

◀ page 7 quite tough enough, mentally, to be a Caravaggio – the pose is easy, the boy holding the head vapid. From being forgotten, Caravaggio is now so famous that museums appear to be happy with the flimsiest attribution. This pseudo-Caravaggio is even pushed as a postcard in the museum shop. With its horrid subject matter, it is closer to our image of the outlaw genius than the genuine Caravaggio that hangs nearby. The Madonna of the Rosary is a mighty altarpiece, tall and complex, yet just for once, Caravaggio doesn't quite pull it off.

The Madonna is enthroned high on the canvas, holding Christ by her side, gesturing with her hand at a selection of black rosary beads a team of clerics dispense to a crowd of the urban poor. The ritual of the rosary developed in the late middle ages, and was formally adopted by the Catholic church in 1569. It is typical of the reformed Catholicism – purified, intensified, and bureaucratically organised – that transformed everyday life in Caravaggio's Italy.

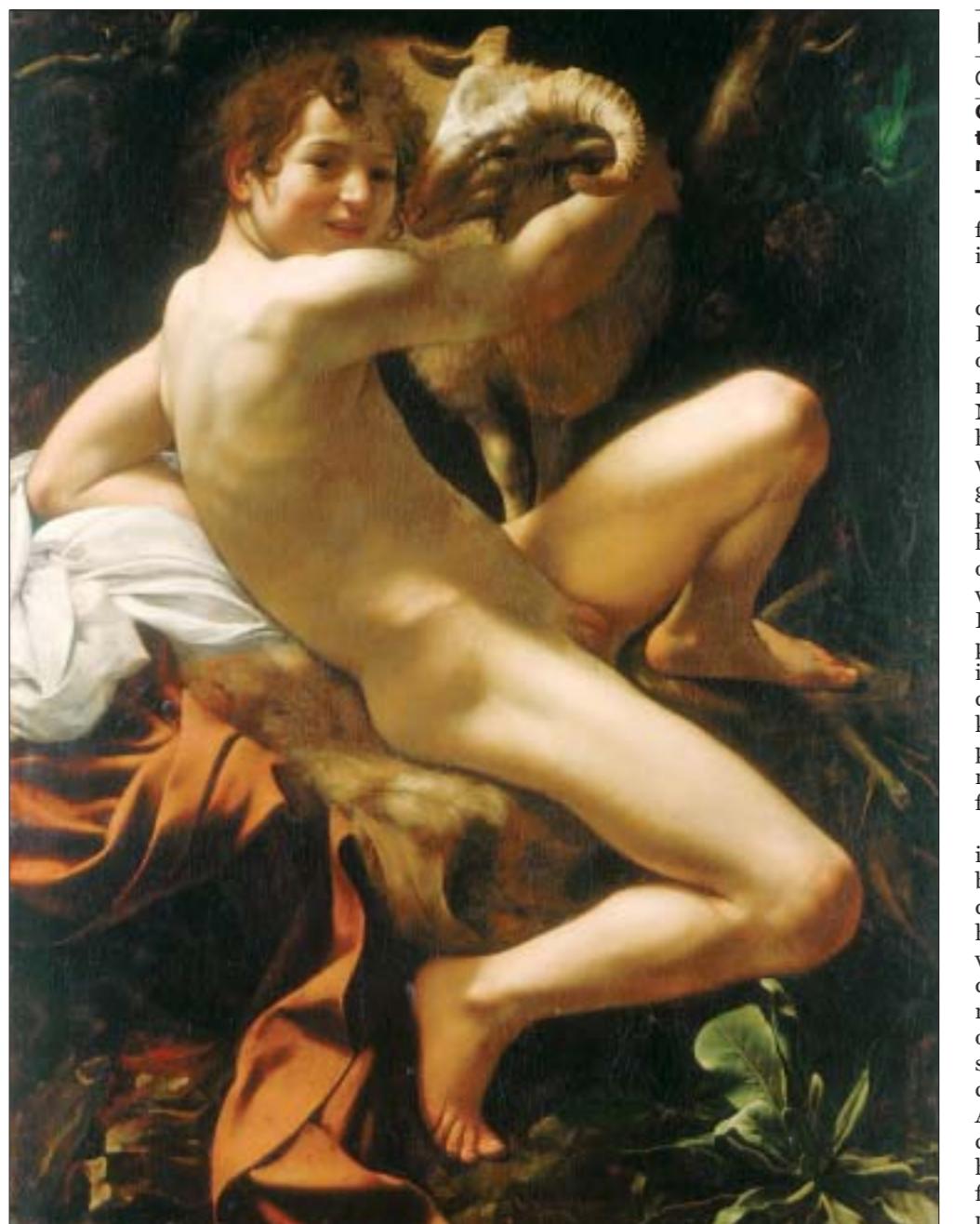
Born in 1571, the year that Catholic navies united to defeat the Islamic Ottoman empire at the battle of Lepanto, Michelangelo Merisi grew up into a southern-European world remade by the Council of Trent, which, in reaction to Martin Luther's Reformation, by the time of its last session in 1561–63 invented Catholicism as it exists today, transforming the magical and superstitious practices of medieval religion into something at once organised and ecstatic. At the heart of what came to be called the Counter-Reformation was the assertion, against Luther, that salvation depended not on faith alone or the inexplicable generosity of God towards worthless sinners, but also on good works. You could earn redemption. One way to gain merit was by saying your rosary.

By the 1560s, the experimental art of the Renaissance was widely denounced by Counter-Reformation clerics. The kind of art that Catholicism needed would be formalised by Guido Reni, Guercino, and in Spain, Murillo and the more truly mystical (and Caravaggesque) Zurbarán: saints suffer terrible torments but their dewy eyes look up confidently to heaven even as their bodies are burned and hacked; specific and obscure points of church doctrine are celebrated by holy history paintings in which popes are woefully depicted in vibrant colours

**C**aravaggio was in no sense a conventional Counter-Reformation propagandist. Only the things of this earth interested him as a painter, whatever he believed as a man. Caravaggio is doubtless

Thomas, who must stick his finger in the wound. In The Madonna of the Rosary in Vienna, in which the wise men of the Dominican order, at Mary's command, institute the cult of the rosary, he cannot bring himself to do what is required, and paint like a baroque confectioner. This vast altarpiece was commissioned to propagate the ritual of the rosary, and here is the machinery of a history of the faith: the Madonna on high, the clerics and saints, and below them, receiving the rosary from their church, the people. But the pious grease needed to make this scenery move, the soft colours and sweet music, the fluffy clouds and rays of light – all are absent. Caravaggio cannot physically do it: cannot paint the Madonna as anyone but a real, tough-faced Neapolitan woman, cannot give any miracles to the churchmen. Only one aspect of the painting has conviction: the clamouring hands of the poor, desperate for something, some hope or faith, and the blunt reality of their unshod feet.

Those same dirty feet appear again when you put a coin in the box to illuminate a painting in a side chapel in the church of San Agostino in Rome. Caravaggio's painting skulks in the



▲ Saint John the Baptist (c1602)

Pinacoteca Capitolina, Rome

This painting is obviously blasphemous. Caravaggio has combined the religious and the erotic, as his naked model cuddles a horny ram



▼ The Calling of Saint Matthew (1599–1600); Saint Matthew and the Angel (1602–3); The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew (1599–1600)

Contarelli chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome  
His three paintings of the life and evangelism of Matthew fill three walls of a square chapel



► The Crucifixion of Saint Peter (1600–1)

Cerasi chapel, Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome

Caravaggio gives psychological reality to the killers and their victims alike. Peter is not portrayed as some sweet faced old man – he is mightily pissed off

first chapel, where it has been since he finished it in 1604.

The story Caravaggio was commissioned to depict for San Agostino was a classic Counter-Reformation miracle, scientifically analysed, officially sanctioned and assiduously promoted. It dealt with the Holy House of Nazareth, the house of the Virgin itself, which had flown to Loreto in the Marches in Italy where it was the centre of a flourishing pilgrimage. You can imagine what a conventional picture of this might look like. But Caravaggio has not painted that story at all. His picture is of a very mortal Mary bearing in her arms a very fleshy Christ, standing in a doorway in Rome, on the threshold of some beaten-up palazzo with a massive grey lintel, chipped and in need of a wash. In the shadows stands a decaying wall. At her feet, which are naked, kneel two pilgrims. But they don't look like pilgrims so much as beggars. Their clothes are ragged, their faces weatherbeaten and leathery, feet streetworn.

Why was this painting successfully installed in San Agostino when so many religious works by Caravaggio were rejected? In his *Madonna di Loreto* – and in all the great altarpieces by him still in place in Italy and Malta – Caravaggio turns his realism to good account. The determination to tell the truth as he sees it makes this an authentic portrayal of the beliefs of the poor. They need their Virgin; they need someone. Caravaggio paints not the stories the church tells but the people it told the stories to. And the people loved him for it. "In the first chapel on the left in the church of San Agostino he painted a *Madonna di Loreto* portrayed from the life," wrote Giovanni Baglione, the painter and enemy of Caravaggio, in a biography published in 1642, "with two pilgrims, one of them with muddy feet, and the other wearing a torn and soiled bonnet; and because of these frivolities in the details . . . the populace loved him."

Baglione's bitter comment – this is the same man who sued Caravaggio, who felt his own art eclipsed by the painter *maudit* – is revealing. Caravaggio won the acclaim of the mob, the lowlives who knew nothing about art: and that, of course, is why he was in such demand with religious orders and confraternities. The Counter-Reformation wanted to reach the people. Caravaggio made art that touched the humblest soul. On the way into San Agostino, you ignored the old woman sitting on the steps. Leaving, after seeing that picture, you put a note in her plastic cup. The pathetic gesture seems appropriate.

In this part of Rome you can walk from one church to another and register the force of Caravaggio's truly popular art. In San Luigi dei Francesi, his image of *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, with its cavaliers and layabouts, is a mirror of the city life outside the church. His three paintings of the life and evangelism of Matthew fill three walls of a square chapel. On the opposite wall to the scene where the men loiter like Tony Soprano's crew in the back room of the Bada Bing, the night erupts in violence. Caravaggio watches a grimacing twisted self-portrait, as Matthew is tortured. It is one of the self-hating images of his own face that haunt his paintings, beginning with the grey, exhausted young features of his *Sick Bacchus* in the Borghese Gallery in Rome and including the ambiguous painting in Dublin in which he holds a lantern over Christ's arrest – as a witness, or as an accomplice?

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