Playwrights have more than once managed, by means of situations and references, to build a piece about a central character who never appears. It is no dramatic device, but the actual rarity of works by Caravaggio, which has limited the representation of him to just such a shadowy outline in the Museum’s galleries of Italian paintings. Until a happy chance brings on the market a work with some claims to authenticity Caravaggio will be suggested only—by his Brescian forerunner Savoldo, by Fetti and Strozzi, who felt his influence, and by the painters of Naples, whose works were deeply marked by his sojourn in that city in 1607. Half a dozen years ago this group of Neapolitan Caravaggisti found representation in the Museum through the purchase of the large and sombrely impressive Christ and the Woman of Samaria by Caracciolo. And now the outline is further filled in by a recent purchase which brings yet another example by a Neapolitan follower, reflecting a quite different facet in Caravaggio’s complexity.

The new painting, Saint Catherine of Alexandria by the elegant and graceful Bernardo Cavallino, came from the collection of Alessandro Laliccia, a Neapolitan lawyer, who had it at least as early as 1921, when it was published by both Aldo de Rinaldis and Ettore Sestieri. Its history before that time is unknown. Because the popularity of baroque painting is so recent, old inventories and collectors’ lists are usually innocent of even the names of baroque painters, and it is not often possible to trace their works even to the beginning of this century. More recently our Saint Catherine belonged to the late Samuel Untermyer and was sold with his collection in 1940.

The picture is a three-quarter length of the beautiful, learned Alexandrian princess, rapt in an ecstasy of adoration, her lovely eyes not closed, however, in a mystic trance but open and directed toward some very moving and immediate vision. It is characteristic of the religious painting of the baroque period—which is at the same time the Counter Reformation period—to reject circumstantial representations of saints with all the paraphernalia of their miracles and martyrdoms so dear to renaissance artists. The baroque painter concentrated all his pictorial powers rather on the delineation of a state of mind or soul, often omitting those attributes which are the material for the study of iconography and depending on his audience’s ability to identify his subjects by what is known of their spiritual experiences. The more intense and emotional those experiences were, the dearer to the baroque artist; and saints like Teresa and the Magdalen and Jerome, whose days were spent in prayer and rapture, were more likely to find favor than such practical good people as Elizabeth of Hungary and Dorothy and Zeno-bius, whose recorded lives are full of saying and doing.

Saint Catherine of Alexandria was not a specifically baroque saint, but her legend, which is one of the Church’s oldest and a favorite of all times, offered enough mystical material to please Cavallino and his contemporaries. He shows her, to be sure, crowned, her left hand holding a delicate palm of martyrdom and resting on the colossal wooden wheel with strong metal rim and ugly hooked spike which her torturers used in a futile effort to break her resolve. The sword, which in Saint Catherine’s case as in so many others, was resorted to when all other means proved ineffectual, is shown at the left, resting against a table or pedestal on which lie two parchment-bound books—the source of the learning with
Saint Catherine of Alexandria by Bernardo Cavallino (1622-1654). Recently acquired by the Museum.
which she confounded Maxentius’s council of scholars. But these attributes are passive and incidental, contributing more to the composition and décor than to the interpretation of the saint. For this, Cavallino has relied upon the attitude of rapture, the hand upon the panting breast, and the thrown-back, gloriously auburn head. When one looks at the fineness and sheen of the rich hair that is so typical of Cavallino, at the sweet mouth with parted coral lips and dainty teeth, the full and rounded white throat, and the pure drawing of the eyes, it is hard to understand why the painter’s eighteenth-century biographer, De Dominici, complained of the women in his paintings. He observed that for one thing only could the artist be taken to task by a severe critic: he did not endow his ladies with that beauty of countenance that gives the idea of perfection. Perhaps the face of Saint Catherine is a little fuller than contemporary taste desired and the fine brows lack the heavy definition of those of Neapolitan beauties, but it is the youthful, ingenuous charm of the little saint, contrasted with the strong lines of architecture and the grand sweep of the drapery, that constitutes the appeal of our picture.

The composition is extraordinarily interesting and complicated. In the narrow space between the great pedestal and column at the right and the table at the left, the figure of Saint Catherine moves backward obliquely into the shadow. The wheel, which shuts off the foreground, is not parallel to the picture plane but set at an angle. Above the head of the girl, the gloomy background is rendered dramatic by a Caravaggesque device, a shaft of light cutting diagonally across the picture, a purely arbitrary lighting scheme that rarely fails in its effect.

As a matter of fact the elements in this picture derived from Caravaggio are in the nature of a common inheritance, whereas those taken from the Bolognese and from Guido Reni in particular are more or less concrete and specific—almost a borrowing. The female type with soft, smooth young face is the very same type found in many of Guido’s pictures, coming ultimately from Guido’s masters, the Carracci. Concerning Cavallino’s relation to Guido, we have an interesting note in De Dominici’s Life which might even apply to our picture. Cavallino, doing some paintings for Andrea Vaccaro, had copied certain half-lengths by Guido Reni that belonged to the Prince di Conca, among them some Virgin Saints, and wanted to do a number of similar half-lengths of his own, imitating, we are told, “that admirable master’s fine turning of the eyes.” Four of these half-lengths of Virgin Saints by Cavallino were owned by Gennaro Marotta and were later, in the year 1722, bought by the Cavaliere Giovanni Scarpin to be sent to England. Whether or not our painting of Saint Catherine is one of these tributes of Cavallino to Guido Reni, it gives us at least a good idea of what they looked like.

It is difficult to know where to place our picture in time, for the entire chronology of Cavallino’s work rests on one painting, the Saint Cecilia in the Wenner collection in Naples, which is signed and dated 1645. The large output of his very short life—from 1622 to 1654—must be grouped about this one sure point. The Saint Cecilia in the Wenner collection and a closely related version in the National Museum in Naples are extremely accomplished works of great impressiveness. But compared with these paintings in Naples, our Saint Catherine has a breadth and sweep that are surely indications of increased power, and it is not difficult to agree with Sestieri, who dates our painting some time after 1645.

Of Cavallino’s early life and training we have only the anecdotal Neapolitan account of Bernardo De Dominici, on whom, in the dearth of other evidence, even modern critics must depend. He sets out along the usual lines, giving the most obvious explanations for the influences observable in the painter’s works. There is the thwarting parent, who urges his son to apply himself to book learning and to leave bagatelles aside—and there is the schoolmaster, a frustrated would-be painter, who lends the boy some drawings by Agostino Carracci. A new note is struck when the angry father, feeling himself cheated, drags the “pedant” into court, and the judge,
demanding to see the boy’s drawings, consults his friend, the painter Stanzione, who then becomes Cavallino’s first master. Through Stanzione Cavallino came to know Andrea Vaccaro, who, we are expressly told, was not his master, but a patron and friend. It was evidently a common practice to employ indigent young painters to produce in quantity and for a pittance works that were sold and widely exported, sometimes under the names of famous painters. Cavallino was exploited in this way for some time until Vaccaro, deploring the abuse of his ability, had one of his paintings publicly exhibited. In most of his works Cavallino, prudently obeying Vaccaro’s counsel, clung to the painting of small figures, thus avoiding the mistake made, according to De Dominici, by Salvator Rosa, “who . . . believed he was better at heroic, imposing subjects than in the little figures of soldiers, mariners, and common people, in which he truly surpassed all others.”

Even if such biographies are unreliable, some germs of truth lie buried in their entertaining fiction. And the accounts of how Cavallino had looked at the painting of Artemisia Gentileschi, who stayed in Naples from 1630 to 1637, had copied a Venus by Titian, and had rushed with the other Neapolitan painters to admire a work of Rubens, do serve to remind us that in the seventeenth century there was good painting of all nationalities to be seen in Naples and that looking at it and learning from it was no mere eclecticism but good practice and good sense. That Cavallino drew from many sources is evident from his paintings; it is equally evident that he assimilated what he drew and gave to it a distinction all his own. Indeed, though the language is generous, we cannot on the whole disagree with De Dominici’s conclusion that Cavallino arrived finally at the formation of an excellent manner, which, accompanied by a grace that was naturally his, rendered his works complete in every aspect of art.