



◀ The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist (1608)

Co-Cathedral of St John, Valletta
The violence is completely convincing; this is how you will be dragged from your cell, when the order is given, and butchered

◀ **page 11** this great marbled and frescoed villa is also the most unforgettable. Caravaggio's Boy with a Basket of Fruit, painted in about 1593-94, risks being kitsch, it is so blatantly cynical in its allure. Actually, it is kitsch of genius.

The ancient author Pliny the Elder tells of the eye-fooling still-life painters of antiquity, of Zeuxis who painted grapes so accurately a bird tried to eat them. The paintings of Zeuxis are lost, and only frescos by lesser craftsmen found at Pompeii exist to prove how accomplished the Greeks and Romans were at painting fruit. Without Zeuxis to rival him, Caravaggio stands alone as the one painter who could truly make fruit so moist, so round, that you want to lick the canvas.

Still life tries to dissolve the gap between the senses of sight and taste and Dutch and Spanish 17th-century paintings almost achieve this. Caravaggio does it, effortlessly. His still life of a basket of fruit poised on a table edge in the Ambrosiana Picture Gallery in Milan, although it dates from his Roman years, connects you with what must have been his original early talent as a boy in northern Italy. The basket of fruit the boy in the Borghese Gallery offers you is unparalleled. Nothing in art is as real. You can look as closely as you like and it just gets more alive in its detail: the dusty blush on the black and purple and green grapes, the battered skin of an apple, the moist red seeds of an opened pomegranate. Caravaggio's innovative portrayal of light is what makes the fruit so luscious as it reflects in each individual grape, just as it does in the vase in his closely related Boy Bitten by a Lizard in London's National Gallery.

If Caravaggio stopped there, at painting perfect grapes, it would be fine. But he goes embarrassingly further. The fruit deployed by his Boy with a Basket of Fruit is a seduction. It is proffered, and you want to taste it. The boy, however, is no innocent vendor. His right shoulder is bare, his shirt having slipped down, as if by accident, and his face under his tousled dark hair is thrown back, with heavy eyes looking at you.

Caravaggio did not suddenly stop painting like this when he started to get church commissions, nor did his cardinal clients want him to. Whatever the exact nature of the game he and they and the *ragazzi*, the street kids, played, its danger still makes these paintings – whatever your sexuality – pungent.

The Berlin Cupid was painted at the same time he was doing his great Roman altarpieces. And the real history of his images is even more peculiar than that. It's not simply that Caravaggio went on painting his sinful private treats at the same time as his public martyrdoms. He combined the religious and the erotic.

In the Capitoline picture gallery on top of the hill that was the sacred centre of ancient Rome, a boy smiles out of the dark, cuddling a horny ram. Naked, he rests on fur and bed-clothes, although he is purportedly in the wilderness. This is Caravaggio's Saint John the Baptist. Except he is also the lad who posed as Cupid. He smiles out of the painting at us, with real joy this time. His flesh is gold, and a band of shadow down his tummy leads inevitably to his penis. If this is not a painting of Caravaggio's boy, with whom he lay, then Rembrandt's portrait of his lover in a fur wrap is not personal, either, and nor is Rubens's of his wife naked except for a fur. Caravaggio's Saint John is tender, loving – and obviously blasphemous. How could he ever have dared **page 16**