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Perceptions of an Icon: The Realistic Depiction of Holy Death in Caravaggio's *Death of the Virgin*

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Death of a Virgin is arguably Caravaggio's most renowned work, and is one of the most celebrated and recognisable paintings in the world, being one of the main attractions at the Louvre in Paris. The painting was also welcomed by contemporary artists who thought it radical in its naturalism. The painting was rejected, however, by the Carmelites that commissioned it. Catholic perceptions of the Virgin were of monumental perfectionism, an image that was not produced by Caravaggio in his pursuit of a realistic depiction of the holy scene.

Death of the Virgin (fig. 3), Caravaggio's largest Roman altarpiece, was commissioned in 1601 by the famous jurist, Laerzio Cherubini of Norcia, for his chapel in the Carmelite church of Santa Maria della Scala, Rome. When the picture was finally completed, a public scandal occurred. The friars (or at least the Church) took strong exception to the painting, and refused to accept the final work. Caravaggio's naturalistic, corporeal depiction of the Virgin did not correlate well with the conventions of her representation that were dogmatically pursued by the Catholic Church who preferred to imagine the Virgin as a pure, aesthetically perfect being that transcended the earthly body on her way to heaven. Nonetheless, *Death of the Virgin* was extremely well thought of by contemporary

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artists such as, notably, Rubens and high-profile collectors like Kings Charles I of England and Louis XIV of France. This split of perception of the painting seem to correlate to the different ways the Virgin, as an Icon, was perceived. Even nowadays, as Pamela Askew reports, there is no definitive way of looking at this hugely acclaimed work of art: "in 1951 Lionello Venturi called it the most profoundly religious painting of Italian *seicento* art, whereas more recent critics have chosen to see it as a work virtually empty of any religious content."[1] The painting has a complex relationship with its religious content, and one which acts as a dialectic between realism and religious convention.

To start any serious discussion of *Death of the Virgin,* it is important to consider the liturgical context of Caravaggio's commission. According to Friedlaender, "Almost all of Caravaggio's religious works, beginning with the San Luigi series, were altarpieces designed for the worship of the Christian community and its members."[2] It follows that Caravaggio was a very much the product of the Counter Reformation, as his altarpieces were intended to help worshippers to meditate while they attended mass. Moreover, *Death of the Virgin* is very close in spirit and purpose to the philosophy of both Neri and Loyola, two great reformers of the late 16th and early 17th centuries who both emphasized a great simplification of devotion, while putting the main stress on the individual and his contact with God. In Loyola's writings, for instance, there is little or no mention of visions and of miracles of the saints – such as the Assumption of the Virgin, for example. On the contrary, "When the Virgin is mentioned … it is more with regard to her earthly life as the Mother of Christ than as Queen of Heaven."[3] This conception of the Virgin, with its lack of idealization, can definitely be seen in Caravaggio's work. Moreover, his realistic depiction of the Apostles as people from the humble backgrounds of poverty, as well as the unassuming setting of a dim,

[1] P. Askew, *Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin* (Princeton, 1990), xi.
[2] J. Chorpenning, 'Another look at Caravaggio and Religion' (1987), 16 *Artibus et Historiae,* 154.
[3] W. Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies* (Princeton, 1974), 122.

Spartan room in which the swollen body of the Virgin has been laid out are in full harmony with St. Ignatius' and St. Philip's principal demands for humility and simplicity.

Death of the Virgin, so in harmony with Counter-Reformation meditative practices and liturgical piety, was rejected by its patrons in the Church. Among the reasons for this rejection was the title of the painting itself, which led to misconceptions about the actual moment that Caravaggio was portraying. In earlier paintings of the subject, the designation *Death of the Virgin* has been used for the whole scope of the scenes related to "the end of the Virgin's earthly life, including her farewell to the apostles, lying in state, funeral procession, entombment, and *assumptio animae* or assumption of the soul."[4] Even though there was no fixed iconographical type for the representation of the Virgin's death, it is upon her Assumption and her Coronation, and not upon her Dormition, that the Western artists preferred to dwell.[5] Thus, traditionally both Italian and Northern artists tended to show the Virgin Mary as dying rather than dead – like in the works of such masters as Annibale Carracci, Pieter Bruegel, or Carlo Saraceni (fig. 4). Caravaggio, on the contrary, has portrayed the Virgin, as Robert Hinks so accurately puts it, "not as *dying to* this world, but as *dead in* this world"[6]. Caravaggio's Virgin does not conform to the perceptions of her death that were held by the Church. He rejects them in favour of the reality of a shockingly mortal woman; a lifeless corpse in a dirty room, rather than an Icon, radiant on her death-bed.

According to the initial commission, Caravaggio was asked "to paint the death or *transitus* of the blessed Virgin Mary."[7] Therefore, it is significant to consider what the word *transitus* actually means. The term *transitus* (*transito* in Italian) simply means a passage over or a journey. Thus, in reference to the Virgin's death, the title *Transito*

[4] Askew, *Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin*, 19.
[5] R. Hinks, *Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin* (Oxford, 1953), 11.
[6] Ibid, 13.
[7] Askew, *Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin*, 6.

della Madonna has tended to emphasize not the end of her earthly life, but rather her transition from one state of being to another or, in other words, her passage from earth to heaven. This is something Caravaggio refused to depict: "we ask for bread, and are given a stone; we expected to see the Mother of God poised on her flight from time to eternity, and we are shown a dead woman."[8] Caravaggio's image is in conflict with how his patrons imagined the Virgin, since nothing "transitional" appears in this *transitus* of the Virgin.

Caravaggio further abandons previous iconographical conventions by not showing Mary as the Queen of Heaven. This seems to violate the traditional image of the Madonna revered by the Carmelite Order, who preferred the Virgin to be called Queen (*Regina*), as the crown, symbol of ruling power, elevated the Virgin to the throne of Christ, associating her with his eternal reign in heaven. Omitting any physical manifestation of the supernatural (except the Virgin's halo), the realism inherent in *Death of a Virgin* was in direct rebuttal of the conventions expected by the Church in a painting of the Virgin, and "could have been seen by Carmelite *padri* as playing into the hands of the "heretical" (Protestant) reformers"[9] who in their attack of the cult of the Madonna, had sought to deny the divine nature of her being. According to them, she was not a deity, but a simple woman, and certainly not a queen. In telling contrast to Caravaggio's *Death of the Virgin*, Saraceni's altarpiece, commissioned to replace the original work, represents the Virgin as a true Queen of Heaven, surrounded by an aureole of light and with attendant angels in the moment of receiving her floral crown. Saraceni's work thus shows those methods in which the Discalced Carmelites preferred to visualize the Virgin's *transitus* - instead of the image of a dead woman, they wanted a heavenly glory of cherubs that appears in the version they finally accepted.

[8] Hinks, *Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin*, 15.
[9] Askew, *Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin*, 62.

Caravaggio's image of the Virgin did not constitute an adequate and respectful pictorial praise of the Mother of God in the opinion of his patrons, the religious order of Discalced Carmelites. They were offended by her bare feet and swollen, dead body; characteristics which were emblematic of Caravaggio's pursuit of realism when executing the painting. To his patrons, this was completely unacceptable, stripping "the most sacred beings of their deserved majestic raiments."[10] Indeed, instead of the triumphant Mother of God, Caravaggio evoked an image of a simple peasant woman, and possibly, as some critics and contemporaries believed, the image of "some dirty prostitute from the Ortaccio."[11] It was, in fact, rumoured that the model for Caravaggio's painting was a prostitute, and so, to the patrons that viewed the female figure as such, this constituted very much less than a perfect and pure rendition of the Virgin when compared to the conventions Western ideology and Church doctrine prescribed to her image.

According to Puglisi, the early critics especially praised the radically new artistic practises of Caravaggio – his strongly contrasted lighting, his manipulation of colour, and above all his painting directly from the model.[12] Seventeenth-century accounts of Caravaggio's mature methods of working describe that "he never brought his figures out into the daylight, but placed them in the dark brown atmosphere of a closed room, using a high light that descended vertically over the principal parts of the bodies while leaving the remainder in shadow in order to give force through a strong contrast of light and dark."[13] These stylistic approaches to painting, more from nature than from the imagination, were not conducive to the divine, supernatural results that religious patrons would expect. In *Death of the Virgin* the literal source of the light is not given, but its elevated point of origin in relation to the interior space suggests a window high up on the

[10] C. Puglisi, *Caravaggio* (London, 2002), 195.
[11] H. Langdon, *Lives of Caravaggio by Giorgio Mancini, Giovanni Baglione and Giovanni Pietro Bellori* (London, 2006), 34.
[12] Ibid, 369.
[13] Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 247.

left. This directed lighting, creating a sharp contrast between the lit forms and shadows, not only lends three-dimensionality to Caravaggio's figures, but also penetrates a surrounding darkness with such intensity and force that it nearly becomes a manifestation of the divine.[14] Hence, as the apostles convene around the Virgin, it is her body that assumes primacy as the culminating focal point of the composition of the light.

Another hint at divinity that does not require an explicit manifestation of the supernatural is the rendering of the magnificent red curtain in the painting. There is a very powerful relationship established by Caravaggio between the red of the Virgin's dress and the red of the immense curtain, "whose deep folds continue the flowing shapes of the brown mantle over the corpse, and suggest a soaring upward movement, filling the spectator with awe."[15] In his own unique, naturalistic way, Caravaggio may be depicting the Assumption of the Virgin. Rather than show this process explicitly and according to Roman Catholic convention, with the body of the Virgin between heaven and earth, Caravaggio is depicting the moment with the more naturalistic movement of the curtain, which seems to soar upwards. A physical progression can be seen from the body of the Virgin to the curtain, which itself seems propelled upwards from the body. Rather than showing a visible spirit ascending, Caravaggio represents the assumption of the Virgin's soul to Heaven through the upward movement in the scene surrounding her body.

In addition, by refusing to describe space and reducing architecture to the ceiling beams, Caravaggio was able to concentrate his efforts on to the naturalistic depiction of the model alone. The common humanity and poverty of Caravaggio's Virgin, as well as the artist's emphasis on the inward-turned, restrained, yet compelling heartfelt grief for a "mere person", resulted in the reversal of the observer's role in the picture. When we are looking at Caravaggio's *Death of*

[14] Langdon *Caravaggio: A Life*, 250.
[15] Ibid, 249.

the Virgin, we don't feel ourselves as external spectators faced with a painted image, but rather as eyewitnesses to a real event that is taking place right in front of our eyes. Again, Caravaggio's representation of the scene is more based in an earthly realism than supernatural doctrine, as is the case even for the holy Icons in the painting. The Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalen are viewed as secular figures living in the present instead of the historical past, the effect being that "the immediate event becomes readable as a young woman mourning the death of … her mother."[16] In order to achieve this humanisation of the supernatural, the artist not only disregarded decorum, ignoring conventional rules of representation of the sacred episodes, but also denied the spiritual content of the scene in favour of how it would look more realistically.

When discussing Caravaggio's naturalistic perception of the Virgin, it is important to note that his depiction of the Icon as noticeably mortally dead, as opposed to being in a transitory state between life and death, was not completely unprecedented. Indeed, the official contemporary view of the Catholic Church, advocated by Cardinal Baronio, admitted that Mary had, without a doubt, died the mortal death of a mortal human. *Death of the Virgin* was criticized and rejected by the Church not because it depicted the Virgin as a dead woman, but because it depicted her as *only* a dead woman, and not as physically monumental, aesthetically perfect, and already on her way to Heaven. At the time the idea of the Virgin's resurrection and the assumption of her body and soul was still being dogmatically propagated by the Church, and it was these supernatural conventions of the story that Caravaggio rejected, favouring a scene that could have featured any subjects from the Iconic Virgin to a lowly prostitute. However, the picture had by no means been discredited on that account among other contemporary painters. On the contrary, the young artists then in Rome were greatly impressed by Caravaggio's novelty and praised him as "the only true imitator of nature."[17] It was this imitation of nature which placed *Death of a*

[16] Askew, *Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin*, 100.
[17] Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 247.

Virgin in direct conflict with the conventional depictions of the holy scene. Making the subject of the scene universal, Caravaggio depicted the assumption of the Virgin almost entirely in realist visual terms. There is a definite feeling of significance, holiness, and even assumption in the painting, but that feeling is realised through aesthetically imperfect, naturalistic, and secular imagery.

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