

CARAVAGGIO, CONDEMNED TO DEATH, PAINTED HIS OWN PORTRAIT...

■ By Lucy Gordan

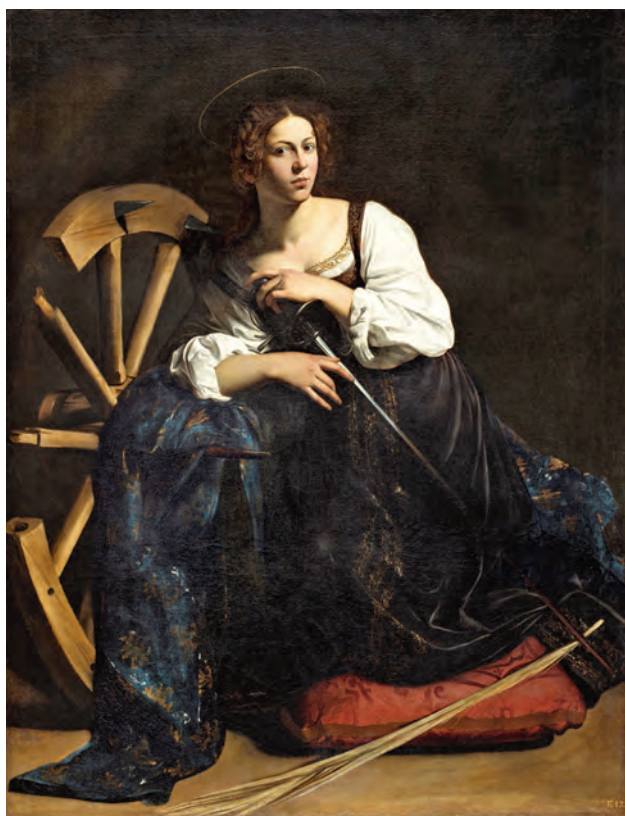
In April 1951, in Milan's Palazzo Reale, the scholar Roberto Longhi curated the first exhibition in history dedicated to Caravaggio, whose name had been forgotten for over three centuries.

Born in Milan in 1571, Michelangelo Merisi was five years old when he moved with his siblings and his mother to her hometown, Caravaggio, to escape the plague ravaging Milan which killed both his grandfather and father.

When his mother also died in 1574, Merisi moved back to Milan to train as a painter with Simone Peterzano, a student of Titian, before moving to Rome in c. 1591. Here he called himself "Caravaggio" so his works would not be compared with those of another Michelangelo — Buonarroti.

Hot-tempered and frequently violent, Caravaggio, after a difficult start, thanks to Costantino Spada, a secondhand dealer who sold Caravaggio's first paintings, and then to well-connected patrons, had a successful and prolific career in Rome.

That is, until 1606, when he stabbed to death the pimp/small-time gangster Ranuccio Tomasoni during a brawl over a courtesan in Piazza Navona. Caravaggio, who'd already had several clashes with the authorities, was sentenced to death by beheading but, protected by the noble Colonna family, he fled



St. Catherine of Alexandria is "Caravaggio 2025"'s logo.

(Photo credit: Museo Nacional Thyssen Bornemisza, Madrid.)

first to Naples, then to Malta, and lastly to Sicily (Siracusa and Messina) and then back to Naples. Nonetheless, Rome was always in his heart and, promised a papal pardon, he was on his way back by *felucca* (a small boat), when he died, probably of malaria, in Porto Ercole in 1610.

On display until July 6 in the exhibit "Caravaggio 2025" are 24 of Caravaggio's some 60 masterpieces (almost all painted in Rome) which scholars agree are authentic. (advance booking: www.barberini.corsini.org/caravaggio-2025; some 60,000 tickets already sold before March 7, its opening day).

It's being held in Rome's National Gallery of Ancient Art, better-known as Palazzo Barberini, once the home of Antonio Barberini (1569-1646), one of Caravaggio's most important patron/collectors and the nephew of Maffeo Barberini, who became Pope Urban VIII in 1623.

Four of Barberini's Caravagios have never left Palazzo Barberini's collection after Antonio's purchases and are on display: *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (c.1598), *St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness* (c.1602-04), *St. Francis in Meditation* (1606), and *Narcissus* (c.1599). (This last is the only painting of a mythological subject attributed to Caravaggio, so it is possible that it is not authentic.)



Judith Beheading Holofernes was first owned by Ottavio Costa and then Cardinal Antonio Barberini. Since Barberini's purchase it has never left Palazzo Barberini. Judith is the same model as St.

Catherine of Alexandria and the woman holding the mirror in Detroit's *Martha and Mary Magdalene*. Holofernes is a self-portrait of Caravaggio who was sentenced to death by beheading. (Photo credit: Gallerie Nazionali di Arte Antica, Roma-MiC)



St. Francis in Ecstasy, Caravaggio's earliest painting of a religious subject with *Judith Beheading Holofernes*.

Above right, *Ecce Homo*. (Photo: Icon Trust).

Below, *St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness* is one of the three St. John the Baptists exhibited here together for the first time.

(Photo Nelson-Atkins Digital Production and Preservation, Kansas).

Before Barberini, Caravaggio had two patron/collectors.

One was the refined and eclectic cardinal — also an expert on music and singing — Francesco Maria del Monte, who owned *The Musicians*, *St. Catherine of Alexandria* and *The Cardsharps* by Caravaggio. (At Del Monte's death in 1627, Barberini purchased these Caravaggios, later sold by his heirs and so dispersed).

Caravaggio's other early patron/collector was the Genoese banker Count Ottavio Costa (1554-1637), the first owner of the striking *St. Francis in Ecstasy*, Caravaggio's earliest painting of a religious subject, and of *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, sold to Antonio Barberini and, as mentioned above, still in Palazzo Barberini.

Caravaggio's final collector was the cutthroat Cardinal Scipione Borghese, nephew of Pope Paul V, and the self-appointed mediator of Caravaggio's papal pardon, in exchange for several of his paintings. Not surprisingly, Scipione in 1613 founded the Borghese Gallery, which is now lending three of its Caravaggio canvases which have never been lent before: *Young Sick Bacchus*, *David with the Head of Goliath* and *St. John the Baptist*. (The Borghese's other three: *St. Jerome in his study*, *Madonna dei Palafrenieri* and *St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness* aren't displayed in "Caravaggio 2025").

Another "Roman" Caravaggio, *The Fortune Teller*, originally owned by Cardinal Del Monte, is on loan from



the Capitoline Museums. The other canvases are returning to Rome, for the first time in centuries, from private collections and museums in Italy: Gallerie d'Italia (Naples), the Uffizzi (Florence), Pinacoteca di Brera (Milan) and Capodimonte (Naples). Others come from around the world: Detroit Institute of Art (*Martha and Mary Magdalene*); Kimball Art Museum, Fort Worth (*The Cardsharps*); the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (*The Musicians*); Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City (*St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness*); Wadsworth Atheneum of Art, Hartford (*St. Francis in Ecstasy*); Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid (*St. Catherine of Alexandria*); National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin (*The Taking of Christ*) and Royal Collection

Trust, London (*Boy Peeling a Fruit*).

Displayed in chronological order, "Caravaggio 2025" is divided into four sections: "Making a Name in Rome" covers his arrival in Rome and his first short-lived job painting flowers for Cavalier d'Arpino through his commissions by Del Monte and Costa (1597); "Invigorating the Dark Shades" discusses his portraits, although only a few still exist; "The Sacred and the Tragic Between Rome and Naples" begins with his commissions for San Luigi dei Francesi, where he used *chiaroscuro* lighting for the first time, and represents a watershed in his production because from then on, Caravaggio would focus almost exclusively on religious subjects; and "End Game" includes

the works he painted after he left Naples in the summer of 1607 for Malta, where he was arrested again and again escaped, fleeing first to Sicily and then back to Naples, where he painted The Borghese Gallery's *St. John the Baptist* and the *Martyrdom of St. Ursula* shortly before his final, tragic journey.

The exhibition's star canvases are three:

— *Ecce Homo* was painted in Naples and taken to Madrid by the wife of vice-roy, Count of Castrillo, at the outbreak of the 1609 plague. It was only rediscovered in 2021, when a Spanish private collector put it up for auction in Madrid.

Attributed to an insignificant artist, the suggested starting bid was 1,500 euro, or about \$1,800, but the Spanish government pulled the painting after several Italian dealers and art historians identified the work as a Caravaggio. After an extensive restoration, the painting was bought by an anonymous Spanish client who has lent the work long-term to the Prado Museum in Madrid, which in turn has lent it to "Caravaggio 2025." This is the first time it has returned to Italy.

— *Portrait of Maffei Barberini*, also in a private collection in Spain, had never been displayed in public until a few months ago when it was loaned to the Palazzo Barberini, its original home, which is presently negotiating to buy it.

— *The Conversion of Saul* was commissioned (1604-05) soon after Caravaggio's cycle of works dedicated to Saint Matthew in San Luigi dei Francesi. This commission consisted of two paintings for the Cerasi Chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo. Caravaggio's first versions of the *Crucifixion of Peter* and the *Conversion of Saul* were rejected because they were painted while the chapel was under construction and the canvases were too big for the space allotted to them.

Thus, Caravaggio repainted them both. The first version of the *Crucifixion* was lost.

But the first version of the *Conversion* is on loan from a private collection in Rome. It's painted on a very large cypress panel (237x189 cm), so far more precious than the canvas version in the Cerasi Chapel.

Also noteworthy is the fact that many of Caravaggio's paintings contain his self-portrait, sometimes alone, but more frequently as part of the scene. It appears alone in



Above right, *The Musicians* first belonged to Cardinal Del Monte, then to Cardinal Antonio Barberini, and now to The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The person between the musician and the man with his back turned to the viewer is a self-portrait of Caravaggio. (Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art).

Caravaggio's earliest two canvases painted in Rome, both dating to 1596, *The Boy Peeling Fruit* and the *Young Sick Bacchus*; one of *The Musicians* (1597); as Holofernes in *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (1599-1600) (he painted several versions of this scene because, needless to say, Caravaggio was terrified of being beheaded); in *The Taking of Christ* (1602), as Goliath in *David with the Head of Goliath* (1606 or 1609-1610), and in his last painting, *The Martyrdom of St. Ursula* (1610), certainly one of the paintings traveling with him to pay for his pardon and in poor condition because its paint was still

wet when he started his journey.

Besides his recurring self-portraits, Caravaggio used the same people as his models, usually his drinking mates or courtesans, no matter what the painting's subject.

For example, the protagonists of *St. Catherine of Alexandria*, the woman holding the mirror in *Martha and Mary Magdalene*, and Judith in *Judith Beheading Holofernes* are the same model, possibly Fillide Melandroni, a courtesan from Siena — all displayed side-by-side for the first time.

In addition, several of his canvases depict the same subject (not all displayed in "Caravaggio 2025"): *Boy Peeling Fruit*, *Lute Player*, *The Fortune Teller*, *Supper at Emmaus*, *David and Goliath*, *St. Francis of Assisi* and *St. Jerome*.

Here, for example, are three paintings of St. John the Baptist that have never before been displayed together.

Not surprisingly, more of Caravaggio's many paintings are permanently displayed in Rome than in any other city in the world. In addition to the Villa Borghese's three, the Doria Pamphili Gallery has two not on loan — not to omit the several in Rome's churches:

San Luigi dei Francesi, Santa Maria del Popolo, and Sant'Agostino, which are not exhibited in "Caravaggio 2025" because they are easily accessible in situ.

Visitors to "Caravaggio 2025" will be able to get tickets on weekends to see his only known fresco (1597). Located a short walk away in the Casino Boncompagni Ludovico, first owned by Cardinal Francesco Maria Del Monte, it depicts Jupiter, Neptune and Pluto. ○



Portrait of Maffei Barberini, who became Pope Urban VIII in 1623. (Photo credit: Private Collection).