ON SOME ASPECTS OF CARAVAGGIO AND HIS TIMES

BY DENIS MAHON

Denis Mahon, formerly attaché at the National Gallery in London, has specialized in research on the Italian seventeenth century. He is at present preparing the catalogue of the Guercino drawings at Windsor Castle.

The Metropolitan Museum has recently secured an example of the relatively rare work of a great artist who had a profound impact on European painting and who has often been hailed as “the first modern painter.” As I have already discussed The Musicians in some detail elsewhere, with the full art-historical apparatus, I shall limit myself here to repeating that I identify this remarkable canvas with Caravaggio’s painting of young musicians which his contemporary, Giovanni Baglione, records as having been executed for the art-loving Cardinal del Monte immediately after the latter had taken the destitute young genius under his protection: an early work therefore, painted in the fifteen-nineties—to be dated about 1594-1595, according to my interpretation of the very complex chronological problem of the youthful group to which it must belong.

On the present occasion I should like to touch on some aspects of the background, both general and particular, which a picture of this kind reflects. Perhaps it is necessary to insist from the start on the regrettably limited scope of our knowledge and understanding of seventeenth-century Italian painting, of which Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was one of the founding spirits. The time is long overdue for a much wider recognition of the fact that, under the façade of smooth—but superficial and outdated—text-book generalizations, there exists (particularly as regards the early phases of Seicento painting) a multiplicity of intricate problems which are but rarely posed, much less solved. Specialists who have to wrestle with these questions in detail are only too well aware of the extent of the groundwork which remains to be done, but many art historians are still to be found who, having no very particular familiarity with the period, are prepared to let pass without question a variety of well-worn traditional assumptions about both tendencies and personalities of the Seicento. If, therefore, some of the readings of the situation which I venture to put forward in this necessarily brief and undoc-umented essay appear unconventional, I may perhaps excuse myself on the score that this can scarcely be avoided when the basic premises themselves need so much reworking and rethinking.

The essence of the artistic personality of Caravaggio is that it is intensely individual—to an extent, that is to say, which is well beyond the usual. Yet the very short-lived setting in which the artist makes his appearance possesses in its turn a marked, and indeed unique, character. Individual and environment are intimately interlocked, and neither is fully comprehensible without the other—nor, it may be added, can a particular work of Caravaggio be understood with some claims to completeness and balance if it is approached in abstraction from either or both of them. Yet it is just upon these subjects that confusion reigns supreme, and, what is more, confusion of ancient standing. The practice of casting Caravaggio as a type and treating the artistic events of his time in almost symbolic fashion achieved early popularity, originating as it did in the second half of the Seicento (and in this connection we must bear in mind that even the world of 1635—let alone that of 1670!

---

—was very different from that of 1600). The constant repetition, overlaid with innumerable variants, of these interpretations tended to push the highly distinct and special character of both the artist and his setting out of the foreground and to open the way to the sweeping range of “portraits” of Caravaggio which are presented to us today. To take two extremes, we have on the one hand the revolutionary of the purest die, having no connection whatever with the achievements of the past, and on the other hand a belated (and consequently slightly raffish) offshoot of the great renaissance traditions. Few would contend that these examples of apparently contradictory standpoints are devoid of a certain measure of truth. The first (by reason of the almost automatically eulogistic connotation which attaches nowadays to the imprecise concept of “originality”) has contributed powerfully to Caravaggio’s elevation to that high status which he unquestionably deserves but runs the paradoxical risk of transforming one of the most individual of painters into a generalized image, a sort of archetypal patron saint of “modern movements.” The second point of view stresses the undeniable fact, which the romantic simplifications of the first were apt to ignore, that Caravaggio owed his debts to the past; the danger here is, of course, to suppose that the artist has been thereby “explained.” But portraits of this kind (there are many others besides the two I have mentioned) have the radical disadvantage of looking at Caravaggio out of his contemporary context; it is like seeing an acquaintance in a distorting mirror—though recognizable, he is pulled out of his true shape. Moreover, it need hardly be added that such varied conclusions on the essence of the matter have necessarily had repercussions on our approach to such detailed problems of art history as chronology, connoisseurship, and the like. To redress the balance, and avoid the ever-present danger of mere irrelevance from the critical point of view, special attention could profitably be devoted to attempts to understand Caravaggio’s artistic personality as an individual whole and as related to his own times.

I should like to consider here some limited aspects of this “context” for his paintings: the area where there is an interlacing of theory and practice, taste and method. First of all it is necessary to make clear my belief that one of the most striking characteristics of the Italy of about 1600 is that art theory of a reasoned and articulate kind was, as a general rule, of little consequence to contemporary artists, and indeed hardly existed as an explicit factor bearing upon the actual creation of paintings. This view is quite at variance with more customary readings of the situation at the time in question (here I must emphasize that I employ the date 1600 in quite a precise sense). One scene we are invited to visualize is that of the gallant Caravaggio sacrificing himself while sowing the seeds of liberation from a powerful monopoly of conservative academicians who had unquestioning faith in their command of ultimate theoretics—in the most high-flown sense of the term. However, the explanation of this inspiring vision must be sought, not in the historical data, but largely on the basis that it is due to an over-flexible conception of what constitutes contemporary evidence, together with an unwarranted assumption that the ingredients of the 1600 situation must have been the same as those of later and more familiar situations apparently analogous in character—the “academy” at odds with “the advanced artist.” The fact is that such information as has come down to us speaks otherwise.

A codification of art theory proper (in other words, the setting out in connected and reasoned verbal form of those characteristics in works of art which give them higher or lower aesthetic quality) did not then exist in any shape which commanded wide and general acceptance. Indeed, art theory had been in the throes of its first great schism, that between the devotees of the two leading artistic languages, classic and painterly (in contemporary terms Roman-Florentine disegno and Veneto-Lombard colore), and a situation had developed which is best described as anarchical. It is in truth hardly possible to comprehend the vital impulses behind the state of affairs in 1600
The Musicians, by Caravaggio (1571-1610). Painted around 1594-1595. 36\(\frac{1}{4}\) x 46\(\frac{3}{8}\) inches

without having the birth, growth, implications, and ramifications of the disegno-colore controversy constantly at the back of one’s mind, but all I can do here is to stress that aspect and leave further elaboration to a different publication. The atmosphere of uncertainty which was becoming increasingly evident served to throw the figure of Caravaggio into strong relief—as a positive element with a sense of direction, someone who gave the impression of knowing what he was trying to do; moreover by crystallizing (whether accurately or tendentiously) his methods and aims in simple verbal form he himself adopted a theoretical attitude. The very simplicity (in a sense, the “anti-theoretical” character) of his reliably recorded assertions to the effect that nature alone was worth the imitating and that

“the Masters” should be ignored was especially appealing at a time when the pendulum swung restlessly between sophisticated confusion and virtual indifference, and it was undoubtedly an important factor in enabling Caravaggio to make his mark as rapidly as he did and to become a compelling and magnetic focus of interest. So much by way of roughing out a general prima facie case for the relevance to an understanding of Caravaggio of considerations bearing upon theory and taste in relation to practice and method; we may now pursue our discussion in greater detail.

Weighty evidence exists in support of the view that enthusiasm for elaborate art theory was conspicuously lacking in Rome at a moment almost exactly contemporary with the actual painting in that city of our music party. I refer to the very revealing and significant account, which has fortunately been preserved,

of the proceedings at the reunions of the Ro-
man association of painters, the Accademia
di San Luca, when Federico Zuccaro at-
ttempted without the slightest success to in-
terest its members in theoretical matters dur-
ing his short tenure of the presidency between
November 1593 and October 1594. I have dis-
cussed this affair at considerable length else-
where, with copious quotations from the very
rare original sources, so I shall confine myself
on the present occasion to summarizing the
inferences which I believe can reasonably be
drawn from them. The Zuccaro incident is
one of the most notable examples which ex-
ists of deep cleavage between the theoretical
and the practical. It is evident that the vast
majority of his fellow members (too many mis-
leading implications are generated by describ-
ing them as Academicians) had no sympathy
with what he was talking about—and indeed
precious little understanding of it. What was
abundantly clear, however, was that it had
virtually no bearing on their day-to-day work,
and this damped their enthusiasm from the
start; to be expected to listen to Zuccaro con-
juring with sophistries of dubious pertinence
became a burden and a nuisance, and as soon
as he stepped down from the presidency the the-
etical side of the Academy’s activities died
a natural death. I use the word “natural” ad-
visedly, because Zuccaro was obviously the odd
man out, and his fellow members, in declining
to be bothered with art theory, represented
what was typical. This utter indifference
speaks volumes, and it is difficult to avoid the
impression that Zuccaro was a lonely and
rather eccentric figure. Very few copies of his
written works were printed, and there was evi-
dently no demand for them; in the view of
Baglione, who was in perfectly amicable rela-
tions with Zuccaro as an individual, they were
merely strange fantasies (bizzarrie).

The almost complete dearth of publications
on painting at the beginning of the Seicento
does indeed seem to reflect a slackening of
interest in verbal speculation about art (and,
by contrast, a preoccupation with “the prac-
tical”). There had been a spate of literature in
the late Cinquecento, but from the early
nineties onwards (if we except Zuccaro) noth-
ing of importance is printed until Baglione
(1642). Monsignor Agucchi (whose Trattato
was of course not published at the time) is en-
titled to take his place as an up-to-date mind
in so far as he attempted to bring theory into
closer relation with practice; but it still re-
mained on a rarefied level. The actual content
of his views (as distinct from his leanings to-
wards a relatively more practical approach)
can hardly be claimed as representative of his
own period, in spite of its very considerable
interest as a portent of the future—winning
for him, as it eventually turned out, the posi-
tion of one of the pioneers in the application
of classic-idealist theory. Though fundamen-
tally different from Zuccaro, Agucchi was none
less, in the first decade of the century,
something of an isolated phenomenon; he was
an advocate for the acceptance of his personal
interpretation rather than the echo of a wide-
ly accepted view. On the other hand the work
(also not published) of the third writer whose
activity falls within the literary hiatus referred
to above was much more in tune with the
times; Giulio Mancini was not at all interested
in art theory in any consistent or rigorous
sense, being an amatore and dilettante in a
strictly practical way, with wide tastes and
something of the approach of the connoisseur.
Indeed the counterpart of the general absence
of art theory is that it is precisely at this junc-
ture that we witness the birth on a consider-
able scale of the practical dilettante who looks
at the painting rather than the book. Besides
practicality, one of the keynotes of that brief
moment in art history with which we are con-
cerned was experimentalism; this extended
also to the leading art patrons, and one of
the most refreshing discoveries one can make
when investigating this youthful and energetic
phase is to find that they were on the whole
a not unenlightened lot, were ready to cast
their net pretty widely, and had surprisingly
few prejudices—among which exclusive devo-
tion to classic-idealist theory can hardly be
numbered.

It is of course true that the threads of that
idealistic view of artistic excellence which had originated in classical antiquity (and which, being adopted by the Academies towards the end of the Seicento, eventually came to be described as "academic") are traceable back through our period and into the Renaissance. But there is little justification for assuming, as is frequently done, that the theory carried the same weight and breadth of acceptance at every stage of its journey; its mere existence is no guarantee of this, and there are in fact dormant moments (of which 1600 seems to be one) when it was largely ineffective. Not only (bearing in mind the indifference of the Accademia di San Luca to art theory) is it questionable to suggest that there was art-theoretical opposition to Caravaggio in what may be called "institutional" academic form, but the evidence also conflicts with the view that the idealist (later, academic) theory of art was seriously to be reckoned with as a positive and active factor in opposition to Caravaggio during his lifetime. The fact that this latter view still finds currency (it has been restated quite recently) seems to be due to faulty reasoning. It is no doubt correct to say that any elaborated theory of artistic excellence was likely to be put forward by men versed in "letters," and so the probability was that such a theory would contain traditional idealist elements (since idealist theory was the "literary" theory par excellence). But the flaw in the argument arises with the next step. Because any explicit theorists at that date had almost by definition to be learned and cultivated men—"academic" in another sense—it is assumed that this proposition is (so to speak) valid in reverse; it can then be argued that the practical attitude towards art of the learned and cultivated man in general must have been identical with the
views attributable to that tiny minority which could have been interested (if not articulate) in so far as reasoned art theory was concerned. But, as has already been pointed out, explicit art theory was in fact momentarily undergoing a recession, while what we may call its implicit variety was flourishing. Criticism—it is better not to call it theory—was in reality in the hands of the practical dilettante; the gesture of acquiring a painting is frequently a kind of simple, yet positive, criticism, since it cannot but be colored by some reflection of a critical standpoint.

For enlightenment as to the true state of affairs it is in fact necessary to turn to the activities—naturally echoing their general taste—of the foremost contemporary supporters of art. After Cardinal Federico Borromeo left Rome for Milan in 1595 the official Protectorship of the Accademia di San Luca was taken over by one of the most intelligent patrons of the time, Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte, whom we honor as the perspicacious discoverer of Caravaggio and who was at that very moment engaged in the active encouragement of the youthful innovator. In fact, The Musicians, with a certain absence of anxious tension in it which may testify, rather touchingly, to Caravaggio’s feeling of a haven reached after being buffeted by the storm, must have left its painter’s hands for the cardinal’s collection at just about this time. However, being Caravaggio’s principal protector turned out to be no sinecure, and yet Del Monte (who evidently had no doubt that he was a painter of genius) seems to have remained patiently faithful to this honorable role until the artist had to flee from Rome. Nevertheless, all through this period, and indeed long after Caravaggio’s death, the cardinal also remained the official Protector of the Accademia di San Luca. Towards the end of his life we find him still interested in what young artists were doing, commissioning works from Guercino during the latter’s short visit to Rome, and, still later, encouraging Andrea Sacchi, then at the beginning of his career. Del Monte’s artistic sympathies were obviously remarkably wide, and there is no evidence (in spite of the fact that he was a learned and cultivated man) that they were cramped by an outlook which was academic in either of the senses to which we have referred above.

The distinguished Roman family of Mattei provides another instance of leading patrons of the arts whose tastes appear to have been uninhibited by restraints which could properly be described as academic. Among the Amatori who are recorded by the Secretary of the Accademia di San Luca as having taken a special interest in that institution in the nineties is the Marchese Asdrubale Mattei, whose name is given by Bellori as the possessor of Caravaggio’s famous (now lost) Seizure of Christ in the Garden and whose brother Ciriaco had been both a purchaser at high prices of several of Caravaggio’s pictures (according to Baglione) and an especially ardent collector of classical antiquities (according to a report of 1601 from the Mantuan envoy in Rome). We know that representatives of the old mannerist tradition, artists of the Bolognese group, and even the budding young heralds of the full baroque all received commissions from the Marchese Asdrubale. And what shall we say of the Marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani, who, though he employed such classic-idealists as Albani and Domenichino to decorate his palace at Bassano di Sutri and was a renowned collector of classical antiquities, takes a leading place among the support- ers of Caravaggio, several of whose works he was proud to possess? One of the most outstanding art-lovers of his time, he seems to have had a practical familiarity with paintings (of the type which we find in the case of Mancini) and also the ability to apply it, judging by a recorded incident in which he correctly attributed to Dosso a picture the authorship of which had eluded the more professional eye of Cristoforo Roncalli. No one who is familiar with the period could deny his claims to learning and culture, yet all the evidence we have is against any assumption that his artistic tastes were either unduly influenced by traditional idealist theories or can meaningfully be described as academic; indeed the Marchese rated Caravaggio with Annibale
Carracci and Guido Reni as the greatest of modern artists.

I hope such examples will serve to explain why I am of the opinion that elaborately reasoned art theory did not play the leading part which is usually claimed for it around 1600. In this connection perhaps I may mention in parenthesis that I do not believe that the other painter of major importance in Rome at the time, Annibale Carracci, set any store at all by theory of this kind; with him, as with Caravaggio, the stress is always on practicality and experimentalism. Moreover the essence of the new spirit—"finding out for oneself"—seems to have been shared by quite a number of the leading art patrons. In fact it appears to me to be all too easy to exaggerate—in accordance, no doubt, with that romantic tradition of art history which requires an unsympathetic reception for an innovator—such unfavorable criticism as Caravaggio's work encountered when he was alive. While no one would deny that throughout his career Caravaggio generated friction in various ways (as was only to be expected from such a highly wilful and unconventional character), it would in my reading be going entirely too far to accept the customary view that he had to contend with a well-established "climate" of hostile art-theoretical opinion; on the contrary, once his first few years of finding his feet were over, Caravaggio seems to have attained a position from which he could command professional success to an enviable degree—he was sought after rather than ignored and forgotten. I can, of course, very well believe that this may have sometimes led to jealousy on the part of some of his fellow painters, but I am inclined to question whether it can reasonably be suggested that such criticisms of his work as ensued were related to an art-theoretical system in the same sense as the criticisms of later generations.

There is evidence which points (in my view, plausibly) to Caravaggio's actual methods as having been the primary cause of something of a shake-up in established professional circles. Nowadays we sometimes seem a little too ready to lose sight of the fact that certain of our categories of style, such as mannerist and naturalist, often originally reflected basic differences in working method to a considerable extent. Certainly at the particular juncture in art history with which we are concerned the factor of method was of quite exceptional importance. Caravaggio and those who followed his example were called naturalisti because of the system which they adopted of dispensing with preparatory drawings and painting directly from nature as much as possible. By contrast, those who worked without much recourse to models were described as painting "from their heads," *di maniera*, a feat which—so its adepts were liable to assert—required much previous exercise in drawing and experience with the brush. Caravaggio figured as a youthful (and North Italian!) newcomer who had by-passed the customary routine and discipline of the studios and was achieving celebrity in spite of it. In short, to "make a program"—as Caravaggio unquestionably did—of working in oils direct from the natural model (a practice which was rather contemptuously called "coloring" by those used to the Roman-Florentine traditions) was taken to imply an avoidance of that regular training in drawing which was deemed to be necessary before launching out with the brush. Certainly the success of such a procedure—newfangled in

---

1 I have already written a certain amount on the question of supposed Carraccesque theory (including the— in my view—nonexistent "eclectic" theory) and propose to develop this theme further in my forthcoming paper referred to in note 2 above.

2 Perhaps it is necessary to emphasize again that I am only referring to strictly contemporary criticisms of Caravaggio, who had left Rome in 1606 and died in 1610. The Roman artistic scene between the 1590's and the 1630's is characterized by constant transformation, and I believe that some support for Agucchi's originally rather isolated idealist-theoretical standpoint (which was, so to speak, applied interpretatively by him to the phenomenon of Annibale Carracci) did follow the rise to the highest esteem of the Carraccesque group which took place shortly before 1620. To illustrate the latter we may take the case of Cardinal Scipione Borghese (an admirer of Caravaggio in 1605-1606), who commissioned Guido Reni's Aurora in 1613 and a few years later thought it worth while to seize Domenichino's Hunt of Diana by force—such was the uninhibited enthusiasm of collectors in those days!
Rome, if not in Venice—with its obvious appeal to many of the younger painters, can hardly have been looked upon with favor by some of the older ones who had been through the mill. The original cleavage was, in my reading, on lines of this kind—easily recognizable to working artists. Such criticisms as followed would have had a professional and quasi-technical flavor. The fact that Caravaggio had more or less ignored the conventional studio training would have been readily apparent to those who had undergone it. Nothing was easier than to point out features in his paintings which could be taken to indicate that he had not mastered “the tricks of the trade.” As an example we may cite the constantly recurring difficulty which he had in the co-ordination and articulation of the human form on occasions when, for compositional reasons, its structure as a continuous whole was not visible to the spectator. Problems involving distance (which were technically not particularly baffling for the competent studio-trained artist) were always apt to worry him—perspective, foreshortening, even landscape; hence his anxiety to keep his figures together in a single plane, and so to avoid whenever possible the problems of digradazione (proportionate reductions in relative size caused by distance from the eye). If one looks at his paintings in a way which has no direct relevance to aesthetic judgment but which can be revealing for that understanding of his artistic personality which should precede it, one realizes that the individual forms have a tendency not to fit together in depth, in the sense that there is frequently an absence of visualizable ground plan.

In short, the technical embarrassments of Caravaggio were evident enough if one went out of one’s way to seek them. Moreover they could be conveniently epitomized by his notorious failure to enter the important field of large-scale decoration, which could be treated as a limitation due to incapacity. The artist’s piecemeal method of composing when faced by a large canvas could be adduced as evidence; and in this connection it may perhaps be added that his habit of actually developing a composition ad hoc directly in oils—sometimes resulting in considerable alterations—is strikingly illustrated by the really astounding radiographs of the celebrated Martyrdom of Saint Matthew, recently published by Professor Venturi. The present is hardly an appropriate occasion to embroider the ungrateful theme of those traits in Caravaggio’s art which some of his professional colleagues could have regarded as evidence of technical weakness or even incompetence; but it should be emphasized that they are partly associative with his then relatively unorthodox practice of making his compositions take shape on the canvas—in other words, subordinating the abstract a priori idea of “composition” to the concrete fact of that intimacy with nature which his direct approach permitted.

— Two instances may perhaps be taken, by way of illustration, from one of his most wonderful paintings, the Conversion of Saint Paul. How is one supposed to account for the whereabouts of the lower part of the saint’s right leg? How is the body of the old man holding the horse supposed to be articulated?

There were, however, other aspects of the matter (notwithstanding the criticisms on more or less professional lines to which Caravaggio's innovations in method exposed him), since the young artist, once he had attracted the attention of a dilettante of the caliber of Cardinal del Monte, succeeded within a few years in securing a leading place among the painters in Rome. How did this come about with such extraordinary rapidity? The fact was that a general situation had developed which was inherently favorable to the prospects of an artist who bore every appearance of making a new start; Caravaggio—very much after his own fashion, of course—filled an urgent need. For a full generation the feeling had been spreading in Roman-Florentine artistic circles that painting had got into a blind alley. An important contributory cause was doubtless the influential theory implicit in Vasari's Lives that art progressed by means of the solution of one quasi-technical problem after another, with later generations inheriting and building upon the gains of their predecessors, until perfection was reached. The fallacies began to emerge with the supposition that this happy event had in fact occurred. Not only were there rival candidates for the honor of having achieved it, with Titian put up to compete with Vasari's hero Michelangelo (the personification of that schism to which I have already referred), but the theory of what should have ensued and the fact of what did actually ensue diverged diametrically. According to the logic of the theory of historical progress, the so-called "secrets" of art had now no longer to be painfully discovered, as in the past—they were commonly known and could be easily imparted; art ought accordingly to have entered upon a golden age. What had, however, actually occurred in practice was, of course, that the achievements of the great masters of the High Renaissance gradually came to be regarded less as embodiments of "discoveries" which would facilitate the advance of later artists than as a fixed canon of perfection which could scarcely be equaled. The consequent flaw in the theoretical conception implicit in Vasari (whose account of
was the type most likely to find the keys of the future in his hands. A potential way of escape out of the discouraging impasse of the late Cinquecento could be offered by a practical, down-to-bedrock experimentalism, from which theory—in any elaborate and ex cathedra sense—was excluded. It is, in fact, a new questing spirit of this kind, with a dislike for taking things for granted, which was the essential driving force behind both the leading pioneers of Seicento painting, Caravaggio and (strange as it may seem to those who do not question traditional views) Annibale Carracci; nor is this out of place in a period which gave birth to a Galileo.

The fact that Caravaggio found himself in a position to respond, in a general sense, to the fundamental exigencies of his time serves to explain why his work should have aroused interest almost from the beginning and why its repercussions were so impressive and so widely disseminated. But this, of course, gives no more than a partial account of the phenomenon Caravaggio. For more enlightenment we must turn to the individual. Caravaggio was by temperament a highly self-willed character who did not take kindly to being taught anything (the unfortunate Peterzano, who had charge of the unruly boy, is entitled to our heartfelt sympathy). Truth for him was not what he had been told but what he had himself discovered by practical experience. Reluctant to accept the short cut of those multitudinous ready-made devices which were bandied about in the studios, he determined to base himself on what he took to be first principles by working in oil color direct from the natural model, a practice which (as has already been pointed out) was an innovation in the Rome of the late Cinquecento, though not foreign to Venetian traditions. Logically enough he started with still life—the outlay was small and a model always available. Half-lengths were added, and finally he blossomed out into figure compositions, but his work can only be fully comprehended if it is constantly borne in mind that his vital roots were those of an obstinately self-taught still-life painter; it is extremely characteristic that he never overcame his shyness of “fluid” movement. The fact that Caravaggio was in all essential respects self-taught did not, of course, mean that he completely ignored the paintings—as opposed to the precepts—of others, in spite of his vigorous assertions (very shrewdly timed from the point of view of what we should now call public relations) that he took no account of “the Masters”; indeed it is likely to become increasingly evident, as Caravaggio studies develop, that he had a sensitive eye and a retentive memory for the achievements of painters who interested him. But what we may call the mere working mechanics of pictorial representation in the High Renaissance sense never became an open book to Caravaggio. Perhaps, however, this was to his and to our good fortune—for it was evident as never before that the essence did not necessarily lie in the mechanics, and Caravaggio’s slightly awkward yet vital neo-primitivism (coupled with his methodological emphasis on the theme of “back to nature”) was, notwithstanding professional reservations, an essential source of his strength.

What do we expect to find in the paintings of such a man at such a time? Above all a forceful and unrelenting experimentalism, which in his case finds expression in continuous and astonishing transformations in the superficial appearance of his paintings—though not their fundamental character. If examples of Seicento art were as few and far between as those of some more remote periods, and if only two or three of Caravaggio’s works, from quite different moments of his meteorically short career, were to survive anonymously, it is doubtful whether their common authorship would be stylistically perceivable; could anyone have thought of ascribing the Uffizi Bacchus to the “Master of the Naples Works of Mercy?” Hence the importance of familiarity with the constantly changing sequence of Caravaggio’s development—in other words, his chronology. Once he has reached a certain maturity he is always taking up enterprises new ventures and almost casually scattering pregnant suggestions right and left which he hardly bothers to develop but which
suffice others for years (after all, artists as dissimilar as Gentileschi and Caracciolo had a common inspiration). As a result of this restlessness his work is distinguished by what we may call unfinished business to an extent which is uncommon among the great masters. We must expect loose ends to be constantly cropping up, but though a Manfredi (concentrating on but a single aspect of Caravaggio) may polish the raw edges, who would seriously prefer, when it comes to the point, the work of the more conventional follower? Copies of Caravaggio, particularly of his earlier works, can be very instructive in this sense. A skilful copyist who has received a thorough studio training will on occasion find difficulty in resisting small conventional "corrections" of the master's work in order to make it appear more conformist and palatable and to smooth over that element which gives such a current of vitality to his art—the struggle with what he felt to be a problem. If looked at according to purely conventional standards the copy will be an improvement—but the virtue will have gone out of it.

It is in the early works that the clues to Caravaggio's very distinct artistic personality are most clearly set out for all to find. Here too his interests are constantly on the move, shifting from one approach to another as he tries, unaided by precept, to master his intractable material. A problem which tends to monopolize his attention in one picture may find itself supplanted in the next, to return in the third. Sometimes it is the still life which interests him particularly, sometimes the human physiognomy; then the time comes when he tentatively combines two figures or places two or three half-lengths together in one of those "romantic" story-telling incidents which made such an immediate impression. With The Musicians we find both a summing up of some of the findings of his very earliest paintings and unmistakable indications of a reaching out towards new horizons—particularly in the matter of composition, since a method which he developed during the next few years is here tried out for the first time. In the absence of the story-telling element which had helped to hold the protagonists together in such paintings as The Card-Sharpers and The Fortune-Teller, Caravaggio now confronts the task of co-ordinating on one canvas several of those virtually subjectless single half-lengths which were so characteristic of his first studies (such as the two in the Borghese Gallery) and which still survived slightly later in rather more developed form (the Hermitage Lute-Player, also painted for Del Monte, and the Uffizi Bacchus). The lack of libretto meant that Caravaggio would be in a position of undertaking an exercise in figure composition of a purely formal type (since no a priori arrangement of the figures could be either suggested to him or explained to the spectator by means of subject matter); and in fact this music party is our young experimentalist's first trial in such a type of "abstractly" worked-out picture construction. The co-ordinating factor in this instance is provided by what we may describe as a web of emphatic curving rhythms which carry the eye slowly to and fro. Since the general effect of the whole is similar to that of a sculptured panel in high relief, these rhythms are, as it were, boxed up and not permitted to lose their potency by expending themselves into the background or foreground; by being thus confined within a relatively narrow plane they are compelled to concentrate on their essential function of binding the figures together. The occasional foreshortenings (curiously isolated statements as is so often—and so typically—the case with Caravaggio) are never allowed to push a serious hole in the composition and so disturb the shut-in effect of "backed" relief on which coherence depends; if I may be allowed a somewhat cryptic observation in parenthesis, Caravaggio's instinct for limiting his liability is one of his most striking and fruitful traits. It would appear that in our music party Caravaggio was concentrating a special effort on the composition as such, in the most strictly literal sense of the term, and various alterations which he can be seen to have made during the work testify to these predilections. In the result, however, obvious though it is that The Musicians is the production of a young man engaged in
vigorously hewing out his own path, the whole is clearly something more than the sum of the parts, and the artist has contrived to give us, even at this early stage, a taste of his true caliber; there is a quality in this picture which, for the first time in Caravaggio's career, can be described as formidable. But while the actual putting together of The Musicians, being a breaking of new ground, absorbed much of Caravaggio's attention and energy, it did not absorb it all. In certain passages he turns aside to enrich genres in which he was already well practiced. To take one example, the painting of a superb head like that of the principal musician cost him no pangs in the creation; by now he was completely at home in work of this kind, as the compact, confident modeling visible in the impressive radiograph bears witness.

It was in such paintings as this that the acute eye of Cardinal del Monte recognized the exceptional promise of the then unknown young artist; within a relatively short time his patron's influence had brought Caravaggio the commission for the Contarelli chapel which placed him in the forefront and set the seal on his fame. Famosissimo pittore: so he is described in 1601 by the writer of a newsletter, and so he remains for us today.

Postscriptum. This article was already standing in type when the writer received the recent book on Caravaggio by Professor Longhi, who expresses the view that Caravaggio painted The Musicians at an even earlier moment than the encounter with Cardinal del Monte. The case for this, though plausible enough, does not seem to me to carry decisive weight, in view of the fact that the Hermitage Lute-Player can be cited as concrete evidence that this type of work was actually painted at the beginning of the phase under Del Monte's protection (after all, Baglione mentions the two together, The Musicians preceding The Lute-Player). The question is, however, more complicated than it may appear on the surface, being also concerned with two difficult, related problems: first, the true character of the costumes in certain of Caravaggio's pictures and, second, that of his so-called "realism" (as distinct from naturalism). These problems cannot be discussed here, but perhaps the reader may be referred, for a few further remarks on the subject, to a footnote in my review of Professor Longhi's book in the June 1953 issue of The Burlington Magazine, xcv (1953), p. 216, note 27.
NOTES ON CONDITION
Like the great majority of paintings over three hundred and fifty years old, The Musicians has suffered somewhat, chiefly from the attentions of overzealous restorers. However, the damage is generally distributed; it affects none of the vital areas, and no part is so severely injured as to require anything more than minor reconstruction. The painting has been relined at least twice. On the first occasion the inscription Michelangelo da Caravaggio was added, copied probably from an older inscription on the back. On the second, the painting was cut down slightly at top and bottom and about two inches on the left side, removing the first two letters of the inscription. The scalloped pattern of the canvas weave caused by the pull of the original stretcher nails shows that only about one inch was removed on the right side.

Surface wear, due mostly to past cleanings, is nowhere serious enough to destroy form. Little damage has been done to areas of thick and solid paint, as in the face of the lute-player, the other areas of flesh in light, and the white draperies. Glazes, where used, have suffered more, being thinner and more vulnerable to solvents; this is clearly seen in parts of the lute and also in the shadows of the face of the boy on the left, shown below.

Small flakes of paint have been lost in scattered areas: the back of the seminude figure, the upper right background, and, more important, parts of the book, the violin, and the white drapery in the center foreground.

Changes in the composition made by Caravaggio in the course of completing the picture are now discernible, partly because the paint has become more transparent with the passage of time and partly because of surface wear. They can be seen in the knotted scarf around the lute-player’s waist and in the left hand of the boy with grapes.

Before its acquisition by the Museum, when the painting was cleaned and restored in London, the additions of past restorers were removed: a pair of wings on the shoulders of the boy on the left and a quiver of arrows behind his right arm. Old restorations not in character with the well-preserved areas were also removed and the losses painted in to match surrounding areas. In its present state the character of the paint surface is typical of Caravaggio’s youthful work, closely akin to The Fortune-Teller in the Louvre and The Magdalen in the Doria collection.

Theodore Rousseau, Jr.