

Not to be missed: Caravaggio at LACMA. By Marlena Donohue.  
December 2012.

Perhaps more than for his prodigious gifts, we are familiar with the Baroque painter Caravaggio for his reputation as the ultimate renegade. Again and again, we hear about the artist's record – public brawling, libel, homicide – described only half jokingly as longer than his commission list.

But the U.S. premier of “Bodies and Shadows: Caravaggio and His Legacy,” now at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, puts his pure and powerful talent front and center. Featuring eight of his own significant works, the show also displays nearly 50 pieces by Italian, Spanish, French and Dutch artists that demonstrate the strength of his legacy.

Because of his unusual life and talent, as well as his short career, Caravaggio's works, filled as they are with assiduous skill and emotional heat, are coveted today.) They were hoarded in his time too; devoted patrons like Cardinal Del Monte commissioned works as intended gifts to the church or friends but ultimately couldn't bear to part with the canvases). So it's a rare treat to see in one place so many of his pieces – by both Caravaggio as budding artist and as mature master – alongside those of his talented followers.

Born in 1571 in a small town near Bergamo that bore his name, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was not an unschooled prodigy, as popular myth has it; in fact, he had studied with a fresco painter in Milan before coming to Rome in 1592. Even in the dramatic, intrigue rich ambience of late-16<sup>th</sup>-century Rome, however, Caravaggio made waves, and within a very short time he counted the most illustrious personalities – Pope Paul V among them – as devoted clients.

For all his legal scrapes and terrible temper, the man dies from – of all things – malaria, which he contracted in Porto Ercole, on the Tuscan coast north of Rome, as he made his way back to the city after months on the run, finally returning to seek a Papal pardon for murder. The year 2010 marked the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Caravaggio's too-early death and age 38, and myriad exhibitions and new research emerged about the artists as a result.

“Bodies and Shadows” debuted to rave reviews at the Musée Fabre, in Montpellier, France, followed by a stop at the Musée des Augustins, in Toulouse. After the show closes in LA, it will make one final US stop at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut.

Jean-Patrice Marandel, chief curator of European art at LACMA, re-hung the exhibit to show Caravaggio in the context of artists whose works he influenced, via direct contact and across time and national borders. The exhibition gathers rare paintings from major US and international museums, including the Louvre, the National Gallery of Art, the Cleveland Museum and the Nelson-Atkins, in Kansas City, which lent its stunning and very famous *St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness*.

Marandel recently spoke with Marlena Donohue about the show, on view at LACMA through February 10, 2013.

### **Caravaggio's life reads like a movie and it often overshadows his remarkable output.**

People who know next to nothing about 17<sup>th</sup>-century Italian history or art, and who can name perhaps three pieces by him, if that, know all about Caravaggio because of his early death and violent life.

### **That's due to our fascination with the bad-boy syndrome?**

Yes, when things like tragedy, illness or madness happen to artists – think about Van Gogh or Frida Kahlo – it usually sticks in the social psyche. I had slightly other reasons for doing this. On the anniversary of his death in 2010, there was unprecedented attention that generated new research, facts and insights on the artist and his circle. I wanted to add to that fuller picture.

### **So now we can sort the truisms from the facts?**

He was described in his day as “odd” – maybe a proto-Romantic figure. He wore flowing capes, was mercurial, had a terrible temper, liked attention but reacted badly when people got too close, or tried to compete.

### **Was he an outsider by nature or necessity?**

That was his character, and he cultivated it strategically.

### **In ordered hierarchical Renaissance society why would anyone want that rep?**

He arrived in competitive Rome practically unknown, and in a very short time was the favored artist of a highly selective, elite clientele. You had to find a way to stand out.

### **He couldn't have been going to those lawless lengths just to market a bohemian persona.**

Yes that's true. A fellow painter named Giovanni Baglione got too close, like a moth to light, began to work in a style close to his, a Caravaggio turned on him, posted public notices everywhere calling Baglione a fraud, a copyist, a homosexual. Caravaggio was found guilty of libel; that was the nature of high drama and high culture in Rome at the time.

### **So, the student trying to outdo the mentor?**

Caravaggio had no students; young artists and well-known Renaissance painters frequented his studio just to pick things up, to be around him.

### **A Warhol Factory type thing?**

That's not a bad comparison. His methods were against tradition; they couldn't be taught. In academic painting, you have a way of proceeding that can be communicated systematically to an art class: First make a drawing, render a foreshortened arm this way, gesso the canvas like this, lay down the pigments in this manner. Caravaggio made no preparatory drawings, he often did first contours with the hard tip

of his brush, then worked right on the canvas as he observed models – the results were completely unique.

**If he had no students per se, how did you select the painters for this show to create a context for his impact and career?**

I picked 50 painters, from different countries and with different sensibilities, all linked to him stylistically. With Georges de La Tour, for example, you have a French artist also working in the early 1600s, but with no record of ever visiting Rome or having any direct contact with the work. Artists had to register with the church to visit Rome and there's no such record of him having done so. Yet La Tour is echoing Caravaggio-like revolutions, such as the intense transitions from light to dark and the sensual drama you see in *The Magdalen with the Smoking Flame* of 1638 from LACMA's permanent collection. This indicates the inordinate impact of Caravaggio well beyond his own day or circle.

**Caravaggio lived by working for uppercrust patrons. We know patrons decided content at that time, so he wasn't working fully from imagination.**

That was the standard way he and all Renaissance artists survived, by getting pre-contracted work. But Caravaggio often painted on spec, making the work, then showing it and selling it almost on the spot. Even when patrons commissioned a theme to adorn a public place like a chapel, they often ended up keeping the canvas for themselves.

**Which says all the posturing in the world would not have worked without his genius.**

Well, yes. You have to ask yourself, why would an elite buyer refuse to part with a work showing common people, raw scenes filled with real suffering? They were just compelling.

**His images can be downright sexy and the mixture of the erotic with the mystical or the everyday was shocking then. Was that part of it? Caravaggio's *Saint Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy*, where that gender ambiguous little angel nestles the dying Francis, who wears the oddest expression of pleasure – that's pretty shocking for religious art in the 1600s, when the church was cleaning itself up in response to Luther.**

We have the whole homosexual interpretation, yes. I think it is deeper than that, however.

**How so?**

It's easy to confuse the sensuality in his works for his ability to capture the complexity of human emotion, that experiences are never just plain joy – joy has horror, fear, relief all mixed in. If you empathize with your subject as Caravaggio did, you capture this very human mixture.

**You think his humanism was mocking the divine?**

No. Everyone in Italy then was religious, in the way one cannot escape being part of mass media today – it was the cultural fiber. He had a less orthodox vision of religiosity, but he was Catholic, and respected the tenets of the church. His paintings comply quite directly to Counter-Reformation demands that required art to be able to reach the masses, with common types depicted in dramatic moments of faith.

**His particular take on realism goes beyond religious ecstasy. You see it in the two canvases both titled Toothpuller: The earlier one, attributed to Caravaggio, is so raw, and the later one, thought to be by the Dutch artist Theodore Rombout, who we know was in Rome in 1616 is so similar yet oddly tame.**

Caravaggio's was a sign for a dental ward in a hospital. Pain and intense situations were part of everyday life in the 17<sup>th</sup> century – no anesthetics, people died on the streets, odors, war, duels, killing; he seemed unafraid to investigate that.

**Both are super theatrical, but only the Caravaggio made me both grimace yet keep looking and looking.**

The theatrical was part of standard high and low culture in Baroque Italy; there was the Comedie dell'Arte and street performances. But Caravaggio's enlightened, literate customers expected a philosophical experience beyond mere spectacle, something speaking subtly about human condition, the ages of man and struggles of existence.

**And no one prior reflected on the real and the spiritual the way he did.**

Hanging the show I realized that most of his figures are life-size, and they engage and involve our bodies in the drama, the questions. Using light, emotional edge, scale, all of it – this was now he put the viewer of his day and our day directly in the painting. I wanted to emphasize this. "Bodies and Shadows" is the exhibition title for a reason.