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**The Shape of Art to Come**

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## 1.1 Caravaggio and Rome

In 1599, while a young Caravaggio was working on his first public commission for the decoration of the Contarelli Chapel, another great artist whose name was William Shakespeare wrote “All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players, They have their exits and their entrances”<sup>1</sup>. It is a fascinating notion put forth by the English playwright that life follows art, that our journey from birth to death has its entrances on the world’s stage as well as its exits. For most their entrances are minor in the vast theatre of history. But for those who aspired to greatness their entrances forever changed the story and structure of history. Caravaggio was one of these. His story, perhaps even to a greater extent than most other stories of the life of an artist, shares a narrative of the common tropes of literary frameworks and structure. His artistic story begins in the late Cinquecento Italian high renaissance as an apprentice of Simone Peterzano in the city of Milano, the birthplace of Caravaggio.<sup>2</sup> Caravaggio artistic journey would however find no prosperity in Milano. Often being described as a hellion, both in his own time and by those of came later, Caravaggio probably led an extravagant lifestyle in the company of mobsters and courtesans. A deeply flawed character and at this time a failed artist with an unsustainable lifestyle in the ever-deteriorating city which was plagued with crime, diseases, and famines,<sup>3</sup> the young Caravaggio would attempt to seek artistic redemption in Italy’s new cultural, artistic, and financial centre; Rome.

In literary terms one might say that Caravaggio’s decision of leaving for Rome was the inciting incident of the artist’s life. He was not alone in this artistic pilgrimage as the late 16<sup>th</sup> century saw a huge influx of painters, sculptures, poets and others seeking artistic favours and prosperity in Rome. Rome herself had just recently risen out of the ashes of the aftermath of her sacking by Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire in 1527. And although the war between Spain and France had devastated the Papal State, it was arguably also the very cause for Rome’s renewal. In the aftermath Michelangelo made his return to Rome and by his death in 1564 he had finished decorating the Sistine Chapel, restructured, renovated and built the new political centre in Rome;

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<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare, William. *As You Like it*, as found in *The Tudor Edition of William Shakespeare, The Complete Works*. Collins London and Glasgow, 1<sup>st</sup> edition 8<sup>th</sup> printing, 1961. Print. P. 266

<sup>2</sup> Langdon, Helen. *Caravaggio: A Life*, Chatto & Windus, 1998. Print. P. 21-24

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. P. 30

Il Campidoglio, the Capitoline hill.<sup>4</sup> He had designed the new palace for the wealthy Farnese family, Palazzo Farnese, and designed the cupola for the new St. Peter Basilica.<sup>5</sup> Michelangelo's heritage in Rome left such a vast source of inspiration and artistic reception that Rome became an artistic centre for the new emerging style of Mannerism. In the mid to latter half of 16<sup>th</sup> century Rome also saw a religious reawakening through the counter-reformation. The rise of Protestantism and Calvinism in central and northern Europe in the aftermath of the reformation gave the papacy and subsequently Rome an even larger religious importance with a newfound interest and emphasis on religious arts. It was in prosperity that Caravaggio sought favour for this artistry. He would not only find it here, but like his precursors he himself would leave a defining and revolutionary transformation of the arts in Rome.

Like his namesake Michelangelo, Caravaggio would add to the artistic inspiration and reception of Rome. Caravaggio's would achieve artistic breakthrough in Rome and the world stage with his first public commission, the decoration of the Contarelli Chapel in San Luigi dei Francesi. Here he would paint the two pivotal paintings *The Martyrdom of S. Matthew* (FIG 1) and *The Calling of S. Matthew* (FIG 2). These paintings are not only pivotal in Caravaggio's artistic career but also pivotal in the ongoing artistic shift from the late renaissance mannerist style towards the baroque style at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Being the seminal painter of the era, Caravaggio's paintings are in a unique position to give us insight into the shifting landscape of the painted arts at this moment in history. Yet due to his very influence and status Caravaggio is more often than not viewed as a revolutionary of pure originality and thus often understood more in respect to those who came after him instead of understanding him as a developmental link between the those who came before him and further advancement of the painted arts. Like Michelangelo, Caravaggio is not the seminal artist of his era because he broke with all established decorum, but because he worked with them to achieve a new artistic expression. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in his two breakout paintings *The Martyrdom of S. Matthew* and *The Calling of S. Matthew*. My enquiry will be to study these two paintings in light of previous iterations of the same motives in an attempt to display Caravaggio not simply as a revolutionary, but rather as a critical point in the development from and link between the renaissance to the baroque.

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<sup>4</sup> Hibbert, Christopher. *Rome: The Biography of a City*, Penguin Books, 1985. Print. P. 167-171

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. P. 167-171

<sup>6</sup> Langdon. P. 34

## 2.1 The Contarelli Chapel

When Caravaggio arrived in Rome in 1592 the city was already undergoing an artistic shift. Seen in hindsight with our modern and more complete overview of the canon of art history there is certainly an argument to be made that the style and aesthetics of the renaissance was at this point nearing the end of its relevance. The re-birth of the classic Roman and Greek heritage had already been accomplished especially through the works of Michelangelo. And although it may be too simplistic to understand the art of the renaissance simply as an attempt to achieve the artistic expression of the classical heritage it is a sentiment which echoes those made by 16<sup>th</sup> century thinkers such as Vasari. He writes in his opus *The Lives of the Artists*; “(A)nd alone he (Michelangelo) has triumphed over ancient artist, modern artists, and even Nature herself”<sup>7</sup>. In the eyes of Vasari Michelangelo was the peak of artistic prowess, and his fame and artistic excellency seemed unreachable by artist who came after him. Furthermore Mannerism, the last distinct art style of the renaissance era and the dominant style in the post Michelangelo period, had by the time of Caravaggio arrival in Rome fallen out of favour by the Catholic church. This is rightfully attributed to the decrees of Council of Trent who simultaneously encouraged religious imagery, probably due its strong propagandist use in counter-reformation rhetoric yet also stressed restraint on artists of sacral arts. In the synods second part of the twenty-fifth session in 1563 concerning relics, saints, sacral imagery the council decreed that church officials should take care that “nothing seen that is disorderly, or that is unbecomingly or confusedly arranged, nothing that is profane, nothing indecorous, seeing that holiness becometh the house of God.”<sup>8</sup> However with innovation and originality in the painted arts seemingly stagnate under the mannerist style churches were still decorated in a characteristic mannerism style which often implementing grotesques and other pagan Roman symbols.<sup>9</sup>

The Council of Trent furthermore stressed the importance of saints. Again this was probably somewhat propagandist in nature seeing as most religious tenants of Protestantism dismissed the worship of saints as idolatry. Yet the status of saints have always had a special place

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<sup>7</sup> Vasari, Giorgio. *The Lives of the Artists*, translated by Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella, Oxford World's Classic, 1991. Print. P. 282

<sup>8</sup> Council of Trent, The Twenty-fifth Session of the Council of Trent, 1563.

<sup>9</sup> The most notable example of this is Fransesco Salviati's Markgrafen Chapel in Santa Maria Dell' Anima in Rome. This chapel featuring several frescos of the life of Christ is highly decorated in grotesques inspired by those found in Nero's Domus Aurea. Salviati painted the frescos sometime in the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century.

of importance in the Catholic faith. The synod writes that “(T)he saints, who reign together with Christ, offer up their own prayers to God for men; that it is good and useful suppliantly to invoke them, and to have recourse to their prayers, aid, (and) help for obtaining benefits from God, through His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is our alone Redeemer and Saviour.”<sup>10</sup> This follows a long line of tradition in sacral arts, particularly in votive art, a tradition that those of means would give a sum of money, either in life or through their will, which would go to the decoration a chapel dedicated to their namesake.

One of the many who did this was the French Cardinal Matthieu Contarel, or as he is better known in Italian, Matteo Contarelli. The cardinal had long wished to build and decorated a chapel in honour of his namesake Matthew, which would stand in the newly erected French church in Rome, San Luigi dei Francesi. However the cardinal’s untimely death in 1585, only two years after receiving the cardinalship, meant that he would never see the chapel completed. In fact, it would take over 15 years after the death of Contarelli and four different artists before the chapel stood completed. The first of these was the mannerist Girolamo Muziano. He had already sign on to paint six paintings for the chapel while Contarelli was still alive in 1565,<sup>11</sup> yet had not complete any works at the time of the cardinal’s death. It is interesting to note that sometime between 1565 and 1585 Muziano had been commissioned to decorate several chapels, including a Matteo chapel, in S. Maria in Aracoeli.<sup>12</sup> In this Matteo chapel he would paint a fresco depicting the martyrdom of S. Matthew (FIG 3) which he worked on between 1586-89.<sup>13</sup> In 1587, while Muziano was working in S. Maria in Aracoeli, a new commission for the Contarelli Chapel was issued to a Flemish sculpture Jacob Cobaert.<sup>14</sup> The contract called for a statue of the apostle Matthew to serve as the altarpiece of the chapel. It would take Cobaert 13 years to finally deliver the statue and at which point it was ultimately rejected by the priests of San Luigi dei Franseci. Cobaert would have no further dealings with the Contarelli chapel. Muziano who had not produced any works for the chapel in the 27 years after the original contract with Contarelli would pass away in 1592 leaving the chapel to remain undecorated. However, a year before Muziano’s death the mannerist Cavaliere d’Arpino was commissioned to paint some of the frescos in the chapel. D’Arpino only

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<sup>10</sup> Council of Trent, The twenty-fifth session.

<sup>11</sup> Hibbard, Howard. *Caravaggio*, Harper & Row Publishers, 1983. Print. P. 91

<sup>12</sup> Varriano, John. *Caravaggio the Art of Realism*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006. Print. P. 42

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. P. 42

<sup>14</sup> Hibbard P. 91



finished three frescos all found in the vault of the chapel which can be seen today (FIG 4). He would be the only one, except Caravaggio, whose work can still be seen today.

In 1598 with minimal progress on the decoration and only two years before the upcoming jubilee and holy year 1600, the priest of San Luigi dei Francesi put Cardinal Francesco del Monte in charge of operations to hopefully finish the decoration of the Contarelli chapel. Having only a small amount of the original sum left by Contarelli, del Monte commissioned a young Caravaggio to paint two paintings offering him the same sum of 400 scudi that had been offered d'Arpino seven years earlier.<sup>15</sup> This would be Caravaggio's first public commission and his greatest to date. Del Monte's decision for choosing the young painter was without reason. At this time Caravaggio had spent around 6 years in Rome mainly enjoying the patronage of Del Monte. Many of Caravaggio's early works most of which were stillebens and mainly characterised by their joyous and carefree nature, with sharp colours and easily decipherable subject matters such as his Bacchus, musicians, gypsy, and fruit paintings were all private commissions by Del Monte.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore Caravaggio had since his arrival in Rome been associated with d'Arpino, having worked as an assistant in the mannerist's studio. In his monograph on Caravaggio, Howard Hibbard even suggests that Caravaggio may have already been involved in the decoration of the Contarelli chapel alongside d'Arpino, assisting in painting the ceiling frescos.<sup>17</sup> Regardless Caravaggio's undertaking would now be larger in both scale and scope than anything he had painting thus far in his career.

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<sup>15</sup> Hibbard. P. 93

<sup>16</sup> Langdon. P. 148-153

<sup>17</sup> Hibbard. P. 91



## 2.2 *Martyrdom of S. Matthew*

Caravaggio's undertaking posed two unique problems for the painter.

First comes the aforementioned challenge of scale. His contract for the Contarelli Chapel called for two paintings, as opposed to Muziano's original contract of six, depicting the calling and the martyrdom of S. Matthew. As to the reason why he was commissioned to only paint two paintings when Muziano had originally been commissioned to paint six is unbeknownst to us. Yet we can guess at the answer being related to the small sum of money left, as well as del Montes or the priests of San Luigi dei Francesi wishes for a grander painting, and thus in line with the traditional historical painting, to further emphasize Matthew's life and honour him as a saint in accordance with the tenants of the Catholic faith and the decrees of the Council of Trent. For Caravaggio this meant having to study larger religious and historical paintings. Despite the talent and the obvious mastery of painting that Caravaggio possessed his lack of experience is often brought up as a point of contention when talking about the Contarelli Chapel, in particular the *Martyrdom* painting.

Of the two paintings *The Martyrdom of S. Matthew* (FIG 1) and *The Calling of S. Matthew* (FIG 2) we don't know with certainty which one Caravaggio began to paint first, but it has been suggested based on different x-ray scans of the underlying canvas (FIG 5) that he started with the martyrdom.<sup>18</sup> It is also through these x-ray scans that the postulate of Caravaggio's lack of skill with larger paintings is brought up. The original painting which can be seen on the scans of the underlying canvas depicts a congregation filled with a myriad of different characters. All of these characters are considerably smaller in scale than in Caravaggio's finalised version of the *Martyrdom*.<sup>19</sup> We see the character of S. Matthew standing somewhat dumbfounded with his arms slightly raised and the palms of his hand facing his attacker. The assailant stands before S. Matthew and with great energy swings his sword towards the apostle whilst the whole congregation observes in shock at the scene. A point of interest for those keen on studying the *Martyrdom* is how far Caravaggio had come along on the original painting before he decided to redo the whole painting. This hints at the fact that either Caravaggio thought he could work with the original scene

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<sup>18</sup> Hibbard. P. 91

<sup>19</sup> Olson, Todd P. *Pitiful Relics: Caravaggio's Martyrdom of St. Matthew*, Representations, Vol. 77, No. 1, 2002. Print. P. 108-109

and, as it has been suggested, simply attempt to rescale the figures.<sup>20</sup> Or, arguably more likely, that he or the priest of San Luigi were dissatisfied with the way the painting was turning out.

This second postulate is further underlined when we take the finalised version into consideration. Caravaggio would remove the vast majority of the characters and thus compositionally change the scene of the martyrdom, as well as re-envision the character of Matthew and the moment of his martyrdom. The removal of the staffage characters created a stronger centralised scene in which we see Matthew on this back one armed stretched out to reach the palm branch by the angel above him. This hand is grabbed by the assailant as he makes ready to thrust his sword into Matthew. In his article on *The Martyrdom of S. Matthew* Todd Olson argues that this shift from the passive, somewhat dumbfounded protagonist we see on the underlying canvas, to a more active and arguable more heroic or saint-like character was done so in accordance with the treaties of Alberti and Council of Trent emphasis on the elevation of saints. However a there is a further point to be made when considering the finalised version of Caravaggio's *Martyrdom* relating to the second problem Caravaggio encountered in his undertaking.

This second problem faced by Caravaggio is related to subject matter; S. Matthew. One would understandable assume the evangelists and the events of their lives had by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century been depicted in a myriad of paintings. In some regards this is true. Paintings depicting John the evangelist, who at this time was still believed to be the same figure as S. John the Baptist, were plentiful. In Venetian art depictions of S. Mark the evangelist was similarly plentiful given the important religious status of S. Mark in Venice and his relics which are said to reside in the San Marco Cathedral in Venice. The evangelist S. Luke did not hold the same place of religious importance that S. Mark did in Venice, nor S. John for the entirety of the Catholic faith. Yet S. Luke's status as the patron saint of artist, in particular painters, meant that he was held in high favour by painters and other artisan guilds and thus paintings of S. Luke were somewhat common. However S. Matthew, regardless of the importance of his gospel, was rarely depicted let alone being the main focus of religious paintings. The most commonplace to find depictions of Matthew are in pendentives or minor frescos or mosaics in apses being placed alongside the three other evangelists. For Caravaggio undertaking at the Contarelli Chapel this meant either having to rely

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<sup>20</sup> The probable reason for Caravaggio reusing the same canvas is arguably rooted in the cost of acquiring a new canvas of the size required for the chapel.

on the few available depictions of S. Matthew or rely on his own interpretation of the source material.

To my knowledge there were only two other depictions of the martyrdom of St. Matthew located in Rome at the time Caravaggio got the commission for the Contarelli Chapel. One of which was the aforementioned painting (FIG 3) by Girolamo Muziano for the Mattei chapel in S. Maria in Aracoeli painted in 1587.<sup>21</sup> The other was a fresco by an unknown artist sometime in 1599 in the church of S. Nereo e Achilleo (FIG 6).<sup>22</sup> Due to their unique nature and their relevance to Caravaggio undertaking at the Contarelli Chapel it is not only likely that Caravaggio knew of these paintings, but that he probably made studies of them. However at which point in the process of painting the *Martyrdom* he took these into consideration is unclear. The reason I'm stressing the chronology of when Caravaggio turned to these depictions is due to the similar nature of between Caravaggio's finalised version of the *Martyrdom* and particularly Muziano's painting, and to a lesser extent the S. Nereo e Achilleo fresco.

The composition and subject matter of the scene painted by Muziano follows the traditional iconography of S. Matthew and it is executed more or less in exact accordance with the scene of S. Matthew's martyrdom as described in Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea*. The story goes that the king of Ethiopia, King Hirtacus, wanted Matthew to wed him and the virgin Ephigenia. Yet when the sermon was held Matthew rejected the marriage by arguing that Ephigenia had already devoted her life to God and thus was already wed to the lord. Outraged the king left the sermon and collected his guards who upon breaching the church murdered Matthew by plunging a sword through his back.<sup>23</sup> Muziano depicted the scene inside the church where we observe multiple assailants barging in on the sermon. In the very spacious and open centre of the painting we see the apostle, shown as an older bearded man clad in blue and white garbs, kneeling at the altar steps with his right hand raised as if to give or receive a blessing. The hand is raised towards King Hirtacus who clad in pink garbs turns his head towards one of his men as he identifies Matthew by pointing his left hand at the apostle. Behind the kneeling Matthew we see one of the soldiers with his left hand on Matthew's shoulder and the other grasping his sword as he makes

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<sup>21</sup> Camiz, Franca Trinchieri. *Death and Rebirth in Caravaggio's "Martyrdom of St. Matthew"*, *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 11, No. 22, 1990. Print. P. 89

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* P. 89

<sup>23</sup> De Voragine, Jacobus. *The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine*, translated and adapted by Ryan, Granger and Helmut Ripperger, Arno Press: Longmans, Green & Co, 1941. Print. P. 562.

ready to thrust the weapon into the apostle's back. To the left of the spectacle we see Ephigenia, clad in bright blue and yellow coloured garbs with a tiara on her head standing behind a prie-dieu.

Not taking into consideration the characteristically mannerist traits of having a myriad of very bright and clear colours in all variations, the composition of Muziano's painting strongly evokes that of Caravaggio's finalised version of the *Martyrdom*. There is a similar emphasis on a strong central scene with the assailant and Matthew. This open central space is similarly achieved in both paintings by having the assailant characters observe from a distance and the characters of the congregation fleeing from the scene. Similarly, Muziano's Matthew evokes a strong sense of ethos, an almost stoic form of calmness as he accepts his faith in the resolution that he will give his life for the lord. There is also a striking similarity between the assailant in Muziano's and Caravaggio's paintings. They share a similar contrapposto-like pose with their sword hand pulled slightly behind as they make ready to thrust their sword into Matthew. Both characters are grasping Matthew with their left hand as if to hold the apostle in place before carrying out their murderous deed on the altar steps of the church. There are even staffage characters in in both paintings which share similar poses and expressions such as the man mimicking Ephigenia's gesture found slightly above Matthew in Muziano's painting, and the character with the same gesture seen to the left of the assailant in Caravaggio's painting. These similarities are too specific to simply be coincidental. And equally interesting is the fact that very few if none of these similarities appear in Caravaggio's original *Martyrdom* found on the underlying canvas. Caravaggio must clearly have been inspired in some way by Muziano's painting and this begs the question; why did Caravaggio reuse so many ideas from Muziano's painting?

This question may serve as an interesting point in our current understand of Caravaggio's *Martyrdom*. Being the seminal and arguably most important figure in the development of the Baroque style, Caravaggio and his paintings are seen as the clear breakaway from the outdated mannerist style. Yet how could one of his two breakout paintings rely so heavily on the work of a mannerist? It is now important that we do not let our modern preconceived notion of how revolutionary Caravaggio's art *would* become cloud our understand of Caravaggio at this very time in history. His fame and originality was at the time of *Martyrdom* far from cemented.<sup>24</sup> Further it is reasonable to assume that Caravaggio did not view himself, if he ever, as a paradigm shifting

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<sup>24</sup> Bellori writes that Caravaggio enjoyed great fame among the younger generations of painters in Rome. Bellori himself was a critic of Caravaggio and preferred the more traditional style of painting.

artist whose works changed the shape of art to come. In many ways his revolutionary status was not something he achieved, as much as it was something given to him by later generations of painters. And even than 17<sup>th</sup> century contemporary writers like Giovanni Bellori was largely critical of Caravaggio's approach to painting.<sup>25</sup> Now in what respect Caravaggio would view himself and a painter like Muziano as equal in style and expression is arguable and most likely the baroque master would not consider himself a follower of mannerist style. And subsequently we are left with a probable yet perhaps unsatisfying or anticlimactic answer to the question of why *Martyrdom* relies so much on Muziano's painting. I find most likely that Caravaggio simply ran out of time. His commission was originally given so that the Contarelli Chapel could be finished in time for the jubilee year of 1600, and as Hibbard writes that we should assume that work began in the mid 1599.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore Caravaggio being as we've seen unexperienced with paintings at this scale as well as having to complete not just one but two paintings in the span of two years, as well as nearly completing one only to scarp it later and redo the entire scene, we begin to understand that Caravaggio must have felt the pressure amounting. Further we need to remember that this was his first public commission and arguably the most pivotal point in his career as a painter. A perceived failed attempt by a young painter attempting a scene beyond his abilities could ruin his chances of further public commissions.

Yet although Caravaggio may have played it safer with a more traditional composition with reliance on Muziano's painting, we must not dismiss some of the radical changes Caravaggio did concerning the iconography of the *Martyrdom*. First and probably most notable is the lack of the character of Ephigenia and King Hirtacus. Both in Muziano's painting and the S. Nereo e Achilleo fresco Ephigenia plays a central role as the counterpart to Matthew. In Muziano's *Martyrdom* she strongly evokes the Virgin Mary being clad in the characteristically blue shroud. She further underlines the resolution of faith in God as she shares the stoic ethos of Matthew's expression. Further there are religious similarities between Ephigenia and the Virgin Mary as both have stories dealing with the idea of being married to God. Similarly the S. Nereo e Achilleo fresco's depiction of Ephigenia is strongly evocative of the Virgin Mary and here one can even argue that she is the main character being placed in the open central space where in both Muziano's and Caravaggio's

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<sup>25</sup> Hass, Angela. *Caravaggio's Calling of St Matthew Reconsidered*, Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, Vol. 51, 1988. Print. P. 248

<sup>26</sup> Hibbard. P. 95

paintings the scene of Matthew's martyrdom takes place. King Hirtacus does not seem to be present in the S. Nereo e Achilleo fresco, similar to Caravaggio's painting. Yet the most striking similarity between the fresco at S. Nereo e Achilleo and Caravaggio's *Martyrdom* is their change in the depiction of how Matthew died. In his opus De Voragine clearly states that Matthew was stabbed in the back, just as Muziano depicts it. The S. Nereo e Achilleo fresco and Caravaggio's *Martyrdom* rejects this and has Matthew lying on his back facing the assailant. Whether or not Caravaggio was inspired by the fresco is unknown although certainly a possibility. Yet I believe the aforementioned article by Olson gives a better and more plausible answer to this change in iconography. Caravaggio need a more active character with an ultimately more heroic last moment facing his assailant as oppose to being stabbed in the back. And this very choice by Caravaggio's may further explain why he also decided to remove Ephigenia and King Hirtacus from the character gallery. Caravaggio's *Martyrdom* is not a strictly historical scene of the events of the martyrdom of S. Matthew as much as it is a depiction of the moment of his martyrdom. This dramatization and momentariness in not only a characteristic of Caravaggio, but also a characteristic of the growing emphasis in the Catholic church on saints, their examples, suffering, and ultimate apotheosis. Yet perhaps even more important the synthesis of the emphasis of the church on suffering and apotheosis and Caravaggio's dramatization and momentariness is one of the main if characteristics of the baroque style as a whole.

Hibbard writes that *The Martyrdom of S. Matthew* "remains us of more traditional compositions than *Calling*, and perhaps less important as a document in the career of Caravaggio the revolutionary."<sup>27</sup> Caravaggio clearly relies on the traditional composition of Muziano's previous iteration of the scene. However simply viewing the *Martyrdom* as a less important document due to its traditional approach to form avoids Caravaggio's willingness to both achieving uniqueness through the change in iconography and narrative, as well as relying on already existent works of art. In many ways we should see the *Martyrdom* as a defining link between the last remnants of the renaissance style and the beginning of the baroque style. LINK?

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<sup>27</sup> Hibbard. P. 102



### 2.3 *The Calling of S. Matthew*

Due to the somewhat erratic nature of *The Martyrdom of S. Matthew* (FIG 1) which should be attributed to its reworking and heavy reliance on Muziano's previous iteration of the motive and its more traditional nature than later works by Caravaggio it is not always included in the pantheon of Caravaggio's greatest and most iconic oeuvres. It has never enjoyed the same kind of universal acclaim that its sister-painting *The Calling of S. Matthew* (FIG 2) has enjoyed. As seen in my previous chapter it is not without reason that many have seen the *Martyrdom* as a 'less important document' in Caravaggio's career.

Yet there are many features present in the *Martyrdom* of which I have not touch on, which are characteristically Caravaggio and baroque, yet is more famously executed in the *Calling*. One of these is his use of recurring characters from his previous paintings. These characters are more characteristically motifs of Caravaggio rather than being of actual importance in the understanding and interpretation of his oeuvres, although they do allude to a certain feeling or aura that lends itself to lesser independent interpretations within the painting. They arguably serve some purpose in both the *Martyrdom* and the *Calling* by alluding to status or class. Another characteristic of Caravaggio found in both paintings is what I'll call a contemporary feel within the painting. Caravaggio was fond of portraying his characters, even historical characters, in his times contemporary clothes. In the *Martyrdom* some of Caravaggio's recurring characters are seen in 'modern' clothes, however S. Matthew is seen in more period specific garbs and his assailant along with a few other staffage characters are portrayed almost as classic nude figures. In the *Calling* on the other hand every character beside Christ and S. Peter are portrayed in contemporary garbs.

However, the most pressing of the characteristics found in both paintings is Caravaggio's signature tenebrism. The antithesis of the more traditional chiaroscuro effect is a prominent feature of the majority of Caravaggio's later works, although he had implemented this compositional device in earlier paintings as well.<sup>28</sup> Arguably the reason its execution is so famous in the *Calling* as oppose to the *Martyrdom* is its strong narrative purpose. The contrast between the dark setting of the tax-collectors and the bright ray of light streaming in from the top right of the painting

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<sup>28</sup> Caravaggio painted many variations of some of his earlier works, some of them in the tenebrism style. However the most famous examples of earlier works which heavily features tenebrism are the *Sacrifice of Isaac* (1598) *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (1598) and *David and Goliath* (1599).

underlines the both the calling from Christ, echoing his pointing finger, as well as showing that God's grace has shone on the soon to be apostle. It would thus be conceivable to assume that the ray of light would shine most brightly on the S. Matthew, yet the *Calling* is strangely enigmatic its portrayal of S. Matthew. The question of which of the characters is S. Matthew has been a recurring point of contention within art history and the discussion of Caravaggio's *Calling*. And it is perhaps here that we may best see Caravaggio's reliance on previous depictions of S. Matthew and previous iterations of his calling.

As mentioned, the *Calling of S. Matthew* features several of Caravaggio's recurring characters. One of these is the aristocrat from *The Fortune Teller* (FIG 7) who sits to the right facing us with his gaze lifted in response to Christ's arrival. Here we see how Caravaggio's recurring characters allude to a certain feel seeing as the status of aristocracy underlines the theme of money and affluence which is a central theme not just in the *Calling* but in S. Matthew's iconography generally. Sitting opposite the aristocrat we find a similar figure with similar rich clothes, hat with feather, and action, albeit a more engaged and inquisitive reaction than his opposing counterpart. To the right of the congress of tax-collectors we find Christ accompanied by S. Peter. Christ stands resolute with his right arm stretched outwards pointing his index finger famously reminiscent of Michelangelo's Adam in *The Creation of Adam* (FIG 8) in the Sistine Chapel. S. Peter affirms Christ's action by having his right hand pointing towards the crowd, gazing down at the now called S. Matthew.

Of the five men present at the tax-collectors table only three seems to acknowledge the presence of Christ and S. Peter; the two aristocrats at the right end of the table and the central character. This central character is traditionally understood as S. Matthew. Bellori describes the painting in his opus *The Lives of the Artist* in 1672:

“Several heads are drawn from life, among which is the saint, who interrupts his counting of money and with one hand on his breast, turns toward the Lord.”<sup>29</sup>

The character Bellori describes as S. Matthew is an older man with a full beard and long hair, dressed in fine clothes of red, yellow and black. Similar to the two characters to the right he wears a hat, yet instead of the feather, a coin is fastened in its brim. His right arm is stretched forwards

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<sup>29</sup> Bellori, Giovanni Pietro. *Le Vite de' Pittori, Scvltori et Architetti Moderni*.

towards the pile of coins laying on the table and with his left hand he makes a pointing gesture. The nature of this gesture is unsure. Bellori describes the gesture as “hold a hand on his breast”, not mentioning the pointing nature of the gesture nor its relationship of the gestures of Christ and S. Peter. The easiest explanation of the gesture, and arguably Bellori’s point, is that the character is pointing towards himself affirming the gesture of Christ and Peter and thus answering the call. However, the foreshortening of the figures finger is somewhat lacking making the gesture appear to be directed towards the character on the far left as oppose to himself. This character on the far left is furthermore clutching a bag of coins against his breast such as Bellori describes S. Matthew, however this is the only feature resonating with Bellori’s description and should not be taken as a cue to dismiss Bellori’s identification of the central character as S. Matthew.

However, the identification of S. Matthew in *The Calling of S. Matthew* has been a topic of debate within the study of Caravaggio and the Contarelli Chapel, and his identification is an interesting point in our understanding of Caravaggio’s approach to the painting. In her 1988 article *Caravaggio’s Calling of St. Matthew Reconsidered* art historian Angela Hass argues that we should re-evaluate both the painting and Bellori’s identification of Matthew. Hass’s analysis of Caravaggio’s *The Calling of S. Matthew* is mainly an iconographic one. It relies primarily on previous depictions of the saint as seen in da Vinci’s depiction of S. Matthew in *The Last Supper* and in Jan van Hemessen’s *The Calling of S. Matthew*, and these depictions in relationship with Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea*.<sup>30</sup> She points out two key features in Caravaggio’s painting which seemingly do not adhere to the common understanding of the paintings composition or the traditional iconography of S. Matthew; firstly the pointing gesture of the central character traditionally understood as Matthew, and secondly the iconographic and characteristic similarities between the character seated to the far left, furthest away from Christ, and previous iterations of S. Matthew.

The pointing gesture of the central character, Hass argues, should not be understood as a ‘who me?’ gesture, such as the one postulated by Hibbard in his monograph on Caravaggio,<sup>31</sup> but instead as a ‘who him?’ gesture.<sup>32</sup> The argument for this is compelling, being based primarily on the lack of foreshortening in the character’s finger. Hass’ compares this character’s figure with the

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<sup>30</sup> Hass. P. 246

<sup>31</sup> Hibbard. P. 96

<sup>32</sup> Hass. P. 247

hand of S. Matthew as found in da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (FIG 9). In da Vinci's painting we see S. Matthew, the third from the left, stretching out and pointing both his hands outwards to the right as he turns his head towards St. Jude and St. Simon. To Matthews left we see St. Phillippe who like Matthew makes a pointing gesture, yet Phillippe's finger is pointed inwards towards himself. The foreshortening of the fingers of both characters is perfectly executed by the da Vinci giving both characters an unmistakable intention. Hass postulates that Caravaggio probably had seen and studied da Vinci's painting well and would thus have attempted to execute the foreshortening in similar manner.

Yet, although without doubt being one of the most skilled painters of his time, being both a master of the art and a natural talent as such, there are more than a few Caravaggio paintings which features less than ideal execution, particular in regard to foreshadowing. This has led to several oddities in Caravaggio's paintings.<sup>33</sup> Examples of these are S. Paul's horse in *The Conversion on the Way to Damascus* (FIG 10) with its unproportionable large head compared to its body. Similarly, the odd foreshortening of the shoulder of S. Nicodemus in *The Entombment of Christ* (FIG 11) gives no clear idea for the observer as to whether the saint has a disproportionately large shoulder and short upper arm, or if he has a hunched back. This particular feature must have stumbled even admirers of Caravaggio's paintings and in his near contemporary time seeing as Ruben's version of Caravaggio's painting (FIG 12) have a clear colour difference between S. Nicodemus' torso and arm, as well as placing part of Christ shroud over the saints back, hiding the imperfect anatomy of Caravaggio's painting. Thus, it is possible that in *The Calling of St. Matthew* it was Caravaggio lack of achieving the same effect that da Vinci had achieved and not an intentional choice by the baroque master, that has led to this discrepancy between character and composition.

The second argument for reconsidering *The Calling of St. Matthew* and Bellori's identification lies in what Hass sees as a similarity between the Matthew of da Vinci and the Matthew found in the Flemish painter Jan van Hemessen's 1548 painting *The Calling of St. Matthew* (FIG 13), and the character seated at the far left in Caravaggio's the *Calling*. Da Vinci's depicts S. Matthew as a young beardless man seen in a strong profile. This Matthew very much echoes the character seated at the end of the table in Caravaggio's *Calling*. Although these two

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<sup>33</sup> In *The Calling of Matthew*, the tax-collectors table stands seemingly perfectly upright despite only being supported by two legs on the left hand side.

character feature distinctly different facial features with da Vinci's Matthew having a large strong chin and angled nose and the character to the far left in Caravaggio *Calling* having an almost tucked in chin with a large round dominant nose, they do share the same stern profile and lack of facial hair. Further Hass supports the argument of the beardless Matthew by looking at Van Hemessen's painting of the calling. She identifies the young beardless man closest to Christ holding a counting table as the apostle. A compelling argument is made by suggesting that the counting table in Hemessen's painting and the tax-collectors table in Caravaggio's serves the same purpose; to show the greed of Matthew's profession and portray it as the obstacle he must overcome in order to serve the lord. This sentiment is well echoed in de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea* who writes:

“Matthew committed the sin of avarice (...). These three (David, Soul, and Matthew) men, therefore, were sinners. Yet their repentance was so pleasing to the Lord that not only did He forgive them, but also heaped His gifts upon them in greater abundance.”<sup>34</sup>

Yet Van Hemessen's painting of the calling of S. Matthew is almost as, if not more enigmatic than Caravaggio's later painting of the same motive. Although van Hemessen's painting follows a deeper and more diagonal composition than Caravaggio's, the scene is remarkable similar. Christ stands at the back looking diagonally down towards the tax-collectors table at which we find four character. Closest to Christ we see the young beardless man holding a counting table with coin which Hass identified as Matthew. Following we find a woman with her arms around a richly dressed bearded man sitting at the end of the table. This well-dressed makes a gesture of surprise or shock with one hand stretched outwards and the other raised towards his head. The woman to his left is seemingly trying to calm him. Opposite the bearded man and woman we find the fourth character seated at the table, a bearded man with his head bowed and buried in a book presumptively a tax-ledger. Interpreting the scene purely compositionally it would appear that the well-dressed man in the foreground gesturing after being overcome with some affliction or insight is S. Matthew. The eyes of Christ seemingly gaze down at this man creating a clear diagonal

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<sup>34</sup> Voragine. P. 566

connection between the eyes of Christ and the eyes of the well-dressed man. This character is also the only active character in the scene, beside Christ, which may hint at his presumed sainthood being the central character of the scene. And if we consider another painting of the same motive as seen in Marius van Reymerswaele, another Flemish artist and a contemporary of van Hemessen, *The Calling of S. Matthew* (FIG 14), we find further evidence to support that the well-dressed man is S. Matthew. In Reymerswaele's painting we find only two central characters, Christ and S. Matthew, with the apostle appearing as a bearded, richly dressed, older man.

It thus seems more likely that the common iconography of S. Matthew is a richly dressed, bearded man, and it would thus seem that da Vinci's depiction of S. Matthew is the exception, not the norm. Thus we return to Caravaggio's *The Calling of S. Matthew* and by viewing it in light of these previous depictions of the apostle I would concur with Bellori's description that the central character around the tax-collectors table is the apostle. The central placement of the S. Matthew around the table in the *Calling* also echoes his central placement in the *Martyrdom*. And as a last point in regard to the identification of the apostle in *Calling* we should not dismiss the third painting of S. Matthew that Caravaggio painted when he returned to the Contarelli Chapel two years later to create the altarpiece, *The Inspiration of S. Matthew*. Caravaggio's third Matthew strongly evokes the central character of the *Calling*.

### 3.1 The Shape of Art to Come

When we enquire into the lives and art of those whom history has deemed as not only great, but singularly exceptional in their ability, influence, and importance, it is easy to fall prey to a preconceived notion that everything they did was simply revolutionary. Because if what they did and what they created did not differentiate itself on such a level or was filled with such originality how could they then truly be as great as history have deemed them? The truth is that all artist built themselves on those who came before, especially those pivotal artists who ushered in a new era of style. Caravaggio's art was not revolutionary in its time because it defied all expectations and decorum, but because he found new artistic expressions in an already established artistic tradition.

This further underlines why it is both important and insightful to view artist not through the lens of whom they influenced and why, but rather to enquire into how they changed the artistic landscape of their time. How did they portray something familiar and established differently, or what were their intentions? In the case of Caravaggio's breakthrough on the world scene with *The Martyrdom of S. Matthew* and *The Calling of S. Matthew* we have seen that these pivotal works rely quite heavily on previous iterations of the same scene and motives. Yet it is how Caravaggio worked with, not against, this established motives which ultimately led to their artistic importance. And it was ultimately Caravaggio's willingness and intention to create, re-envision, and reconsider the established decorum in light of his own unique styles made him the seminal and arguably most important artist in the shape of the art to come.

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