

4.

Conversion of St. Paul

Oil on Canvas

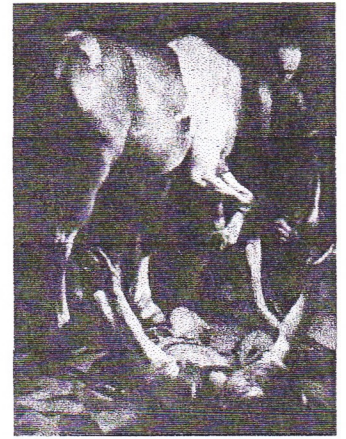
Santa maria del Popole (Cerasi Chapel)

Rome, Italy

Michelangelo Merisi da Carravaggio

1573-1610

Italian



Painting Highlights: The Conversion on the Way to Damascus (Conversione di San Paolo) is a masterpiece by Caravaggio, painted in 1601 for the Cerasi Chapel of the church of Santa Maria del Popolo, in Rome. Across the chapel is a second Caravaggio painting (1600) depicting the inverted Crucifixion of St. Peter. On the altar, is a luminous and crowded Assumption of the Virgin Mary by Annibale Carracci. The dome frescoes are by one of Carracci's apprentices, under his design. The chapel was painted for Monsignor Tiberio Cerasi, who died in 1601 and had been treasurer general under Clement VIII. The commission for Caravaggio (and perhaps Carracci) was apparently secured by his newly acquired patron, Marchese Vincenzo Guistiniani.

The painting depicts the moment recounted in Chapter 9 of Acts of the Apostles when Saul, soon to be the apostle Paul, fell on the road to Damascus. He heard the Lord say "I am Jesus, whom you persecute, arise and go into the city" (see Conversion of Paul). The Golden Legend, a compilation of medieval interpretations of biblical events, may have framed the event for Caravaggio.

Caravaggio's first version of the Conversion painting is in the collection of Principe Guido Odescalchi. It is a much brighter and more Mannerist canvas, with an angel-sustained Jesus reaching downwards towards a blinded Paul.

Artist Highlights: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was an Italian artist active in Rome, Naples, Malta, and Sicily between 1593 and 1610. His paintings, which combine a realistic observation of the human state, both physical and emotional, with a dramatic use of lighting, had a formative influence on the Baroque school of painting. Caravaggio trained as a painter in Milan under a master who had himself trained under Titian. In his early twenties Caravaggio moved to Rome where, during the late 16th and early 17th centuries, many huge new churches and palazzi were being built and paintings were needed to fill them. During the Counter-Reformation the Roman Catholic Church searched for 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 that combined close physical observation with a dramatic, even theatrical, use of chiaroscuro. This came to be known as Tenebrism, the shift from light to dark with little intermediate value. He burst upon the Rome art scene in 1600 with the success of his first public commissions, the Martyrdom of Saint Matthew and Calling of Saint Matthew. Thereafter he never lacked commissions or patrons, yet he handled his success atrociously. He was jailed on several occasions, vandalized his own apartment, and ultimately had a death warrant issued for him by the Pope. An early published notice on him, dating from 1604 and describing his lifestyle 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." In 1606 he killed a young man in a brawl and fled from Rome with a price on his head. He was involved in a brawl in Malta in 1608, and another in Naples in 1609, possibly a deliberate attempt on his life by unidentified enemies. This encounter left him severely injured. A year later, at the age of 38, he died of a fever in Porto Ercole, near Grosseto in Tuscany, while on his way to Rome to receive a pardon. Infamous while he lived, Caravaggio was forgotten almost immediately after his death, and it was only in the 20th century that his importance to the development of Western art was rediscovered. Despite this, his influence on the new Baroque style that eventually emerged from the ruins of Mannerism was profound. It can be seen directly or indirectly in the work of Rubens, Jusepe de Ribera, Bernini, and Rembrandt, and artists in the following generation heavily under his influence were called the "Caravaggisti" or "Caravagesques", as well as Tenebrists or "Tenebrosti" ("shadowists"). Andre Berne-Joffroy, Paul Valéry's secretary, said of him: "What begins in the work of Caravaggio is, quite simply, modern painting."

Master Manual Information Sheet

Artist: Caravaggio (Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio)
Lifespan: 1573 - 1610
Title: The Conversion of St. Paul on the Road to Damascus
Date: 1601
Size: 90 ½ by 70 inches (7.5 X 6 feet)
Location: Cerasi Chapel, Santa Maria del Popolo. Rome
Media: Oil on canvas
Type of Italian Baroque

Painting Highlights: **Caravaggio painted Conversion of St Paul for the Cerasi Chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome,** Pictured is the rump of a luminous golden horse that then draws the eye to the saint-to-be at the moment of his conversion, flat on his back with his arms thrown up. Little first suggests the momentous significance of the spiritual event in progress – this could just be a stable accident.

Caravaggio uses perspective and foreshortening to increase the drama of the painting. He is also known for his use of Chiaroscuro (Italian for light/dark) or tenebrism to heighten the sense of space and action. The eye is drawn to the brightest areas and then the details emerge from the darkness.

The painting has a low horizon which draws viewer into the space – it is positioned on the chapel's right wall at the sightline of an average height person standing at the chapel entrance

The sharply lit horse and figure emerge from the background first as if lit by the light of the chapel's high window. The lighting resembles stage lighting with a spotlight drawing attention to the main action. The figures are heroic and nearly life size and the dramatic spotlight shining on the fallen Paul is the divine light of revelation converting him to Christianity.

St Paul - (c. AD 5 – c. AD 67) was an early Christian missionary, his writings form a large portion of the Bible's New Testament. Paul was known as Saul prior to his conversion, and was dedicated to the persecution of the early disciples of Jesus in the area of Jerusalem. While traveling from Jerusalem to Damascus on a mission to "bring them which were there bound unto Jerusalem", the resurrected Jesus appeared to him in a great light. Saul was struck blind, but after three days his sight was restored and Paul began to preach that Jesus of

Nazareth is the Jewish Messiah and the Son of God.

The **Cerasi Chapel** is one of five chapels located within the Church of Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome. It contains important paintings by Caravaggio and Annibale Carracci, two of the founders of Baroque art. The chapel paintings all date from 1600 or 1601. Monsignor Tiberio Cerasi, Consistorial Advocate and Treasurer-General purchased the chapel in July 1600 for Pope Clement VIII. Cerasi commissioned Carracci and Caravaggio, the two leading emerging artists of the day, to provide an altarpiece of *The Assumption of Mary* (Carracci) and *The Conversion of Saint Paul on the Road to Damascus* and *The Crucifixion of Saint Peter* (Caravaggio) for the two side walls. Cerasi's choice of the Assumption for the altar seems straight-forward enough, while the Saint Paul and Saint Peter honored the two Apostles central to the Catholic Church, as well as the popular Counter-Reformation themes of conversion and martyrdom. Caravaggio's dramatically lit and foreshortened *Peter* and *Paul*, intended to be viewed from the side rather than straight on, draw the eye to Carracci's frontally-presented *Assumption*, so that the chapel is aesthetically united despite the very different styles of the two artists.

Ironically, Caravaggio distained the classical masters –especially Annibale Carracci. And Caravaggio drew criticism from other painters and critics – they called him “the anti-Christ of painting. Giovanni Bellori – biographer of baroque artists said: “Caravaggio began to paint according to his own inclinations not only ignoring, but despising the superb statuary of antiquity and the famous paintings of Raphael. He considered nature to be the only subject fit for his brush. He claimed he imitated his model so closely that he never made a brush stroke that he called his own. According to Bellori, Caravaggio suppressed the dignity of art, did as he pleased and what followed was contempt for beautiful things. Now began the imitation of common, vulgar things, seeking out filth and deformity.”

Caravaggio refused to follow his predecessors challenging the classical tradition in Italian Renaissance painting. This High Renaissance style reached its zenith with Raphael. Instead Caravaggio used naturalism especially in religious paintings and portrayed human dramas in the harsh and dingy settings of his time and place. He sought out everyday people from the streets and fields of Italy as his models and painted them un-idealized. Eventually his influence was seen on later artists inside and outside Italy.

Analysis: Caravaggio was painting a narrative that depicted the moment that Paul was on his way to wipe out the Christian community in Damascus. Paul's struck blind and hears the voice of Jesus and converts to Christianity. This is one of two known paintings by Caravaggio on the subject of the conversion of St Paul.

The other also dates from c. 1601. It is oil on panel (237 × 189 cm) — ca. 1601 and now in a private collection. Caravaggio painted them as a commission for Monsignor Tiberio Cerasi, and the first of the two versions was rejected and taken off his hands by someone else.

The Cerasi version is less chaotic than the first. The only two people present are Paul and the elderly man, and the focus of the painting is drawn where it should be, as the light hits mostly Paul's body and the side of the horse. Deep shadow is cast upon the things that, while present, are intended to fall into the background and serve as a way to occupy the extra space and set the scene.

Caravaggio fixed this to get rid of distracting clutter and add a certain somber grace to the event as opposed to a sense of urgency and distress, a more suitable way of conveying the effect of the Lord's presence in a painting made for a chapel. Technically the picture has defects. The horse looks hemmed in, there is too much happening at the composition's base, too many feet cramped together, let alone Saul's splayed hands and discarded sword. Some critics complain that unlike his other treatment of the subject, this version lacks action.

Artist

Highlights:

Caravaggio (1573-1610). Probably the most revolutionary artist of his time, abandoned the rules that had guided a century of artists before him. Caravaggio belongs to the Baroque period.

The **Baroque** is both a period and the style that used exaggerated motion and clear, easily interpreted detail to produce drama, tension, exuberance, and grandeur in sculpture, painting, literature, dance, and music. The style started around 1600 in Rome and spread to most of Europe. The Roman Catholic Church, in response to the Protestant Reformation, encouraged the popularity and success of the Baroque style. The premise was the arts should communicate religious themes directly and emotionally.

Born Michelangelo Merisi on Sept. 28, 1573, in Caravaggio, Italy. as an

adult he would become known by the name of his birthplace. Orphaned at age 11, he was apprenticed to a painter in Milan for four years. At some time between 1588 and 1592, Caravaggio went to Rome and worked as an assistant to painters of lesser skill. About 1595 he began to sell his paintings through a dealer. The dealer brought Caravaggio to the attention of Cardinal Francesco del Monte.

Through the cardinal, Caravaggio was commissioned, at age 24, to paint for the church of San Luigi dei Francesi. In its Contarelli Chapel Caravaggio's realistic naturalism first fully appeared in three scenes he created of the life of St. Matthew. The works caused public outcry, however, because of their realistic and dramatic nature. In spite of the criticism, his reputation increased.

He had many encounters with the law during his stay in Rome. Much of his biography is based on police records! He was imprisoned for several assaults and for killing an opponent after a disputed score in a tennis match. Caravaggio fled the city and kept moving between hiding places. He reached Naples, probably early in 1607, and painted there for a time, awaiting a pardon by the pope. The dark and urgent nature of his paintings at this time must have reflected Caravaggio's desperate state of mind.

Early in 1608 Caravaggio went to Malta and was received as a celebrated artist. Fearful of pursuit, he continued to flee for two more years, but his paintings of this time were among the greatest of his career. After receiving a pardon from the pope, he was wrongfully arrested and imprisoned for two days. A boat that was to take him to Rome left without him, taking his belongings. Misfortune, exhaustion, and illness overtook him as he helplessly watched the boat depart. He collapsed on the beach and died a few days later on July 18, 1610.

Presentation Ideas:

What happened to this man? Is it good or bad?

Is this painting old or new? How can you tell?

Compare to the horse in "Butterfield"

How does the artist use light?