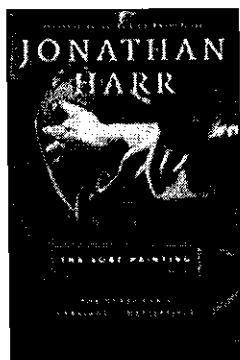


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### The Lost Painting

By Jonathan Harr  
Random House,  
\$24.95  
272 pages  
ISBN 0375508015

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## Art mystery

INTERVIEW BY ALDEN MUDGE

### Jonathan Harr tracks a lost masterpiece

Months before he completed what would become his 1995 award-winning bestseller *A Civil Action* (and years before it was turned into the hit movie starring John Travolta), Jonathan Harr ran out of money.

So when an editor from the *New York Times* magazine called and asked him to write a piece for the magazine, Harr leapt at the chance. The story he ended up pursuing was about the improbable discovery in Ireland of a painting by the great Italian Baroque artist Caravaggio that had been missing for 200 years. Harr sensed there was a bigger story to be told and proposed writing a book about it to his agent. Alas, *A Civil Action* had not yet been published to critical and popular acclaim, and Harr was not famous. His agent told him nobody would give him the money he needed to do the research for the book.

"I just let it go," Harr says during a call to Perugia, Italy, where he has recently completed a course in Italian literature and is now writing short fiction. Harr and his wife live most of the year in Northampton, Massachusetts, but they also have an apartment in Rome. "Rome is noisy and chaotic," Harr says. "It was wonderful when I first got there, but I'm getting a little tired of it. I needed to get out. Perugia is very quiet, very peaceful, very beautiful."



After the rebuff from his agent, Harr spent a few years exploring other book ideas—another legal book along the lines of *A Civil Action*, then an archaeological dig on the Syrian-Turkish border. For any number of reasons these projects didn't pan out, and he eventually returned to his interest in the subject of **The Lost Painting**.

Lucky for us.

**The Lost Painting** is an engrossing and exhilarating weave of art history, detective work and human drama. In conversation, Harr says he struggled to bring the threads of this story together. But his struggles will be invisible to most readers. Here, as in *A Civil Action*, Harr is able to find the right measure of technical detail and emotional conflict to make his intersecting narratives come alive. This is all the more remarkable because the story shifts between modern-day Rome and Dublin, where scholars and art restorers vie to find and authenticate Caravaggio's painting, and late 16th-century Rome, when Caravaggio walked its streets.

Caravaggio was a violent, temperamental artist who left a vivid trail in police and court records in Rome, died young and somewhat mysteriously in exile, and created some of the most sublimely beautiful paintings of the era. Harr agrees with editors of the British art journal *Burlington* who assert that Caravaggio is the first realist painter. "A lot of his paintings are religious paintings, although there's a big debate about how religious he was," Harr says. "I think he wasn't religious at all. But he painted these religious scenes using everyday people, the clothing that people were dressed in at the time, and he painted them with dramatic intensity, all of which was new. He really invented that dark background with a single source of light outside of the painting. His paintings have a drama and a vividness that nobody before had."

As interesting as Caravaggio's story is, it actually pales in comparison to the story Harr tells of Francesca Cappelletti, a young Italian art researcher who with her colleague, Laura Testa, made a seemingly small discovery in the dank, poorly kept archives of the once-grand Antici-Mattei family that would prove invaluable to the authentication of Caravaggio's lost painting called "The Taking of Christ." Francesca was "wonderfully cooperative and open," Harr says. "If she hadn't been, I simply would have gone on to something else." Harr deploys Francesca's truly astonishing openness about all aspects of her life to great effect. Through her story, he is able to convey both the intellectual and the emotional importance of what might otherwise seem dry and dusty research.

Far less cooperative was the other main protagonist in Harr's narrative, an Italian art restorer working at the Irish national gallery named Sergio Benedetti. "A difficult and complicated man," Sergio was the first to suspect that a painting he was asked to examine by Irish Jesuits was an original Caravaggio.

"It was Sergio's absolute burning desire to climb out of the basement of restoration into something more exalted, into being an art historian, which in Italy is the equivalent of being a doctor or a lawyer," Harr says. Along the way Sergio apparently made some critical misjudgments while restoring the Caravaggio painting. "He's committed no crime," Harr hastens to add. "He made a mistake due to his own ardor and anxiety, his own desire to see this painting

[acknowledged]."

Harr frets that Sergio's unwillingness to talk openly about his mistake weakens his story. "He's litigious, too," Harr says, "so I anticipate problems." But in fact, Sergio's prickly reticence makes for an illuminating contrast with Francesca's openness. And it allows—or forces—Harr to write in some detail about the technology and techniques of art restoration, something he does exceptionally well.

"I love the research, love putting things together. It's like solving a puzzle," Harr says near the end of our conversation. And in **The Lost Painting**, he delivers an enthralling solution to the 200-year-old puzzle of what happened to Caravaggio's lost painting.

Alden Mudge writes from Oakland, California.

Author photo by Sandro Cutri.

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## CARAVAGGIO

(b. 1571, Caravaggio, d. 1610, Porto Ercole)

### BIOGRAPHY



#### Martha and Mary Magdalene

c. 1598  
Oil on canvas, 97,8 x 132,7 cm  
Institute of Arts, Detroit

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The painting has an iconographically very unusual theme. It shows Martha reproaching Mary Magdalene for her vanity, a subject that we know through a series of copies. The painting at Detroit has recently been recognized as the original.

The religious theme is treated in a substantially profane manner. It is a pretext for making passages of highly intensive painting and for constructing an image that, seen in the context of the usual dichotomy of Caravaggio's early years, is more of a genre scene than a religious one.

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*On Kingdom Mountain*







# Caravaggio

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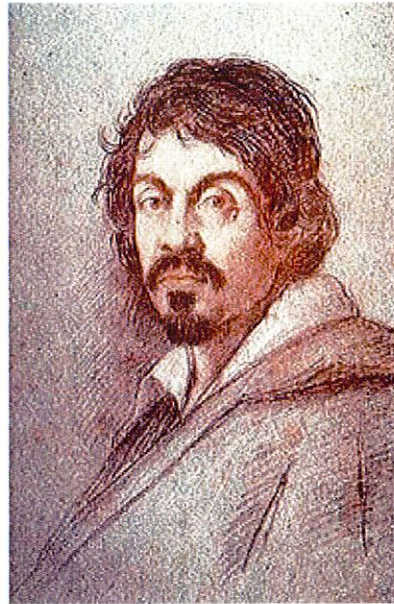
**Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio** (28 September 1571 – 18 July 1610) was an Italian artist active in Rome, Naples, Malta and Sicily between 1593 and 1610. He is commonly placed in the Baroque school, of which he was the first great representative.

Caravaggio was considered enigmatic, fascinating, rebellious and dangerous. He burst upon the Rome art scene in 1600, and thereafter never lacked for commissions or patrons, yet handled his success atrociously. An early published notice on him, dating from 1604 and describing his lifestyle some three years previously, tells how "after a fortnight's work he will swagger about for a month or two with a sword at his side and a servant following him, from one ball-court to the next, ever ready to engage in a fight or an argument, so that it is most awkward to get along with him."<sup>[1]</sup> In 1606 he killed a young man in a brawl and fled from Rome with a price on his head. In Malta in 1608 he was involved in another brawl, and yet another in Naples in 1609, possibly a deliberate attempt on his life by unidentified enemies. By the next year, after a career of little more than a decade, he was dead.

Huge new churches and palazzi were being built in Rome in the decades of the late 16th and early 17th centuries, and paintings were needed to fill them. The Counter-Reformation Church searched for authentic religious art with which to counter the threat of Protestantism, and for this task the artificial conventions of Mannerism, which had ruled art for almost a century, no longer seemed adequate. Caravaggio's novelty was a radical naturalism which combined close physical observation with a dramatic, even theatrical, approach to chiaroscuro, the use of light and shadow.

Famous and extremely influential while he lived, Caravaggio was almost entirely forgotten in the centuries after his death, and it was only in the 20th century that his importance to the

## Caravaggio



Chalk portrait of Caravaggio by Ottavio Leoni, c. 1621.

**Birth name** Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio

**Born** 28 September 1571  
Milan

**Died** 18 July 1610 (aged 38) (Aged 38)  
Porto Ercole, near Grosseto in  
Tuscany

**Nationality** Italian

**Field** Painting

**Famous works** see works by Caravaggio

development of Western art was rediscovered. Yet despite this his influence on the common style which eventually emerged from the ruins of Mannerism, the new Baroque, was profound. Andre Berne-Joffroy, Paul Valéry's secretary, said of him: "What begins in the work of Caravaggio is, quite simply, modern painting."<sup>[2]</sup>

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## Biography

### Early life (1571–1592)

Caravaggio was born in Milan,<sup>[3]</sup> where his father, Fermo Merisi, was a household administrator and architect-decorator to the Marchese of Caravaggio. His mother, Lucia Aratori, came from a propertied family of the same district. In 1576 the family moved to Caravaggio to escape a plague which ravaged Milan. Caravaggio's father died there in 1577. It is assumed that the artist grew up in Caravaggio, but his family kept up connections with the Sforzas and with the powerful Colonna family, who were allied by marriage with the Sforzas, and destined to play a major role in Caravaggio's later life.<sup>[4]</sup> In 1584 he was apprenticed for four years to the Lombard painter Simone Peterzano, described in the contract of apprenticeship as a pupil of Titian. Caravaggio appears to have stayed in the Milan-Caravaggio area after his apprenticeship ended, but it is possible that he visited Venice and saw the works of Giorgione, whom he was later accused of aping, and of Titian. Certainly he would have become familiar with the art treasures of Milan, including Leonardo's *Last Supper*, and with the regional Lombard art, a style which valued "simplicity and attention to naturalistic detail"<sup>[5]</sup> and was closer to the naturalism of Germany than to the stylised formality and grandeur of Roman Mannerism.

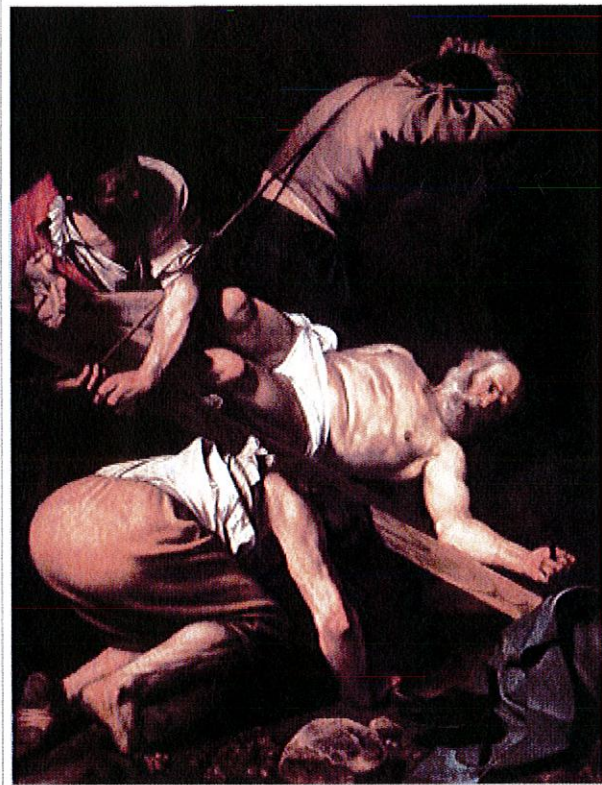


## Rome (1592–1600)



In mid-  
1592

*Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, c. 1593.  
Oil on canvas, 67 x 53 cm. Galleria  
Borghese, Rome.



*The Crucifixion of Saint Peter*, 1601. Cerasi  
Chapel, Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome.

Caravaggio arrived in Rome, “naked and extremely needy ... without fixed address and without provision ... short of money.”<sup>[6]</sup> A few months later he was performing hack-work for the highly successful Giuseppe Cesari, Pope Clement VIII’s favourite painter, “painting flowers and fruit”<sup>[7]</sup> in his factory-like workshop. Known works from this period include a small *Boy Peeling a Fruit* (his earliest known painting), a *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, and the *Young Sick Bacchus*, supposedly a self-portrait done during convalescence from a serious illness that ended his employment with Cesari. All three demonstrate the physical particularity — one aspect of his realism — for which Caravaggio was to become renowned: the fruit-basket-boy’s produce has been analysed by a professor of horticulture, who was able to identify individual cultivars right down to “... a large fig leaf with a prominent fungal scorch lesion resembling anthracnose (*Glomerella cingulata*).”<sup>[8]</sup>

Caravaggio left Cesari in January 1594, determined to make his own way. His fortunes were at their lowest ebb, yet it was now that he forged some extremely important friendships, with the painter Prospero Orsi, the architect Onorio Longhi, and the sixteen year old Sicilian artist Mario Minniti. Orsi, established in the profession, introduced him to influential collectors; Longhi, more balefully, introduced him to the world of Roman street-brawls; and Minniti served as a model and, years later, would be instrumental in helping Caravaggio to important commissions in Sicily.<sup>[9]</sup> *The Fortune Teller*, his first composition with more than one figure, shows Mario being cheated by a gypsy girl. The theme was quite new for Rome, and proved immensely influential over the next century and beyond. This, however, was in the future: at the time, Caravaggio sold it for practically nothing. *The Cardsharps* — showing another unsophisticated boy falling the victim of card cheats — is even more



psychologically complex, and perhaps Caravaggio's first true masterpiece. Like the *Fortune Teller* it was immensely popular, and over 50 copies survive. More importantly, it attracted the patronage of Cardinal Francesco Maria Del Monte, one of the leading connoisseurs in Rome. For Del Monte and his wealthy art-loving circle Caravaggio executed a number of intimate chamber-pieces — *The Musicians*, *The Lute Player*, a tipsy *Bacchus*, an allegorical but realistic *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* — featuring Minniti and other boy models.<sup>[10]</sup> The allegedly homoerotic ambience of these paintings has been the centre of considerable dispute amongst scholars and biographers since it was first raised in the later half of the 20th century.<sup>[11]</sup>

The realism returned with Caravaggio's first paintings on religious themes, and the emergence of remarkable spirituality. The first of these was the *Penitent Magdalene*, showing Mary Magdalene at the moment when she has turned from her life as a courtesan and sits weeping on the floor, her jewels scattered around her. "It seemed not a religious painting at all ... a girl sitting on a low wooden stool drying her hair ... Where was the repentance ... suffering ... promise of salvation?"<sup>[12]</sup> It was understated, in the Lombard manner, not histrionic in the Roman manner of the time. It was followed by others in the same style: *Saint Catherine*, *Martha and Mary Magdalene*,

*Judith Beheading Holofernes*, a *Sacrifice of Isaac*, a *Saint Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy*, and a *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*. The works, while viewed by a comparatively limited circle, increased Caravaggio's fame with both connoisseurs and his fellow-artists. But a true reputation would depend on public commissions, and for these it was necessary to look to the Church.

## 'Most famous painter in Rome' (1600–1606)

In 1599, presumably through the influence of Del Monte, Caravaggio contracted to decorate the Contarelli Chapel in the church of San Luigi dei Francesi. The two works making up the commission, the *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* and *Calling of Saint Matthew*, delivered in 1600, were an immediate sensation. Caravaggio's tenebrism (a heightened chiaroscuro) brought high drama to his subjects, while his acutely observed realism brought a new level of emotional intensity. Opinion among Caravaggio's artist peers was polarized. Some denounced him for various perceived failings, notably his insistence on painting from life, without drawings, but for the most part he was hailed as the saviour of art: "The painters then in Rome were greatly taken by this novelty, and the young ones particularly gathered around him, praised him as the unique imitator of nature, and looked on his work as



*The Cardsharps*, c. 1594. Oil on canvas, 107 x 99 cm. Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.

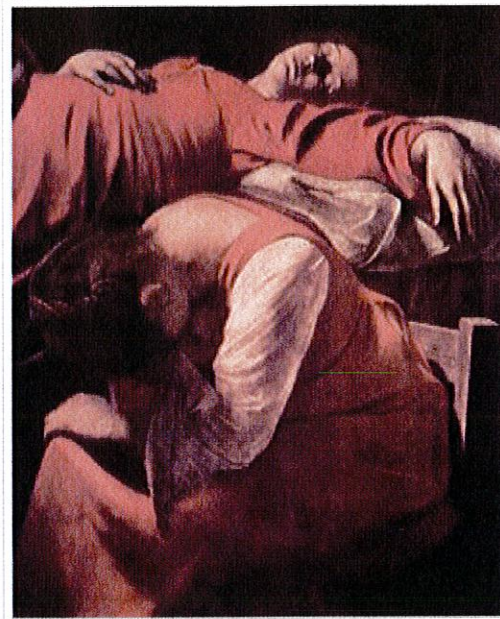




*The Calling of Saint Matthew*. 1599-1600.

Oil on canvas, 322 x 340 cm. Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome. The beam of light, which enters the picture from the direction of a real window, expresses in the blink of an eye the conversion of St Matthew, the hinge on which his destiny will turn, with no flying angels, parting clouds or other artifacts.

miracles."<sup>[13]</sup>



*Death of the Virgin* (detail). 1601 - 1606. Oil on canvas, 396 x 245 cm. Louvre, Paris.

Caravaggio went on to secure a string of prestigious commissions for religious works featuring violent struggles, grotesque

decapitations, torture and death. For the most part each new painting increased his fame, but a few were rejected by the various bodies for whom they were intended, at least in their original forms, and had to be re-painted or find new buyers. The essence of the problem was that while Caravaggio's dramatic intensity was appreciated, his realism was seen by some as unacceptably vulgar.<sup>[14]</sup> His first version of *Saint Matthew and the Angel*, featured the saint as a bald peasant with dirty legs attended by a lightly-clad over-familiar boy-angel, was rejected and had to be repainted as *The Inspiration of Saint Matthew*. Similarly, *The Conversion of Saint Paul* was rejected, and while another version of the same subject, the *Conversion on the Way to Damascus*, was accepted, it featured the saint's horse's haunches far more prominently than the saint himself, prompting this exchange between the artist and an exasperated official of Santa Maria del Popolo: "Why have you put a horse in the middle, and Saint Paul on the ground?" "Because!" "Is the horse God?" "No, but he stands in God's light!"<sup>[15]</sup>

Other works included *Entombment*, the *Madonna di Loreto* (*Madonna of the Pilgrims*), the *Grooms' Madonna*, and the *Death of the Virgin*. The history of these last two paintings illustrate the reception given to some of Caravaggio's art, and the times in which he lived. The *Grooms' Madonna*, also known as *Madonna dei palafrenieri*, painted for a small altar in Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, remained there for just two days, and was then taken off. A cardinal's secretary wrote: "In this painting there are but vulgarity, sacrilege, impiety and disgust...One would say it is a work made by a painter that can paint well, but of a dark



spirit, and who has been for a lot of time far from God, from His adoration, and from any good thought...". The *Death of the Virgin*, then, commissioned in 1601 by a wealthy jurist for his private chapel in the new Carmelite church of Santa Maria della Scala, was rejected by the Carmelites in 1606. Caravaggio's contemporary Giulio Mancini records that it was rejected because Caravaggio had used a well-known prostitute as his model for the Virgin; [16] Giovanni Baglione, another contemporary, tells us it was due to Mary's bare legs<sup>[17]</sup> — a matter of decorum in either case. Caravaggio scholar John Gash suggests that the problem for the Carmelites may have been theological rather than aesthetic, in that Caravaggio's version fails to assert the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary, the idea that the Mother of God did not die in any ordinary sense but was assumed into Heaven. The replacement altarpiece commissioned (from one of Caravaggio's most able followers, Carlo Saraceni), showed the Virgin not dead, as Caravaggio had painted her, but seated and dying; and even this was rejected, and replaced with a work which showed the Virgin not dying, but ascending into Heaven with choirs of angels. In any case, the rejection did not mean that Caravaggio or his paintings were out of favour. The *Death of the Virgin* was no sooner taken out of the church than it was purchased by the Duke of Mantua, on the advice of Rubens, and later acquired by Charles I of England before entering the French royal collection in 1671.



*Amor Vincit Omnia*. 1602 - 1603.  
Oil on canvas. 156 x 113 cm.  
Gemäldegalerie, Berlin. Caravaggio shows Cupid prevailing over all human endeavors: war, music, science, government.

One secular piece from these years is *Amor Victorious*, painted in 1602 for Vincenzo Giustiniani, a member of Del Monte's circle. The model was named in a memoir of the early 17th century as "Cecco", the diminutive for Francesco. He is possibly Francesco Boneri, identified with an artist active in the period 1610-1625 and known as Cecco del Caravaggio ('Caravaggio's Cecco'),<sup>[18]</sup> carrying a bow and arrows and trampling symbols of the warlike and peaceful arts and sciences underfoot. He is unclothed, and it is difficult to accept this grinning urchin as the Roman god Cupid – as difficult as it was to accept Caravaggio's other semi-clad adolescents as the various angels he painted in his canvases, wearing much the same stage-prop wings. The point, however, is the intense yet ambiguous reality of the work: it is simultaneously Cupid and Cecco, as Caravaggio's Virgins were simultaneously the Mother of Christ and the Roman courtesans who modeled for them.

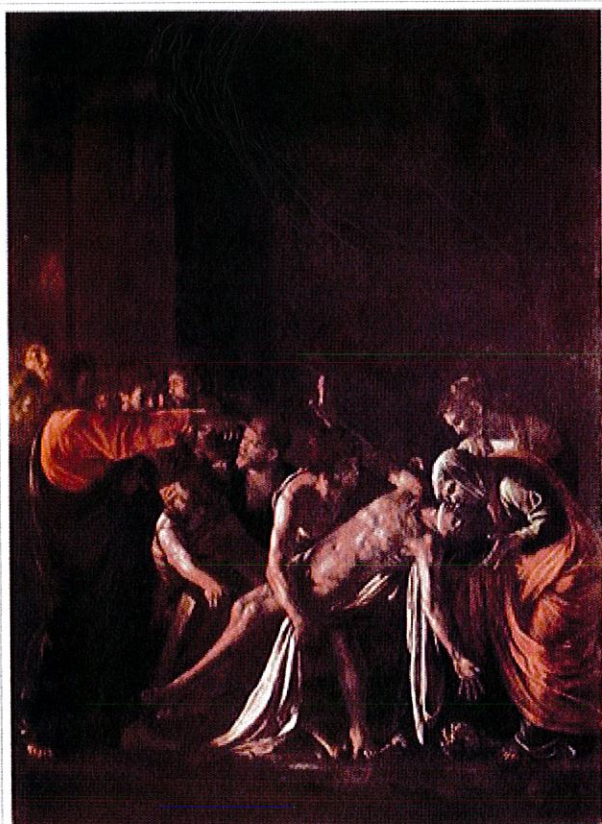
### · Exile and death (1606–1610)

Caravaggio led a tumultuous life. He was notorious for brawling, even in a time and place when such behavior was commonplace, and the transcripts of his police records and trial proceedings fill several pages. On 29 May 1606, he



killed, possibly unintentionally, a young man named Ranuccio Tomassoni.<sup>[19]</sup> Previously his high-placed patrons had protected him from the consequences of his escapades, but this time they could do nothing. Caravaggio, outlawed, fled to Naples. There, outside the jurisdiction of the Roman authorities and protected by the Colonna family, the most famous painter in Rome became the most famous in Naples. His connections with the Colonnas led to a stream of important church commissions, including the *Madonna of the Rosary*, and *The Seven Works of Mercy*.

Despite his success in Naples, after only a few months in the city Caravaggio left for Malta, the headquarters of the Knights of Malta, presumably hoping that the patronage of Alof de Wignacourt, Grand Master of the Knights, could help him secure a pardon for Tomassoni's death. De Wignacourt proved so impressed at having the famous artist as official painter to the Order that he inducted him as a knight, and the early biographer Bellori records that the artist was well pleased with his success. Major works from his Malta period include a huge *Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* (the only painting to which he put his signature) and a *Portrait of Alof de Wignacourt and his Page*, as well as portraits of other leading knights. Yet by late August of 1608 he was arrested and imprisoned. The circumstances surrounding this abrupt change of fortune have long been a matter of speculation, but recent investigation has revealed it to have been the result of yet another brawl, during which the door of a house was battered down and a knight seriously wounded.<sup>[20]</sup> By December he had been expelled from the Order "as a foul and rotten member."<sup>[21]</sup>



*The Raising of Lazarus* (1609), Museo Regionale Uffici, Messina.

Before the expulsion Caravaggio had escaped to Sicily and the company of his old friend Mario Minniti, who was now married and living in Syracuse. Together they set off on what amounted to a triumphal tour from Syracuse to Messina and on to the island capital, Palermo. In each city Caravaggio continued to win prestigious and well-paid commissions. Among other works from this period are a *Burial of St. Lucy*, a *The Raising of Lazarus*, and an *Adoration of the Shepherds*. His style continued to evolve, showing now friezes of figures isolated against vast empty backgrounds. "His great Sicilian altarpieces isolate their shadowy, pitifully poor figures in vast areas of darkness; they suggest the desperate fears and frailty of man, and at the same time convey, with a new yet desolate tenderness, the beauty of humility and of the meek, who shall inherit the earth."<sup>[22]</sup> Contemporary reports depict a man whose behaviour was becoming increasingly bizarre,



sleeping fully armed and in his clothes, ripping up a painting at a slight word of criticism, mocking the local painters.<sup>[23]</sup>

After only nine months in Sicily Caravaggio returned to Naples. According to his earliest biographer he was being pursued by enemies while in Sicily and felt it safest to place himself under the protection of the Colonnas until he could secure his pardon from the pope (now Paul V) and return to Rome.<sup>[24]</sup> In Naples he painted *The Denial of Saint Peter*, a final *John the Baptist (Borghese)*, and, his last picture, *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula*. His style continued to evolve — Saint Ursula is caught in a moment of highest action and drama, as the arrow fired by the king of the Huns strikes her in the breast, unlike earlier paintings which had all the immobility of the posed models. The brushwork was much freer and more impressionistic. Had Caravaggio lived, something new would have come.



*The Denial of Saint Peter*, c. 1610. Oil on canvas, 94 x 125 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. In the chiaroscuro a woman points two fingers at Peter while a soldier points a third. Caravaggio tells the story of Peter denying Christ three times with this symbolism.

In Naples an attempt was made on his life, by persons unknown. At first it was reported in Rome that the "famous artist" Caravaggio was dead, but then it was learned that he was alive, but seriously disfigured in the face. He painted a *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist (Madrid)*, showing his own head on a platter, and sent it to de Wignacourt as a plea for forgiveness. Perhaps at this time he painted also a *David with the Head of Goliath*, showing the young David with a strangely sorrowful expression gazing on the wounded head of the giant, which is again Caravaggio's. This painting he may have sent to the unscrupulous art-loving cardinal-nephew Scipione Borghese, who had the power to grant or withhold pardons.<sup>[25]</sup>

In the summer of 1610 he took a boat northwards to receive the pardon, which seemed imminent thanks to his powerful Roman friends. With him were three last paintings, gifts for Cardinal Scipione.<sup>[26]</sup> What happened next is the subject of much confusion and conjecture. The bare facts are that on 28 July an anonymous *avviso* (private newsletter) from Rome to the ducal court of Urbino reported that Caravaggio was dead. Three days later another *avviso* said that he had died of fever. These were the earliest, brief accounts of his death, which later underwent much elaboration. No body was found.<sup>[27]</sup> A poet friend of the artist later gave 18 July as the date of death, and a recent researcher claims to have discovered a death notice showing that the artist died on that day of a fever in Porto Ercole,<sup>[28]</sup> near Grosseto in Tuscany.

## Caravaggio the artist



## The birth of Baroque

Caravaggio “put the oscuro (shadows) into chiaroscuro.”<sup>[29]</sup> Chiaroscuro was practiced long before he came on the scene, but it was Caravaggio who made the technique definitive, darkening the shadows and transfixing the subject in a blinding shaft of light. With this came the acute observation of physical and psychological reality which formed the ground both for his immense popularity and for his frequent problems with his religious commissions. He worked at great speed, from live models, scoring basic guides directly onto the canvas with the end of the brush handle.

The approach was anathema to the skilled artists of his day, who decried his refusal to work from drawings and to idealise his figures. Yet the models were basic to his realism. Some

have been identified, including Mario Minniti and Francesco Boneri, both fellow-artists, Mario appearing as various figures in the early secular works, the young Francesco as a succession of angels, Baptists and Davids in the later canvasses. His female models include Fillide Melandroni, Anna Bianchini, and Maddalena Antognetti (the "Lena" mentioned in court documents of the "artichoke" case<sup>[30]</sup> as Caravaggio's concubine), all well-known prostitutes, who appear as female religious figures including the Virgin and various saints.

<sup>[31]</sup> Caravaggio himself appears in several paintings, his final self-portrait being as the witness on the far right to the *Martyrdom of Saint Ursula*.<sup>[32]</sup>



*The Taking of Christ*, 1602. National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin. Caravaggio's application of the chiaroscuro technique shows through on the faces and armour notwithstanding the lack of a visible shaft of light.



*Supper at Emmaus*, 1601. Oil on canvas, 139 x 195 cm. National Gallery, London.

Caravaggio had a noteworthy ability to express in one scene of unsurpassed vividness the passing of a crucial moment. *The Supper at Emmaus* depicts the recognition of Christ by his disciples: a moment before he is a fellow traveler, mourning the passing of the Messiah, as he never ceases to be to the inn-keeper's eyes, the second after, he is the Saviour. In *The Calling of St Matthew*, the hand of the Saint points to himself as if he were saying “who, me?”, while his eyes, fixed upon the figure of Christ, have already said, “Yes, I will follow you”. With *The Resurrection of Lazarus*, he goes a step further, giving us a glimpse of the

actual physical process of resurrection. The body of Lazarus is still in the throes of rigor



mortis, but his hand, facing and recognizing that of Christ, is alive. Other major Baroque artists would travel the same path, for example Bernini, fascinated with themes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

## The Caravaggisti

The installation of the St. Matthew paintings in the Contarelli Chapel had an immediate impact among the younger artists in Rome, and Caravaggism became the cutting edge for every ambitious young painter. The first Caravaggisti included Giovanni Baglione (although his Caravaggio phase was short-lived) and Orazio Gentileschi. In the next generation there were Carlo Saraceni, Bartolomeo Manfredi and Orazio Borgianni. Gentileschi, despite being considerably older, was the only one of these artists to live much beyond 1620, and ended up as court painter to Charles I in England. His daughter Artemisia Gentileschi was also close to Caravaggio, and one of the most gifted of the movement. Yet in Rome and in Italy it was not Caravaggio, but the influence of Annibale Carracci, blending elements from the High Renaissance and Lombard realism, which ultimately triumphed.



*Judith Beheading Holofernes* 1598-1599.  
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome.

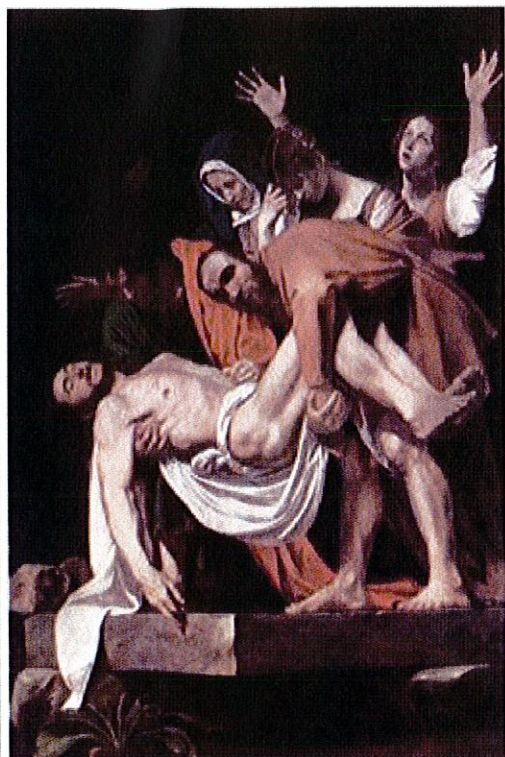
Caravaggio's brief stay in Naples produced a notable school of Neapolitan Caravaggisti, including Battistello Caracciolo and Carlo Sellitto. The Caravaggisti movement there ended with a terrible outbreak of plague in 1656, but the Spanish connection – Naples was a possession of Spain – was instrumental in forming the important Spanish branch of his influence.

A group of Catholic artists from Utrecht, the "Utrecht Caravaggisti", travelled to Rome as students in the first years of the 17th century and were profoundly influenced by the work of Caravaggio, as Bellori describes. On their return to the north this trend had a short-lived but influential flowering in the 1620s among painters like Hendrick ter Brugghen, Gerrit van Honthorst, Andries Both and Dirck van Baburen. In the following generation the affects of Caravaggio, although attenuated, are to be seen in the work of Rubens (who purchased one of his paintings for the Gonzaga of Mantua and painted a copy of the *Entombment of Christ*), Vermeer, Rembrandt, and Velazquez, the last of whom presumably saw his work during his various sojourns in Italy.

## Death and rebirth of a reputation

Caravaggio's fame scarcely survived his death. His innovations inspired the Baroque, but the Baroque





*The Entombment of Christ* (1602-1603). Pinacoteca Vaticana.

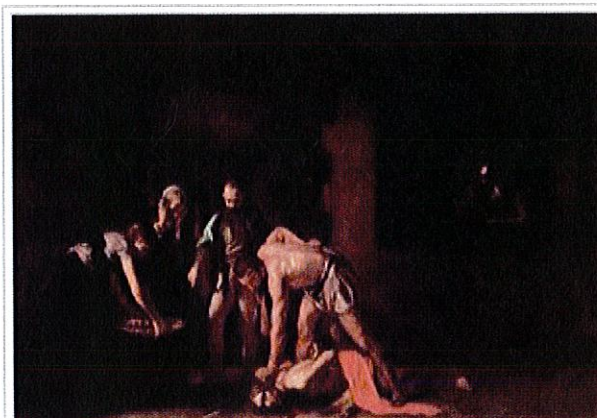
took the drama of his chiaroscuro without the psychological realism. He directly influenced the style of his companion Orazio Gentileschi, and his daughter Artemisia Gentileschi, and, at a distance, the Frenchmen Georges de La Tour and Simon Vouet, and the Spaniard Giuseppe Ribera. Yet within a few decades his works were being ascribed to less scandalous artists, or simply overlooked. The Baroque, to which he contributed so much, had moved on, and fashions had changed, but perhaps more pertinently Caravaggio never established a workshop as the Carracci's did, and thus had no school to spread his techniques. Nor did he ever set out his underlying philosophical approach to art, the psychological realism which can only be deduced from his surviving work. Thus his reputation was doubly vulnerable to the critical demolition-jobs done by two of his earliest biographers, Giovanni Baglione, a rival painter with a personal vendetta, and the influential 17th century critic Giovan Bellori, who had not known him but was under the influence of the

French Classicist Poussin, who had not known him either but hated his work.<sup>[33]</sup>

In the 1920s art critic Roberto Longhi brought Caravaggio's name once more to public attention, and placed him in the European tradition: "Ribera, Vermeer, La Tour and Rembrandt could never have existed without him. And the art of Delacroix, Courbet and Manet would have been utterly different."<sup>[34]</sup> The influential Bernard Berenson agreed: "With the exception of Michelangelo, no other Italian painter exercised so great an influence."<sup>[35]</sup>

## Modern tradition

Many large museums of art, for example those in Detroit and New York, contain rooms where dozens of paintings by as many artists display the characteristic look of the work of Caravaggio — nighttime setting, dramatic lighting, ordinary people used as models, honest description from nature. In modern times, painters like the Norwegian Odd Nerdrum and the Hungarian Tibor Csernus<sup>[[2]</sup> ([http://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Csernus\\_Tibor](http://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Csernus_Tibor)) make no secret of their attempts to emulate and update him, and the contemporary American



*The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*, 1608. Oratory of the co-Cathedral of St

artist Doug Ohlson pays homage to  
Caravaggio's influence on his own work.

John, Valletta.

Filmmaker Derek Jarman turned to the  
Caravaggio legend when creating his movie *Caravaggio*; and Dutch art forger Han van  
Meegeren used genuine Caravaggios when creating his ersatz Old Masters.

Only about 50 works by Caravaggio survive. One, *The Calling of Saints Peter and Andrew*,  
was recently authenticated and restored. It had been in storage in Hampton Court, mislabeled  
as a copy. At least a couple of his paintings have been or may have been lost in recent times.  
Richard Francis Burton writes of a "picture of St. Rosario (in the museum of the Grand Duke  
of Tuscany), showing a circle of thirty men *turpiter ligati*" which is not known to have  
survived. Also, a painting of an Angel was destroyed during the bombing of Dresden,  
though there are black and white photographs of the work.

## Chronology of major works

## See also

- Baroque
- Western painting
- History of painting

## Footnotes

1. ^ Floris Claes van Dijk, a contemporary of Caravaggio in Rome in 1601, quoted in John Gash, "Caravaggio", p.13. The quotation originates in Carl (or Karel) van Mander's *Het Schilder-Boek* of 1604, translated in full in Howard Hibbard, "Caravaggio". The first reference to Caravaggio in a contemporary document from Rome is the listing of his name, with that of Prospero Orsi as his partner, as an 'assistente' in a procession in October 1594 in honour of St. Luke (see H. Waga "Vita nota e ignota dei virtuosi al Pantheon" Rome 1992, Appendix I, pp.219 and 220ff). The earliest informative account of his life in the city is a court transcript dated 11 July 1597 where Caravaggio and Prospero Orsi were witnesses to a crime near San Luigi de' Francesi. (See "The earliest account of Caravaggio in Rome" Sandro Corradini and Maurizio Marini, *The Burlington Magazine*, pp.25-28).
2. ^ Quoted in Gilles Lambert, "Caravaggio", p.8.
3. ^ Confirmed by the finding of the baptism certificate from the Milanese parish of Santo Stefano in Brolo *L'Unità*, February 26, 2007.
4. ^ The Colonna were one of the leading aristocratic families in Rome, and part of a network of powerful connections who supported the artist at crucial points in his life. Thus in 1606, following the death of Tomassoni, he fled first to the Colonna estates south of Rome, then on to Naples where Costanza Colonna Sforza, widow of Francesco Sforza, in whose husband's household Caravaggio's father had held a position, maintained a palace. Costanza's brother Ascanio was Cardinal-Protector of the Kingdom of Naples, another brother, Marzio, was an advisor to the Spanish Viceroy, and a sister was married into the important Neapolitan Carafa family - connections which might help explain the cornucopia of major commissions which fell into Caravaggio's lap in that city. Costanza's son Fabrizio Sforza Colonna, Knight of Malta and general of the Order's galleys, appears to have facilitated his arrival in the island in 1607 and his



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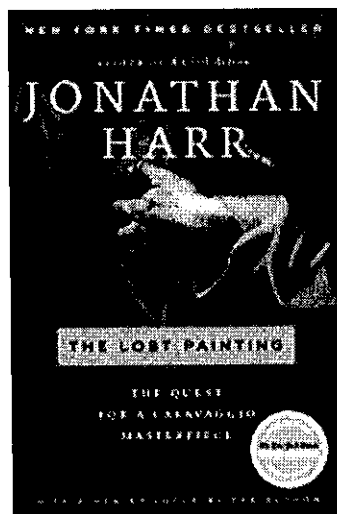
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1. Caravaggio is widely regarded by art historians as a revolutionary painter. Discuss how his work differed from his contemporaries, and how his work was received by the Church.

2. Caravaggio's reputation went into eclipse for almost three hundred years, and yet today, along with Michelangelo, Raphael, and Leonardo, he has become one of the best known of the Italian Old Masters. What is it about his work that speaks to modern tastes?

3. Discuss how and why tastes in art can change so dramatically from one era to the next.

4. One of the recurring problems among Caravaggio scholars is identifying Caravaggio's original works from among many copies. Do you believe that a high-quality copy can create the same aesthetic and emotional experience as the original for a viewer? If so, what is it about the original that makes it so important?

5. At the suggestion of their professor, Francesca and Laura published what they had discovered in the Recanati archive without informing their boss, Giampaolo Correale. How does this affect your view of the two young women? Was Correale justified in his anger?

6. This is a work of nonfiction in which the author depicts the lives and actions of real people without changing their names or concealing their identities. Discuss how you feel about their treatment. Did you feel the author was objective and fair in his depictions?

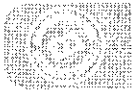
7. The world of art scholars, as described in this book, was riven with jealousies and feuds. Discuss why this was so, and whether you think other disciplines are afflicted with the same sort of atmosphere.

8. The opinion of Sir Denis Mahon was highly esteemed in the art world. Why do you think this was so? Is it reasonable to place such weight on the judgments of one man?



9. Francesca refers several times to the "Caravaggio disease," and fears at one point that she might get infected by it. What does she mean by it?

10. Benedetti left Rome and went to work in Ireland. What was it about Italy that made it so difficult for him to work there?

11. Even though Benedetti managed to repair the damage that he'd caused during the restoration of the painting, he denied that anything had gone amiss. Do you think he was justified in doing so?




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Document 1 of 1

## Jonathan Harr

1948-

Entry updated: 10/04/2006

**Birth Place:** Wisconsin, United States[Awards](#)[Career](#)[Further Readings About the Author](#)[Media Adaptations](#)[Personal Information](#)[Sidelights](#)[Source Citation](#)[Writings by the Author](#)

**Personal Information:** Born 1948, in WI; father, a foreign service officer; married; wife's name Diane (an art teacher). **Education:** Attended College of William and Mary, until 1968; also attended Marshall University and Brandeis University. **Avocational Interests:** Cooking. **Addresses:** Home: 68 Lyman Rd., Northampton, MA 01060. Office: 26 Center, Northampton, MA 01060.

**Career:** Journalist and author. Volunteers in Service to America, Washington, DC, volunteer in Appalachia, beginning 1968; *Advocate*, New Haven, CT, former journalist; *New England Monthly*, former staff writer; Smith College, Northampton, MA, part-time faculty member, 1991.

**Awards:** National Book Critics' Circle Award for nonfiction, 1995, and National Book Award nomination, both for *A Civil Action*.

### WRITINGS:



- *A Civil Action* (nonfiction), Random House (New York, NY), 1995.
- *The Lost Painting*, Random House (New York, NY), 2005.

Contributor to magazines, including *New Yorker* and *New York Times Magazine*.

**Media Adaptations:** *A Civil Action* was adapted by Steven Zaillian as a film starring John Travolta, 1998; it was adapted as an audio book read by Alan Sklar, Random House Audio Publishing Group, 1995.

### "Sidelights"

When journalist Jonathan Harr decided to research and write a book about a toxic waste lawsuit back in 1986, he expected to spend about two years on it. Although much of the work was done by then, the case was still in court for many more years, and so Harr continued to update the manuscript for *A Civil Action*, which was finally published at trial's end in 1995. The result proved well worth the effort. Harr ended up producing an award-winning book about corporate misdoings, the flaws of the judicial system, the egos of attorneys, and the victims who end up paying the highest costs of all--their lives. The case in question involved two companies--W.R. Grace and Beatrice Foods--accused of contaminating the water supply of Woburn, Massachusetts, where the impoverished, largely minority residents were experiencing an inordinately high cancer rate. Enter rich, hotshot attorney Jan Schlichtman, who was hired by several Woburn families to sue the corporations. Determined to win his case, Schlichtman became obsessed with it, eventually spending his personal income, going bankrupt, and even becoming so stressed that he contemplated suicide. Eventually, the case was settled out of court for eight million dollars; however, once the money was divided among the Woburn residents, it proved to be meager compensation for all their grief and medical expenses.

*A Civil Action*, which focuses mainly on Schlichtman's personal crusade, also relates the strategies of the attorneys defending the corporations. "I knew I didn't want to write a book about toxic waste and dead children," Harr explained in a *Publishers Weekly* article, "... I wanted to write about lawyers and the law, about people and how they work." Reviewers found *A Civil Action* to be a remarkable page-turner that conveys considerable drama. According to *Washington Monthly* reviewer Timothy Noah, "Harr's book is more than just a page-turner. It's a subtle and edifying tale about how even the 'best' lawsuits--those where the plaintiffs are battling a clear injustice--can create misery." Becoming a much-discussed case study, *A Civil Action* was heavily reviewed by law journals across the country, while it also became a popular best seller because, as Gene Lyons pointed out in *Entertainment Weekly*, it is "as engaging as the most ingenious thriller." *Booklist* contributor Gilbert Taylor wrote that Schlichtman is "drawn as vividly as a character in a mystery novel."

Harr repeated his technique for his next book, *The Lost Painting*, the story of the loss and rediscovery of *The Taking of Christ*, a rare painting by sixteenth-century Italian painter Caravaggio. Only a few of Caravaggio's paintings are known to have survived into modern times, and several, including *The Taking of Christ*, have disappeared over the intervening years. Harr relates the story from beginning to end, including covering the life of the artist himself, a tragic figure who lived on the

edges of society and died young, the graduate student Francesca Cappelletti, who determines to find the artwork, and Marchesa Mattei, "an eccentric descendant of one of Caravaggio's Roman patrons," according to Donna Seaman in *Booklist*. The much-yellowed and neglected canvas is eventually found at the home of a Jesuit priest who did not realize what he had.

*The Lost Painting*, like *A Civil Action*, is a nonfiction work made highly dramatic by the author's narrative skills, according to critics. For example, an *Economist* writer declared it to be "as perfect a work of narrative nonfiction as you could ever hope to read." A *Kirkus Reviews* critic concluded: "Harr provides a fascinating glimpse into the insular world of art history and art restoration. He also delivers an entertaining cast of characters."

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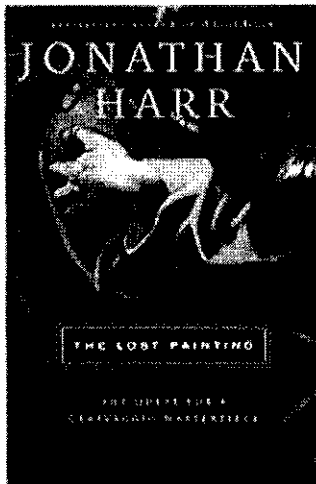
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## Editorial Reviews

### Amazon.com

In 1992 a young art student uncovered a clue in an obscure Italian archive that led to the discovery of Caravaggio's original *The Taking of the Christ*, a painting that had been presumed lost for over 200 years. How this clue--a single entry in an old listing of family possessions--led to a residence in Ireland and the subsequent restoration of this Italian Baroque masterpiece is the subject of this brisk and enthralling detective story. *The Lost Painting* reads more like a historical novel than art history, as Harr smoothly weaves several narratives together to bring the story alive. Though he does not provide an in-depth examination of the painting itself--the book is not aimed specifically at art experts--Harr does include many details for lay readers about restoration, the various methods used to track artwork through history, how originals are distinguished from copies, and an inside view of the art world, past and present. He also



discusses various forensic approaches, including X ray, infrared reflectography, chemical analysis of the paints and canvas, and other modern techniques. But most of the book is focused on more primitive methods, including dogged research through dusty archives and meticulous attention to detail.

This entertaining book boasts an engaging cast of characters, all of whom are inflicted with the "Caravaggio disease," including some of the foremost Caravaggio scholars in the world, persistent students, obsessive restorers, and most of all, the artist himself. Mercurial, supremely gifted, and prone to violence, Caravaggio lived like an outlaw and a pauper most of his troubled life. Yet even when he attained wealth and fame--and briefly, respectability--he was still hounded by the law (for murder) and numerous vengeful enemies. Harr does an admirable job of bringing the man alive in these pages while keeping his long-lost painting at the center of the action. --*Shawn Carkonen*

#### **From Publishers Weekly**

Given the relative obscurity of 16th-century the Italian baroque master and all-around creative bad boy Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, who after a flare of fame remained relatively unknown from his death until the 1950s, the 1992 discovery of the artist's missing painting *The Taking of Christ* understandably stirred up a frenzy in academic circles. Harr's skillful and long-awaited follow-up to 1997's *A Civil Action* provides a finely detailed account of the fuss. While contoured brush strokes and pentimenti repaints have little to do with the toxic waters and legalese Harr dissected in his debut, the author writes comfortably about complex artistic processes and enlivens the potentially tedious details of artistic restoration with his lively and articulate prose. Broken into short, succinct chapters, the narrative unfolds at a brisk pace, skipping quickly from the perspective of 91-year-old Caravaggio scholar Sir Denis Mahon to that of young, enterprising Francesca Cappelletti, a graduate student at the University of Rome researching the disappearance of *The Taking of Christ*. The mystery ends with Sergio Benedetti, a restorer at the National Gallery of Ireland, who ultimately discovers the lost, grime-covered masterpiece in a house owned by Jesuit priests. But while adept at coordinating dates and analyzing hairline fractures in aged paint, Harr often seems overly concerned with the step-by-step process of tracking down *The Taking of the Christ*, as if the specific artist who created it were irrelevant. Granted, Harr is not an art historian, but his lack of artistic analysis of Caravaggio's paintings may frustrate readers who wish to know more about the naturalistic Italian's works. (Nov. 1)

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#### **From *The New Yorker***

Ten years after his best-selling environmental exposé, "A Civil Action," Harr brings his narrative talents to the story of how a Caravaggio painting, "The Taking of Christ," was identified after centuries of obscurity. He follows a precocious graduate student into the archives of a crumbling palazzo, an Italian restorer moored in Ireland, and a patrician British scholar, each of whom contributes a piece of the puzzle. Harr's attempt to spin their search into a gripping thriller yields mixed results. Despite the book's tone of hushed excitement, its long inventory of detail sometimes acquires an archival feel, and its ostensible centerpieces—the drinking, brawling Caravaggio and his elusive painting—make only fleeting appearances. Harr excels, however, at anatomizing the minds of his sleuths, and gets good mileage out of the various eccentrics encountered along the way.

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#### **From The Washington Post's Book World/washingtonpost.com**

Early in *The Lost Painting*, Jonathan Harr's first book since his bestselling *A Civil Action* (1995), he mentions "the Caravaggio disease," a frenzied obsession that takes hold of some scholars who study the painter's work. It is probably safe to say that in recent years the mania has spread beyond the groves of academe to the larger world of art and commerce. The reputation of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, a violent, mercurial genius who created paintings of astonishing power during his brief, bloody life, has risen dramatically over the past few

decades.

It climbed from abysmal depths. "By the end of the seventeenth century, he was regarded as a minor painter of low repute," Harr writes. Caravaggio's critical ascent began in 1951, when scholar Roberto Longhi assembled an exhibition of his work in Milan. It has gathered momentum since then, creating a splash in 1998, when three major biographies were published:

Caravaggio: A Life, by Helen Langdon; M: The Man Who Became Caravaggio, by Peter Robb; and Caravaggio, by Catherine Puglisi. And writers continue to fall under the painter's spell. In addition to Harr's book, Francine Prose weighed in this fall with an entry in HarperCollins's Eminent Lives series (see below). What, one may wonder, can Harr offer besides yet another chronology of Caravaggio's rise, fall and rise?

Not to worry: Harr focuses more on the obsession with the master's art than on his tumultuous existence. Caravaggio, who was born in or around Milan in 1571 and died 60 miles north of Rome at age 39, left behind fewer than 80 paintings. Several were destroyed, and others, Harr writes, "have simply vanished over the centuries." The surviving paintings seldom change hands and are worth as much as \$70 to \$80 million each. The scant supply and high demand have inspired feverish quests for his lost masterpieces. For years, the most sought after of those was "The Taking of Christ," a legendary painting "that had been missing for hundreds of years."

Writing in 1969, Roberto Longhi deduced that the painting may have been sold to a Scotsman in 1802 and perhaps was "hanging in obscurity in some small church" somewhere in the British Isles. As it turns out, Longhi's educated guess was not far off the mark. In 1990, "The Taking of Christ" was found mounted on a wall in Ireland's St. Ignatius Residence, a home for Jesuit priests. "It was dark," Harr writes, "the entire surface obscured by a film of dust, grease, and soot. The varnish had turned a yellowish brown, giving the flesh tones in the faces and hands a tobacco-like hue. The robe worn by Christ had turned the color of dead leaves." After careful restoring, it was publicly unveiled at the National Gallery of Art in Ireland in 1993.

Writing from more than a decade's distance about a search whose outcome is already known, Harr has little mystery to work with here. And though he makes brief mention of rivalries among the art cognoscenti involved in the story, no villain emerges to provide conflict, spice and narrative momentum. In less skilled hands, such conditions are a recipe for deadly dullness. But Harr is a proven talent and a shrewd one as well. He wraps his tale around three central figures: Sir Denis Mahon, a nonagenarian and the world's foremost Caravaggio expert; Francesca Cappelletti, whose research as a 24-year-old graduate student helped lead the way to the lost painting; and Sergio Benedetti, a talented but frustrated restorer who actually found it. Hovering in the background is Caravaggio himself, whose turbulent misadventures Harr judiciously weaves throughout.

The three principals are portrayed with sympathy and delicacy, though Harr makes no attempt to soften their shortcomings. Benedetti's rough edges are exposed the most. Cappelletti describes the terse, secretive restorer-turned-discoverer as "the sort of man who, if you asked him, 'How are you today?' would say, 'Fine, fine. But don't tell anybody.' "

Still, it is Mahon who proves most intriguing -- and most inscrutable. A lifelong bachelor, he loathes human contact but loves rich foods, Savile Row suits and fine art. Paid vast sums to authenticate masterpieces, Mahon is motivated as much by boundless curiosity as financial interest. Harr tells us that he "believed that by studying the work of an artist he could penetrate the depths of that man's mind."



Harr waits more than 200 pages before bringing Mahon, Cappelletti and Benedetti together, giving us plenty of time to familiarize ourselves with each of them as they head toward their inevitable, triumphant climax. Along the way, Harr's lean, observant prose provides sensory intimacy without sensory overload. For example, when Cappelletti returns to the dusty archive where she uncovers valuable clues, the author takes note of "the same bare bulb and stale, damp fungal odor of stone and earth, the same opened boxes of documents and stacks of volumes on the floor, the same piles of folders and books on the table." He also provides fascinating glimpses into the restorer's art as Benedetti returns "The Taking of Christ" to its pristine glory. Benedetti's recipe for glue, an essential tool for restorers, seems made of ingredients taken from a sorcerer's spell-book: "a quantity of pellets of colla forte made with rabbit-skin glue, an equal quantity of water, a tablespoon of white vinegar, a pungent drop of purified ox bile, and a dollop of molasses to give the mixture elasticity."

He also provides an illuminating window into the tenderness and surgical exactitude with which restorers ply their trade. He quotes one veteran restorer who describes paintings as "breathing, half-organic entities: It's a good thing they can't cry . . . otherwise you would go to museums and have to put your fingers in your ears."

Harr is a dogged, patient inquisitor who learned Italian so that he wouldn't have to rely on translators as he conducted his hundreds of interviews. At times one wonders about the veracity of the dialogue when whole conversations are recalled, but only briefly, because Harr uses that approach so sparingly. What's more, he avoids falling in love with his own voice, as writers of his skill level occasionally do.

Wisely, he's content to let these passionate, eccentric and knowledgeable personalities occupy center stage. The result is a revealing portrait of a world seldom seen by ordinary folks, in which Mahon, Cappelletti, Benedetti and their peers obsessively while away the hours, "always in the company of other scholars, always talking about art." At its best, Harr's magnetic storytelling recalls Cappelletti's first encounter with the work of Caravaggio. To her, his paintings seemed "to pulse with heat and life, capturing a moment in time like a scene glimpsed through a window."

Reviewed by Jabari Asim

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#### **From Bookmarks Magazine**

After his award-winning *A Civil Action* (1995), about a civil lawsuit against a chemical manufacturer, Harr set high expectations. Critics agree that *Lost Painting*, on which he first reported in the *New York Times Magazine*, is gripping—but not as enthralling as his legal thriller. Still, Harr uses his excellent investigative reporting and storytelling skills to deliver a fast-paced account of art historical research, from the interpersonal backstabbing to the painstaking process of cleaning the painting. Unfortunately, Harr's portrayal of his two main characters suffers in comparison to his depiction of Caravaggio, a rebellious, brilliant street fighter who transformed European art. Nevertheless, most readers, whether Caravaggio aficionados or novices to Baroque art, will enjoy this scholarly thriller and homage to the artist.

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#### **From Booklist**

Harr, author of the best-selling *A Civil Action* (1995), turns from a true-life courtroom drama to the riveting story of a lost masterpiece. The Italian painter Caravaggio (1573-1610) was famous for his startling vision of the divine in ordinary lives, and infamous for his street-fighter life. An artistic genius and a fugitive killer, Caravaggio remains a compelling enigma, and his mystique is enhanced by the scarcity of his works. The disappearance of one painting in particular, *The Taking of Christ*, baffled art historians for two centuries. Harr, a consummate

storyteller, now traces the canvas' journey in an effortlessly educating and marvelously entertaining mix of art history and scholarly sleuthing. The search begins when a Roman graduate student, Francesca Cappelletti, manages to charm the Marchesa Mattei, an eccentric descendant of one of Caravaggio's Roman patrons, into allowing her and her to examine never-before-studied family archives. Meanwhile, Sergio Benedetti, an ambitious Italian restorer working in Dublin at the National Gallery of Ireland, believes that an old painting hanging in a Jesuit residence, a work in dire need of cleaning, is a forgotten Caravaggio. As Harr expertly tracks the converging quests of the students and the restorer, he incisively recounts Caravaggio's wild and tragic life, and offers evocative testimony to the resonance of his daring and magnificent work. *Donna Seaman*

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### Book Description

An Italian village on a hilltop near the Adriatic coast, a decaying palazzo facing the sea, and in the basement, cobwebbed and dusty, lit by a single bulb, an archive unknown to scholars. Here, a young graduate student from Rome, Francesca Cappelletti, makes a discovery that inspires a search for a work of art of incalculable value, a painting lost for almost two centuries.

The artist was Caravaggio, a master of the Italian Baroque. He was a genius, a revolutionary painter, and a man beset by personal demons. Four hundred years ago, he drank and brawled in the taverns and streets of Rome, moving from one rooming house to another, constantly in and out of jail, all the while painting works of transcendent emotional and visual power. He rose from obscurity to fame and wealth, but success didn't alter his violent temperament. His rage finally led him to commit murder, forcing him to flee Rome a hunted man. He died young, alone, and under strange circumstances.

Caravaggio scholars estimate that between sixty and eighty of his works are in existence today. Many others--no one knows the precise number--have been lost to time. Somewhere, surely, a masterpiece lies forgotten in a storeroom, or in a small parish church, or hanging above a fireplace, mistaken for a mere copy.

Prizewinning author Jonathan Harr embarks on an spellbinding journey to discover the long-lost painting known as The Taking of Christ--its mysterious fate and the circumstances of its disappearance have captivated Caravaggio devotees for years. After Francesca Cappelletti stumbles across a clue in that dusty archive, she tracks the painting across a continent and hundreds of years of history. But it is not until she meets Sergio Benedetti, an art restorer working in Ireland, that she finally manages to assemble all the pieces of the puzzle.

Told with consummate skill by the writer of the bestselling, award-winning *A Civil Action*, **The Lost Painting** is a remarkable synthesis of history and detective story. The fascinating details of Caravaggio's strange, turbulent career and the astonishing beauty of his work come to life in these pages. Harr's account is not unlike a Caravaggio painting: vivid, deftly wrought, and enthralling.

". . . Jonathan Harr has gone to the trouble of writing what will probably be a bestseller . . . rich and wonderful. . . in truth, the book reads better than a thriller because, unlike a lot of best-selling nonfiction authors who write in a more or less novelistic vein (Harr's previous book, *A Civil Action*, was made into a John Travolta movie), Harr doesn't plump up hi tale. He almost never foreshadows, doesn't implausibly reconstruct entire conversations and rarely throws in litanies of clearly conjectured or imagined details just for color's sake. . . if you're a sucker for Rome, and for dusk. . . [you'll] enjoy Harr's more clearly reported details about life in the city, as when--one of my favorite moments in the whole book--Francesca and another young colleague try to calm their nerves before a crucial meeting with a forbidding professor by eating gelato. And who wouldn't in Italy? The pleasures of travelogue here are incidental but not inconsiderable." --*The New York Times Book Review*



"Jonathan Harr has taken the story of the lost painting, and woven from it a deeply moving narrative about history, art and taste--and about the greed, envy, covetousness and professional jealousy of people who fall prey to obsession. It is as perfect a work of narrative nonfiction as you could ever hope to read." --*The Economist*

### About the Author

Jonathan Harr is the author of the national bestseller *A Civil Action*, winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction. He is a former staff writer at the *New England Monthly* and has written for *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times Magazine*. He lives and works in Northampton, Massachusetts, where he has taught nonfiction writing at Smith College.

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Part 1

### THE ENGLISHMAN

The Englishman moves in a slow but deliberate shuffle, knees slightly bent and feet splayed, as he crosses the piazza, heading in the direction of a restaurant named *Da Fortunato*. The year is 2001. The Englishman is ninety-one years old. He carries a cane, the old-fashioned kind, wooden with a hooked handle, although he does not always use it. The dome of his head, smooth as an eggshell, gleams pale in the bright midday Roman sun. He is dressed in his customary manner—a dark blue double-breasted suit, hand tailored on Savile Row more than thirty years ago, and a freshly starched white shirt with gold cuff links and a gold collar pin. His hearing is still sharp, his eyes clear and unclouded. He wears glasses, but then he has worn glasses ever since he was a child. The current pair are tortoiseshell and sit cockeyed on his face, the left earpiece broken at the joint. He has fashioned a temporary repair with tape. The lenses are smudged with his fingerprints.

*Da Fortunato* is located on a small street, in the shadow of the Pantheon. There are tables outside, shaded by a canopy of umbrellas, but the Englishman prefers to eat inside. The owner hurries to greet him and addresses him as Sir Denis, using his English honorific. The waiters all call him *Signore Mahon*. He speaks to them in Italian with easy fluency, although with a distinct Etonian accent.

Sir Denis takes a single glass of red wine with lunch. A waiter recommends that he try the grilled porcini mushrooms with Tuscan olive oil and sea salt, and he agrees, smiling and clapping his hands together. "It's the season!" he says in a high, bright voice to the others at his table, his guests. "They are ever so good now!"

When in Rome he always eats at *Da Fortunato*, if not constrained by invitations to dine elsewhere. He is a man of regular habits. On his many visits to the city, he has always stayed at the *Albergo del Senato*, in the same corner room on the third floor, with a window that looks out over the great smoke-grayed marble portico of the Pantheon. Back home in London, he lives in the house in which he was born, a large redbrick Victorian townhouse in the quiet, orderly confines of Cadogan Square, in Belgravia. He was an only child. He has never married, and he has no direct heirs. His lovers—on this subject he is forever discreet—have long since died.

Around the table, the topic of conversation is an artist who lived four hundred years ago, named Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. Sir Denis has studied, nose to the canvas, magnifying glass in hand, every known work by the artist. Since the death of his rival and nemesis, the great Italian art scholar Roberto Longhi, Sir Denis has been regarded as the

world's foremost authority on Caravaggio. Nowadays, younger scholars who claim the painter as their domain will challenge him on this point or that, as he himself had challenged Longhi many years ago. Even so, he is still paid handsome sums by collectors to render his opinion on the authenticity of disputed works. His verdict can mean a gain or loss of a small fortune for his clients.

To his great regret, Sir Denis tells his luncheon companions, he's never had the chance to own a painting by Caravaggio. For one thing, fewer than eighty authentic Caravaggios-some would argue no more than sixty-are known to exist. Several were destroyed during World War II, and others have simply vanished over the centuries. A genuine Caravaggio rarely comes on the market.

Sir Denis began buying the works of Baroque artists in the 1930s, when the ornate frames commanded higher prices at auction than the paintings themselves. Over the years he has amassed a virtual museum of seicento art in his house at Cadogan Square, seventy-nine masterpieces, works by Guercino, Guido Reni, the Carracci brothers, and Domenichino. He bought his last painting in 1964. By then, prices had begun to rise dramatically. After two centuries of disdain and neglect, the great tide of style had shifted, and before Sir Denis's eyes, the Italian Baroque had come back into fashion.

And no artist of that era has become more fashionable than Caravaggio. Any painting by him, even a small one, would be worth today many times the price of Sir Denis's finest Guercino. "A Caravaggio? Perhaps now as much as forty, fifty million English pounds," he says with a small shrug. "No one can say for certain."

He orders a bowl of wild strawberries for dessert. One of his guests asks about the day, many years ago, when he went in search of a missing Caravaggio. Sir Denis smiles. The episode began, he recalls, with a disagreement with Roberto Longhi, who in 1951 had mounted the first exhibition in Milan of all known works by Caravaggio. Sir Denis, then forty-one years old and already known for his eye, spent several days at the exhibition studying the paintings. Among them was a picture of St. John the Baptist as a young boy, from the Roman collection of the Doria Pamphili family. No one had ever questioned its authenticity. But the more Sir Denis looked at the painting, the more doubtful he became. Later, in the files of the Archivio di Stato in Rome, he came across the trail of another version, one he thought more likely to be the original.

He went looking for it one day in the winter of 1952. Most likely it was morning, although he does not recall this with certainty. He walked from his hotel at a brisk pace-he used to walk briskly, he says-through the narrow, cobbled streets still in morning shadow, past ancient buildings with their umber-colored walls, stained and mottled by centuries of smoke and city grime, the shuttered windows flung open to catch the early sun. He would have worn a woolen overcoat against the damp Roman chill, and a hat, a felt fedora, he believes. He dressed back then as he dresses now-a starched white shirt with a high, old-fashioned collar, a tie, a double-breasted suit-although in those days he carried an umbrella instead of the cane.

His path took him through a maze of streets, many of which, in the years just after the war, still lacked street signs. He had no trouble finding his way. Even then he knew the streets of central Rome as well as he knew London's.

At the Capitoline Hill, he climbed the long stairway up to the piazza designed by Michelangelo. A friend named Carlo Pietrangeli, the director of the Capitoline Gallery, was waiting for him. They greeted each other in the English way, with handshakes. Sir Denis does not like being embraced, and throughout his many sojourns in Italy he has largely managed to avoid the customary greeting of a clasp and a kiss on both cheeks.

Pietrangeli told Sir Denis that he had finally managed to locate the object of his search in, of all



places, the office of the mayor of Rome. Before that, the painting had hung for many years in the office of the inspector general of belle arti, in a medieval building on the Via del Portico d'Ottavia, in the Ghetto district of the city. The inspector general had regarded the painting merely as a decorative piece with a nice frame, of no particular value. The original, after all, was at the Doria Pamphili. After the war-Pietrangeli did not know the precise details-someone had moved it to the Palazzo Senatorio, and finally to the mayor's office.

Pietrangeli and Sir Denis crossed the piazza to the Palazzo Senatorio. The mayor's office lay at the end of a series of dark hallways and antechambers, a spacious room with a high ceiling and a small balcony that looked out over the ancient ruins of the Imperial Forum. There was no one in the office. Sir Denis spotted the painting hanging high on a wall.

He remembers standing beneath it, his head canted back, gazing intently up and comparing it in his mind with the one he had seen at Longhi's exhibition, the Doria Pamphili version. From his vantage point, several feet below the painting, it appeared almost identical in size and composition. It depicted a naked boy, perhaps twelve years old, partly reclined, his body in profile, but his face turned to the viewer, a coy smile crossing his mouth. Most art historians thought Caravaggio had stolen the pose from Michelangelo, from a nude in the Sistine Chapel, and had made a ribald, irreverent parody of it.

From where he stood, Sir Denis could not make out the finer details. The surface of the canvas was dark, the image of the boy obscured by layers of dust and grime and yellowed varnish. But he could tell that the quality was superb. Then again, so was the quality of the Doria Pamphili painting.

He turned to Pietrangeli and exclaimed, "For goodness sake, Carlo, we must get a closer look! We must get a ladder."

Waiting for the ladder to arrive, he paced impatiently in front of the painting, never taking his eyes off it. He thought he could discern some subtle differences between it and the Doria version. Here the boy's gaze caught the viewer directly, mockingly, whereas the eyes of the Doria boy seemed slightly averted, the smile distinctly less open. When a workman finally arrived with a ladder, Sir Denis clambered up and studied the canvas with his magnifying glass. The paint surface had the characteristic craquelure, the web of fine capillary-like cracks produced by the drying of the oil that contained the paint pigments. He saw some abrasion in the paint surface, particularly along the borders, where the canvas and the wooden stretcher behind it came into contact. In some areas, the ground, or preparatory layer, had become visible. He noted that the ground was dark reddish brown in color and roughly textured, as if sand had been mixed into it. This was precisely the type of ground that Caravaggio had often used.

He studied t...

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