulness in his paintings between what is revealed to the audience in contrast to what is concealed from sight as a stimulus

⁴⁶ Richard Spear, *The "Divine" Guido: Religion, Sex, Money, and Art in the World of Guido Reni* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 70.

⁴⁷ Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*, 37.

⁴⁸ Bersani and Dutoit, *Caravaggio's Secrets*, 9.

to the viewer's desire. In *Doubting Thomas* the object of visual desire is made obvious to the viewer who may first notice the wound being probed and then, looking outward, will notice the gazes of the figures drawing them back to the spectacle of penetration. The spectator is provided with a model for viewing this painting by reacting as the disciples act, pulling together and drawing nearer for a closer scrutiny.

Bal's point about the old age of the disciples contrasted to the much younger Christ playing a factor in how the sexuality of this painting is read is also significant, and seems to be a reoccurring theme in Caravaggio's work. *The Sacrifice of Isaac* contains the juxtaposition of the elderly Abraham with two fresh youths, and similarly the painting of *St. Matthew with an Angel* explores the relationship between an aged saint and a beautiful young angel. Hibbard has also picked up on this, writing that, "the combination of youth and age in the pictures of Caravaggio's first decade often seems sexually suggestive, sometimes is tinged with sadomasochism, and often implies ridicule towards older men."⁴⁹ The presence of young and old figures in his paintings with attention paid to their points of contact and the inclusion of sexual innuendoes opens up the possibility of pederastic readings, causing the artist's sexuality to come into question. Caravaggio becomes especially suspect when one looks back to his early works that seem to exclusively focus on the activities of a certain type of seductive and somewhat feminized young man, but also during his later years of productivity when he produced two more brazenly nude young men shown full length and laughing.

Both the *Victorious Cupid* (figure 27) and *Capitoline St. John the Baptist* (figure 28) feature seductive male nudes that seem to mock the viewers' potential shocked reaction with their laughter. Yet, while the nudity of the *Victorious Cupid* can be

⁴⁹ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 259.

attributed to the figure's guise as the pagan cupid, the nudity of the Capitoline *Baptist* is more ambiguous and difficult to overlook when the subject is interpreted as a biblical figure. The Capitoline *Baptist* becomes somewhat problematic since it is actually lacking the attributes customary to paintings of the Baptist, and even John's traditional lamb has here been transformed into a horned ram, leading some art historians to question the *Baptist* label in favor of a more secular interpretation. The painting contains only the awkwardly positioned nude figure shown in a composite view that is a combination of profile and three quarters view. He is shown seated in an outdoor setting, perhaps on a rocky outgrowth or downed tree, with one leg bent downward with his toes touching the ground and the other bent upward resting on the earthen platform on which he sits. He sits partially reclined and props himself up on one elbow while the other arm is draped loosely around the neck of a ram who lovingly draws his head close to the boy's face. He has turned his head away from the ram instead to regard the viewer directly, making eye contact and offering a smile. His softly muscled flesh rests on two abundantly bunched up sheets and an animal fur, providing a comparison of different, yet equally supple, textures.

The shameless exhibitionism of the youth's pose that reveals his genitals combined with the ample display of his soft flesh and his ambiguous, somewhat solicitous address to the viewer all contribute to the erotic undertones of this painting. Bersani and Dutoit suggest that the erotic attraction of paintings such as this where male nudes provocatively make eye contact with the viewer arose from their tendency to both reveal and conceal something simultaneously. They write that "the distinction between non-erotic and erotic address might be, not that the latter solicits greater intimacy or

fewer barriers between persons, but rather that it solicits intimacy in order to block it with a secret.” Furthermore, “erotic address is a self-reflexive move in which the subject addresses another so that it may enjoy narcissistically a secret to which the subject itself may have no other access.”⁵⁰ In works like the *Capitoline Baptist* and the *Victorious Cupid* the revelation of the body of the nude male is countered with a more enigmatic gaze that cannot be read by the viewer. Though the gaze seems to suggest a come-on, at the same time it enigmatically conceals the intentions of the figures. The directness of their gazes also keeps the viewer at a distance since their eyes are not free to run across the nude’s body unobserved, as the youths are fully aware that they are being watched and boldly meet the gaze of the observer with their own. Overall, the play between what is concealed and revealed in Caravaggio’s paintings augments the ambiguity of the work, leading to the formation of layers of meanings and multivalent readings.

Of course, the interpretations of this work are especially varied, given that the actual subject matter of the painting is still highly debatable and seemingly ambiguous under all the potential titles given to it. Even contemporary sources seemed undecided on the title, some classifying this painting as a Baptist image, and others labeling it *Pastor Friso*, identifying the nude as a shepherd figure, rather than a biblical one.⁵¹ Perhaps the best argument for a nonreligious reading of this painting is the existence of two depictions of *John the Baptist* (figures 29 and 30) by Caravaggio that seem to conform to the established iconography of Baptist imagery. In both the *Borghese Baptist* and *Kansas City Baptist*, St. John is depicted with a serious expression, appropriate for a religiously themed painting, with at least some drapery to conceal his nudity, and a thin wooden or

⁵⁰ Bersani and Dutoit, *Caravaggio’s Secrets*, 9.

⁵¹ Gilbert, *Caravaggio and His Two Cardinals*, 35.

reed cross that seems to be standard in other Baptist images. Though the Borghese *Baptist* is shown with a ram, rather than a lamb, the presence of these other saintly attributes secure his identification as the Baptist. Bartolomé González y Serrano provides an example of the complete symbolism of the Baptist in his painting of the subject (figure 31) that correctly includes a lamb at the foot of the Baptist, the reed cross with a scroll draped around it, a halo over the head of John, and a serious expression.

However, when one compares Caravaggio's Capitoline *Baptist* with these other examples of legitimate Baptists, the similarities between them are still apparent. Much of the youthful Baptist's body is revealed in all these paintings, with the clothing that does accompany him consisting of loose drapery and, in many cases, a fur. According to the books of Matthew and Mark, the Baptist clothed himself only in camel hair fastened at his waist with a leather belt, and traditionally artists have used this motif of John's primitive manner of dress to reveal their skill in rendering male nudes, though none have shown him completely nude, barring Caravaggio's ambiguous work. Also common to all these works is the outdoor setting, which is in compliance with the biblical narration that the Baptist resided in the wilderness of Judea, which was probably a desert rather than a forest, but presumably these European artists would represent the wilderness as it existed in their homeland. Therefore, though the Capitoline *Baptist* lacks any concrete markers that this figure should be read as St. John, because of its similarity to other more clear-cut images of the Baptist, it cannot with certainty be denied that Caravaggio did intend to represent the Baptist in this painting. Once again, Caravaggio has provided his viewers with a puzzle for which one definitive conclusion cannot be reached. Maybe he appropriated the Baptist's typical setting as a suitable location to place a secular nude.

Or, perhaps he intended to invest this image with an ambiguity that would deny the painting's categorization as either a sacred or profane work.

The poses of Caravaggio's Capitoline *Baptist* and the *Victorious Cupid*, the only two nudes he was ever known to have painted, were taken and reconfigured from the nudes of Michelangelo, including a Sistine *Ignudo* (figure 32) and the sculpture *Victory* (figure 33), as well as the figures in Taddeo Landini's *Fountain of the Turtles* (figure 34) in the Piazza Mattei. Noticeably, the widely spread position of the legs of the Capitoline *Baptist* emulate those of the fountain figures while also incorporating the profile curve of the buttock continuing into the downward slope of the leg of the *Ignudo*. The upper body of this figure also seems to have built on the *Ignudo*'s slouched position with one arm reaching behind his back to support his weight with the other arm stretching across his body. The *Victorious Cupid* also makes use of the position of the legs of the *Ignudo*, as well as *Victory*, leaning on one leg so only the portion from the thigh to the knee is visible while the other leg is extended to the ground, perhaps to balance the figure. Though some authors, like Friedlaender, have interpreted Caravaggio's figures to be in ridicule of Michelangelo, Gilbert has taken Caravaggio's quotations more like borrowing "shapes from Michelangelo as formal designs without their original meanings," which he contends was, "a common enough practice for artists."⁵² This is not to deny their intention as comical; for certainly the laughing countenances of the figures and the frank exhibitionism of their poses betray that some humor was invested in these works, but rather that mockery was not being directed at the great master, Michelangelo.

Thus, the Capitoline *Baptist* is the most obviously sexual rendition of a figure represented in the mode of the St. John in the wilderness theme by Caravaggio while his

⁵² Gilbert, *Caravaggio and His Two Cardinals*, 5.

other two depictions of the Baptist are more traditional in their symbolism. However, this does not mean that the Borghese and Kansas City *Baptists* lack the erotic content that characterize many of Caravaggio's other works. Bal argues that the Kansas City *Baptist*, for instance, teasingly avoids the gaze of the spectator, and she finds the realistic details like the visibility of the figure's veins, the rough patch of his elbow, and his dirty toenails to cause an "erotic pull" emanating "from an actual touchable body."⁵³ This Baptist is shown, once again, seated in an outdoor setting with dense foliage visible in the dark shadows behind him. He delicately toys with the tall reed cross with one hand but diverts his gaze away from it into the lower corner of the painting. His expression is difficult to read because of the shadows cast over his eyes, and his lips seem all at once to frown and curl up in the corner into a quiver of a smile. His exposed flesh is given smooth treatment with softly rendered musculature, as seems to be the artist's preferred way of rendering these youthful types. He is enfolded by a deep crimson drapery that also covers the earthen platform around him on which he leans. Likewise, animal fur has been draped across his lap and clings lightly around his upper arm, leaving the rest of his chest bare. Bal takes note that, "the folds in the animal skin that alternate between fur and leather are cleverly disposed so as to suggest, just barely, an icon of the boy's penis," which is "tantalizingly signified but not shown," contributing to the traces of sexuality operating within this painting.⁵⁴

As Bal has pointed out, the realistic depiction of the youth and the smooth finish given to the surface of the painting greatly adds to the appeal of the figure. The possibility that this figure could exist in the real world may heighten the viewer's desire

⁵³ Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*, 188.

⁵⁴ Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*, 188.

for him, and this tangibility and heightened presence seems to bring to life many of the figures Caravaggio has depicted. Far from the shocking quality conveyed by the Capitoline *Baptist*, who fully exposes himself, this Baptist exudes a more subtle sensuality. Bal conceives of this painting as a “metaphor for the connection between visual attraction and the infinitely touchable body,” and an “inquiry into the enigma of bodily perception,” which she qualifies by describing the way light plays over the youth’s skin as “the most tender and slight, yet most thrilling, kind of touch.”⁵⁵ In this reading of the work, presumably the viewer would want to touch the youth with the same slight touch, or be touched by him in this manner. And, perhaps viewing this touch that he or she cannot participate in or replicate enhances the desire on the part of the viewer by frustrating his or her attempt to achieve intimacy with the depicted youth. Yet, just as light invisibly plays over his body, the gaze of the viewer can also trace the curves and hollows of his skin, replicating the touch visually when one is unable to touch physically.

Despite the amount of sexual innuendoes contained in his works, Caravaggio’s earliest biographers make little reference to the sexual subject of these paintings. Baglione, for example, wrote of the *Victorious Cupid* that “the wonderful color of this painting was the cause of the intemperate love of Giustiniani for the works of Caravaggio,” and Scanelli wrote, “like the *Saint John in the Desert* in the collection of Cardinal Pio which has such fine realistic flesh tones, the *Amoretto* in the possession of Prince Giustiniani was one of the most highly esteemed works of Caravaggio in a private collection.”⁵⁶ Only Sandrart, another writer who had lived with Giustiniani, made mention of any controversy surrounding the painting writing that:

⁵⁵ Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*, 192.

⁵⁶ Walter Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 182.

This piece was publicly exhibited in a room with another hundred and twenty made by the most prominent artists; however on my advice it was covered with a dark green silk curtain, and only when all the other paintings had been seen to satisfaction, was it finally uncovered, for otherwise it would have made the other curiosities insignificant; not without reason may this painting be called the eclipse of all paintings.⁵⁷

This passage suggests that works such as the *Victorious Cupid* that contained a young male nude positioned provocatively did have a certain amount of shock value, since it was concealed so as not to overshadow the rest of the paintings in the collection.

However, there was no indication that this painting was received negatively. It was, according to Sandrart, sought after by other collectors and Giustiniani, recognizing its value, refused to sell.⁵⁸

The amount of sexual ambiguity found within Caravaggio's paintings has led to much speculation about his sexuality. Art historian Donald Posner argues for the artist's homosexuality based on the testimony of Tommaso Salini in Baglione's lawsuit against Caravaggio for libel, in which he was accused, digressively, of making use of a *bardassa*, a male who takes on a female sex role.⁵⁹ However, Creighton Gilbert asserts the unreliability of such a testimony, which was obviously given under the most hostile of circumstances, by pointing out that, "there is a long history, up to the present, of attacking one's enemies of any sort by calling them homosexual."⁶⁰ Furthermore, he accuses Posner of sensationalizing the accounts of Caravaggio's early biographers in a manner that lacks credibility. He contends that Posner intentionally presents his readers

⁵⁷ Joachim Von Sandrart, "Michael Angelo Marigi von Caravaggio, Mahler," in *Caravaggio Studies*, ed. Walter Friedlaender (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 265.

⁵⁸ Joachim Von Sandrart, "Michael Angelo Marigi von Caravaggio, Mahler," 265.

⁵⁹ Donald Posner, "Caravaggio's Homo-Erotic Early Works," *Art Quarterly* 34 (1971) 302.

⁶⁰ Gilbert, *Caravaggio and His Two Cardinals*, 198.

with partial accounts about the artist's life to mislead them in favor of his own interpretations, which are only clarified in his endnotes, and also accuses him of assigning validity to contemporary testimonies based solely on how well they support his conclusions, accepting those that agree with his own and discrediting those that present evidence to the contrary.⁶¹

Posner argued that Caravaggio was homosexual not only based on his interpretations of early documents pertaining to the artist's life, he also views this supposed sexuality as emanating from the artist's work. Posner asserted that, "the nature of Caravaggio's sexual tastes can hardly be questioned," arguing that this could plainly be seen in "the pictures themselves, with their fleshy, full-lipped, languorous young boys, [which] assure us that Caravaggio's homosexual inclinations exist..."⁶² Though Caravaggio's paintings certainly pervade an air of sexuality, this argument is problematic because it seems unlikely that he would have secured himself much of a clientele on the open art market if he was painting works that were immediately recognizable as belonging to a homosexual artist. Moreover, if Caravaggio did have homosexual inclinations, it is apparent that they were not exclusively so; for his involvement with women, mainly prostitutes, was well documented in criminal records where he and another man fought over a woman, he assaulted a woman whom he had formerly dated, and even the model depicted in *The Death of the Virgin* was rumored to be his mistress.⁶³ Yet Posner's statements remained influential and perhaps damaging to subsequent investigations into Caravaggio's life and sexual proclivities as some scholars seemed to

⁶¹ Gilbert, *Caravaggio and His Two Cardinals*, 198.

⁶² Posner, "Caravaggio's Homo-Erotic Early Works," 302.

⁶³ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 87.

take these questionable interpretations for fact. Laurie Schneider provides a case in point when she labels the artist homosexual in her article and writes unabashedly that he “belonged to an aristocratic homosexual milieu,” without the slightest suggestion that this information is mostly based on speculation.⁶⁴

There are also presumptions that the homoerotic content of Caravaggio’s paintings was employed by the painter to appease homosexual patrons. Cardinal Francesco Del Monte is especially suspect, since he was reported to have many young men living with him, and he also attended a party where young men were dressed as women for the entertainment of the guests.⁶⁵ A problem with this argument is that certainly not all of Caravaggio’s patrons were homosexual, yet Caravaggio produced works that contained homoerotic subject matter prior to Del Monte’s patronage that were intended, as noted, for the open art market. Gilbert also points out that there were many social activities and formal parties that excluded women from attending, and therefore were exclusively comprised of male participants, and since women were not allowed to be professional dancers, if entertainers were hired for a party, they would be men out of necessity.⁶⁶ Furthermore, Del Monte did not amass a large collection of art that was homosexual in character, which would seem to be the implication by labeling him a homosexual patron. In fact, the cardinal owned a large variety of paintings including subjects that depicted nude women, such as a representation of *Susana and the Elders*, as well as various mythological-based scenes with “Venus figures”.⁶⁷ It is perhaps more

⁶⁴ Schneider, “Donatello and Caravaggio,” 78.

⁶⁵ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 30.

⁶⁶ Gilbert, *Caravaggio and His Two Cardinals*, 202.

⁶⁷ Gilbert, *Caravaggio and His Two Cardinals*, 203.

illuminating in the case of Caravaggio to consider the sexual milieu of Rome, rather than speculate on scant and often contradictory evidence.

Jill Burke points out that “homosexual relationships between young men in sixteenth-century Rome could be largely tolerated as a “rite of passage” before marriage, an outlet for the unruly sexuality of youth.”⁶⁸ Though this kind of sexuality surely would not be encouraged, it seems that members of society were willing to look the other way if it was understood that the transgression would be only temporary and practiced by youths who were not yet full members of society. Furthermore, though older men who engaged in sodomy were punished, the laws were less severe when an older man took on an active sex role with a passive younger man taking on a feminine role, than if the older man had been the recipient of anal sex.⁶⁹ In Caravaggio’s paintings the fact that the bodies of young men are somewhat ambiguous indicates their passive sex roles. In their bodies there seems to be a mixture between the masculine and feminine in that they display masculine genitals but are softly depicted and display expressions and poses that are more often reserved for feminine subjects. In painting nude males passively, Caravaggio is invoking a more sexually ambiguous figure, but one with which sexual engagement would be less strictly punished.

⁶⁸ Jill Burke, “Sex and Spirituality in 1500s Rome: Sebastiano del Piombo’s Martyrdom of Saint Agatha,” *The Art Bulletin* (September 2006): 492.

⁶⁹ Guido Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 121.

V. Conclusion: The Reconciliation of Violence and Sexuality

In conclusion, Caravaggio has presented paintings rich in meaning whose ambiguities encourage no definitive interpretation. They combine elements of violence and sexuality while also pushing the limits of what is appropriate in paintings of religious subject matter. Though this may seem to be an uneasy mixture of elements to reconcile within one painting, George Bataille links themes of religion, sacrifice, and the erotic in his book *Death and Sensuality*. He explains that the desire to transcend taboos forbidding violent acts or sexual misbehaviors, for example, arises from the pleasure in transgressing the taboo itself. He writes of the commonalities between sex and sacrifice that:

Both reveal the flesh. Sacrifice replaces the ordered life of the animal with a blind convulsion of its organs. So also with the erotic convulsion; it gives free rein to extravagant organs whose blind activity goes on beyond the considered will of the lovers. Their considered will is followed by the animal activity of these swollen organs. They are animated by a violence outside the control of reason, swollen to bursting point and suddenly the heart rejoices to yield to the breaking of the storm. The urges of the flesh pass all bounds in the absence of controlling will. Flesh is the extravagance within us set up against the law of decency.⁷⁰

Therefore, according to the author, sexual elements infused with violence and religion are not really at odds, but in fact rely on one another, reinforcing the limits of their boundaries and the transgressions of those boundaries, which thematically appears to have been of primary importance to Caravaggio. As Caravaggio made his painted figures and the settings they inhabit, in religious paintings and otherwise, closer to the shared lived reality of early modern Italy, perhaps including violent and sexual references was not viewed by the artist as either outrageous or blasphemous. He may have viewed his

⁷⁰ Georges Bataille, *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* (New York: Arno Press, 1977), 92.

own creations as simple depictions, closely following what he knew. In combining these elements, Caravaggio evokes complex meanings that must be approached from a variety of discourses to earn a more complete understanding of the artist, his paintings, and his time period.

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Figure 2



Jusepe de Ribera, *Apollo and Marsyas*, 1637, Oil on canvas, 182 x 232 cm, Museo Nazionale di San Martino, Naples in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 3



Jusepe de Ribera, *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, 1644, oil on canvas, 202 x 153 cm, Museu Nacional d' Art de Catalunya, Barcelona, in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 4



Rembrandt, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, 1635, Oil on canvas, 193 x 133 cm,
The Hermitage, St. Petersburg, in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 5



Donatello, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, c. 1418, Marble, height: 191 cm
Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence, in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 6



Jacopo da Empoli, *Sacrifice of Isaac*, 1590s, Oil on copper, 32 x 25 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 7



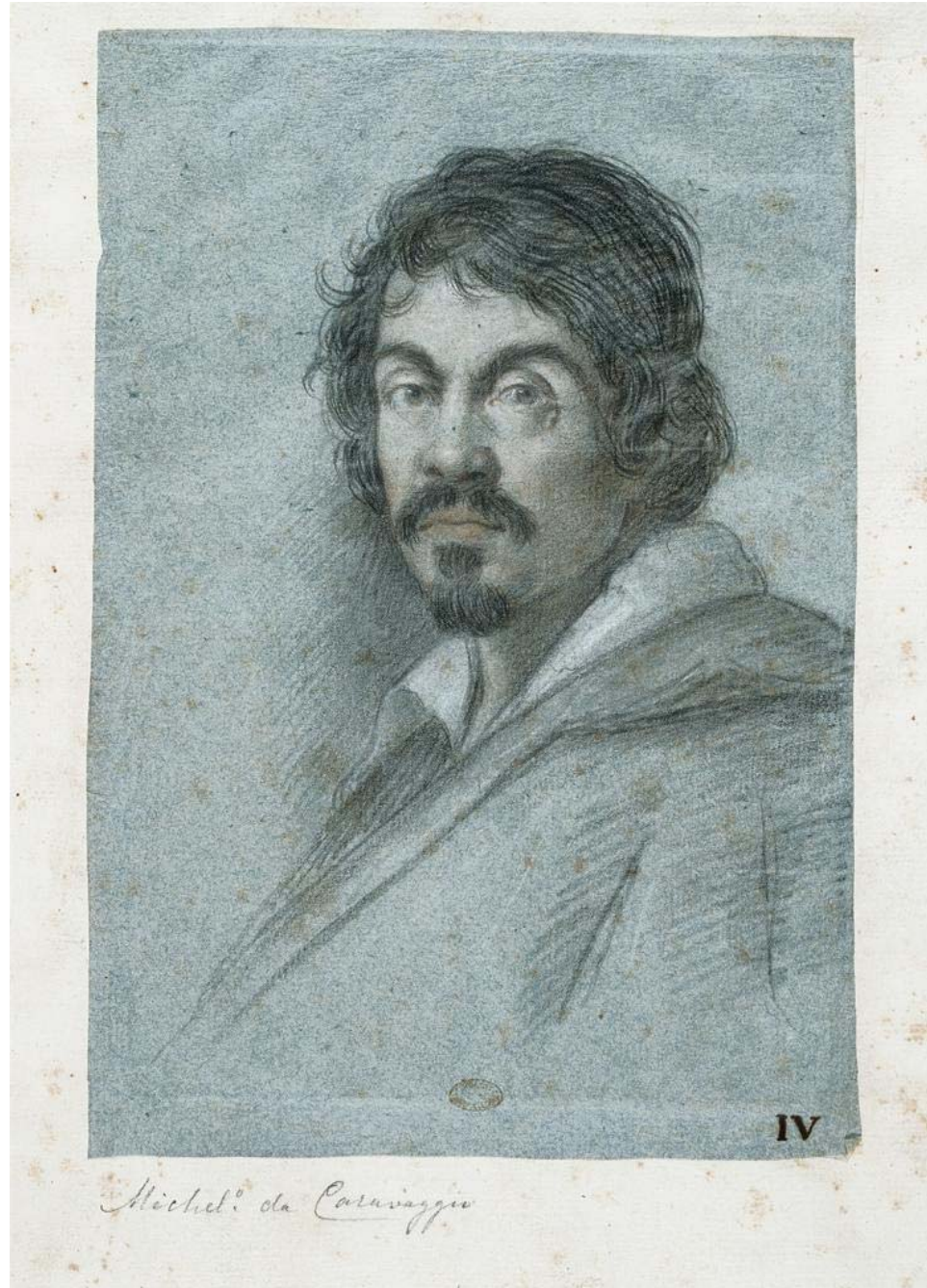
Lodovico Cigoli, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, c. 1607, Oil on canvas, 175.5 x 132.2 cm, Galleria Palatina (Palazzo Pitti), Florence, in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 8



Caravaggio, *David with the Head of Goliath*, c.1610, Oil on canvas, 125 x 100 cm. Galleria Borghese, Rome, Italy, in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 9



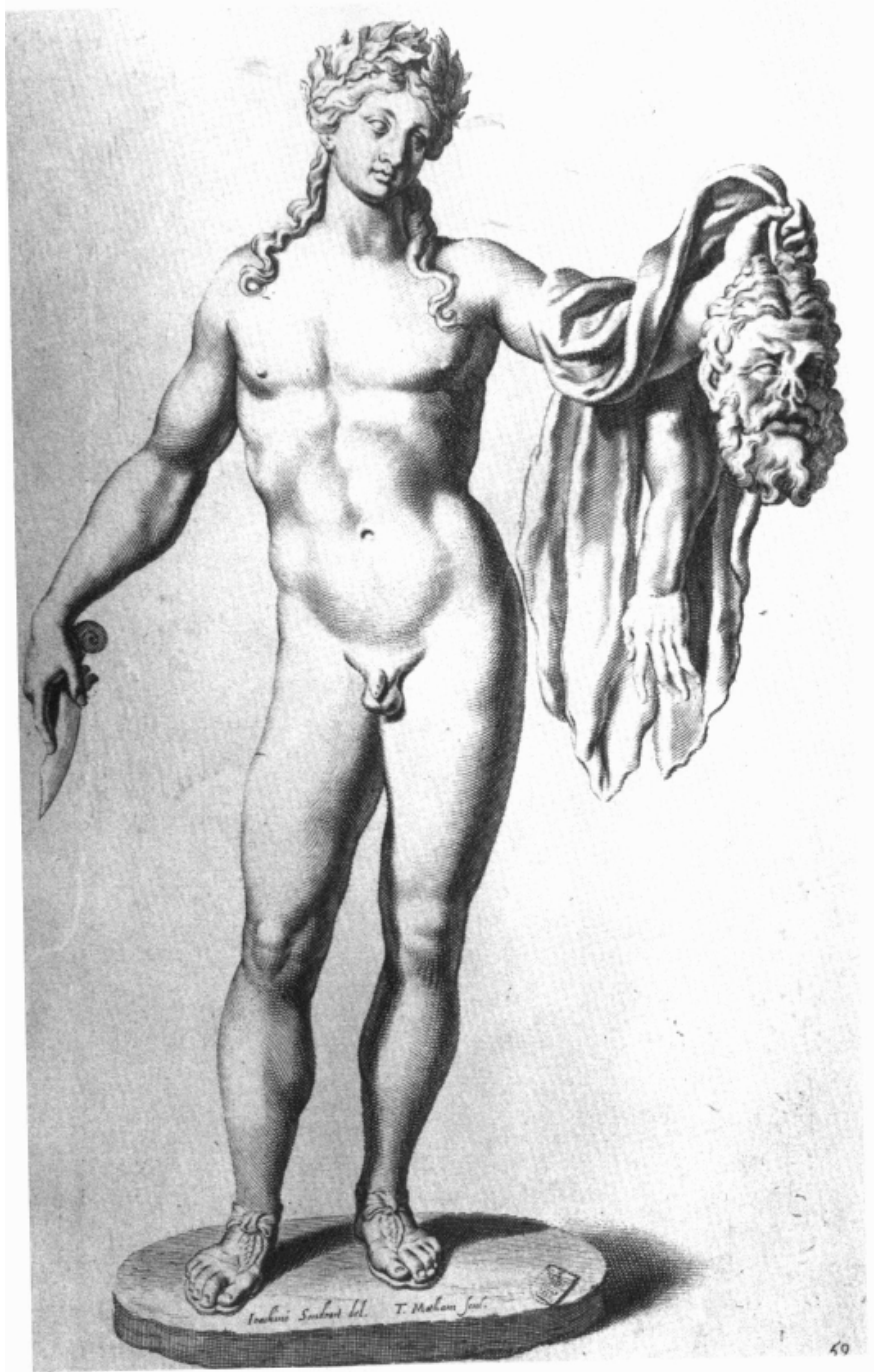
Ottavio Leoni, *Portrait of Caravaggio*, Biblioteca Marucelliana, Florence, in <http://www.artstor.org>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 10



A. Clouwet (attr.), *Portrait of Caravaggio*, engraving from G.P. Bellori, *Vite de' pittori*, c. 1672, in Genevieve Warwick, *Caravaggio: Realism, Rebellion, Reception*, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2006) 105.

Figure 11



T. Matham after J. von Sandrart, *Apollo with the Flayed Skin and Head of Marsyas*, Engraving from Vincenzo Giustiniani, *La Galleria Giustiniana*, c. 1635, in Genevieve Warwick, *Caravaggio: Realism, Rebellion, Reception*, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2006) 107.

Figure 12



Caravaggio, *The Martyrdom of St Matthew*, 1599-1600, Oil on canvas, 323 x 343 cm, Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome, in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 13



Caravaggio, *Betrayal of Christ*, c. 1598, Oil on canvas, 133.5 x 169.5 cm, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 14



Caravaggio, *Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*, 1608, Oil on canvas, 361 x 520 cm, Saint John Museum, La Valletta, in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 15



Caravaggio, *The Death of the Virgin*, 1606, Oil on canvas, 369 x 245 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris, in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 16



Jacopo Ligozzi, *Sacrifice of Isaac*, c. 1596, Oil on wood, 51 x 37,5 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 17



Caravaggio, *St Matthew and the Angel*, 1602, Oil on canvas, 232 x 183 cm
Formerly Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum, Berlin, in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31
March 2008.

Figure 18



Caravaggio, *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, 1599-1600, Oil on canvas, 322 x 340 cm, Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome, in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 19



Caravaggio, *The Inspiration of Saint Matthew*, 1602, Oil on canvas, 296.5 x 189 cm
Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome, in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31
March 2008.

Figure 20



Raphael, *The Transfiguration*, 1516-1520, oil on wood, 405 × 278 cm, Pinacoteca Vaticana, Vatican City, in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 21



Annibale Carracci, *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1600-1601, Oil on canvas, 245 × 155 cm, Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome, in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 22



Augustino Veneziano after Raphael, *St. Matthew*, engraving, 1518, in *The Illustrated Bartsch*, New York, in <http://www.artstor.org>, 25 February 2008.

Figure 23



View of the Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome, in <http://www.artstor.org>, 16 March 2008.

Figure 24



Juan de Valdés Leal, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, 1657-59, Oil on canvas, 187 x 247 cm. Private collection, in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 25



Caravaggio, *Doubting Thomas*, 1602-1603, Oil on canvas, 104 x 146 cm. Sanssouci, Potsdam, Germany, in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 26



Guido Reni, *Saint Sebastian*, 1615, Oil on canvas, 130 x 99 cm, Pinacoteca Capitolina, Rome, in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 27



Caravaggio, *Victorious Cupid*, 1601, Oil on canvas, 154 x 110 cm, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 28



Caravaggio, *St. John the Baptist with a Ram (Pastor Friso)*, c. 1602, Oil on canvas, 129 x 94 cm. Galleria Capitolina, Rome, in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 29



Caravaggio, *St John the Baptist*, 1610, Oil on canvas, 159 x 124 cm, Galleria Borghese, Rome, in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 30



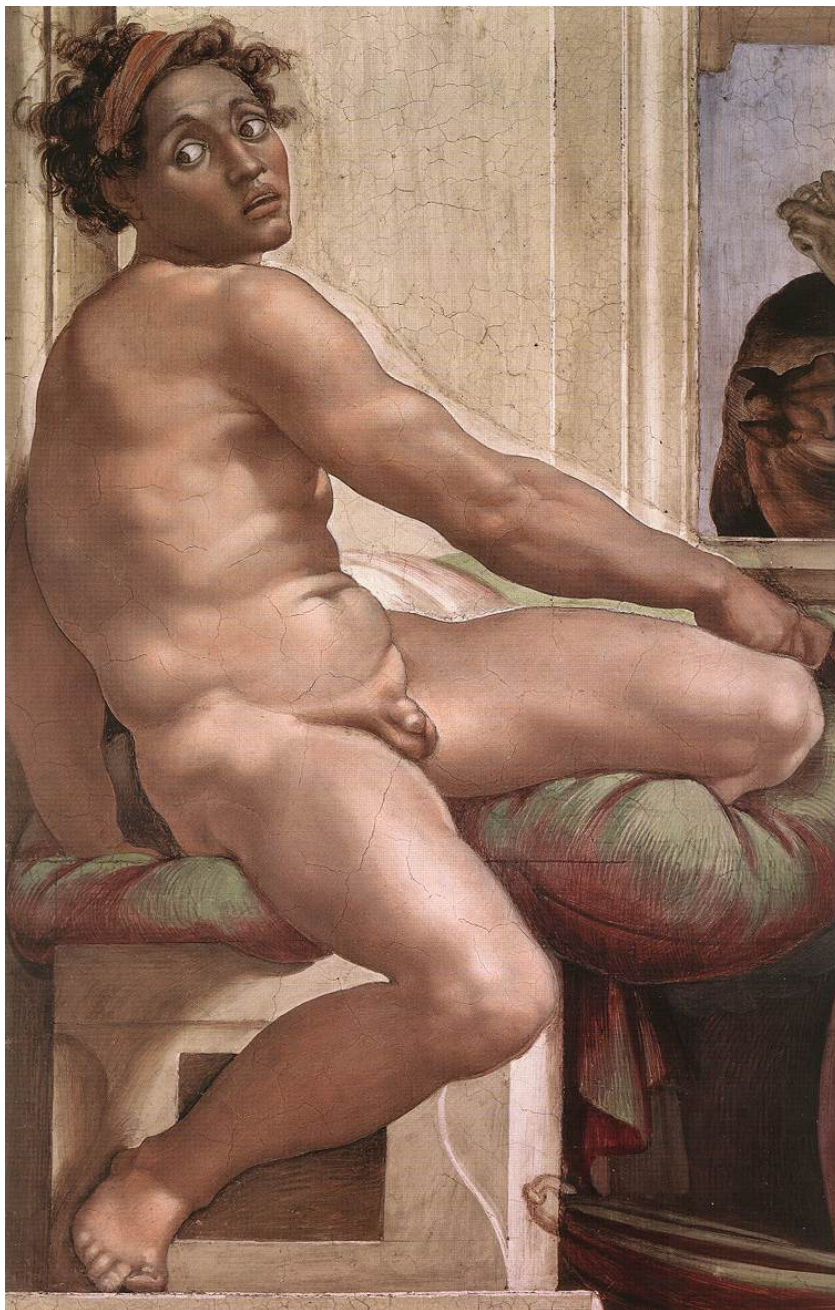
Caravaggio, *John the Baptist*, c. 1604, Oil on canvas, 172.5 x 104.5 cm, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 31



Bartolomé González y Serrano, *St John the Baptist*, 1621, Oil on canvas, 150 x 90 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 32



Michelangelo, *Ignudo*, 1509, Fresco, Cappella Sistina, Vatican, in <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 33



Michelangelo, *Victory*, 1532-34, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, in <http://www.artstor.org>, 31 March 2008.

Figure 34



Taddeo Landini, designed by Giacomo Della Porta, *Fountain of the Turtles*, Piazza Mattei, Rome, 1581-84, in <http://www.artstor.org>, 31 March 2008.