Contents

Rome, circa 1600. The gently dozing Eternal City was rudely awakened by the appearance on the scene of several ambitious and extraordinary artists. In no time the place was transformed into a sizzling cultural hotspot, where painters, sculptors and architects, often from outside Rome and sometimes even from far beyond Italy, shook up the artistic world. The principal actors on this stage were the painter Caravaggio and the sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini; they created a school with their innovative works, which soon found a following all over Europe. The two are the figureheads of this exhibition on the early Baroque in Rome. They represent a new art that was only much later to get its name – derived from the sixteenth-century word 'barocco', which describes the irregularity of wild pearls.

Caravaggio and Bernini also stand for the intense interaction between the sister arts *pictura* and *sculptura* that was crucial to the success of Roman Baroque. It was therefore clear from the outset that in this exhibition paintings and sculptures would be shown together, as expressions of a shared spirit and as an evocation of the artistic dialogue that was going on more than three centuries ago: painters drew inspiration from sculptural forms, sculptors developed methods to bring their work to life in an almost painterly way.

Roman Baroque is above all the art of the *affetti*, the emotions. The strategy shared by painters and sculptors was focused directly at the public's inner life. The innermost feelings of human beings were depicted such that they evoked the same emotions in the viewers. Eyes look piercingly at us – sometimes surprised, sometimes terrified – tears of grief or joy flow, mouths scream in pain and distress, lips are grimly compressed or parted as if to speak to us. Everything is dynamic: vehemently gesticulating arms, streaming hair, clenched fists, spread fingers and wildly flowing draperies. They make physical and inner movements visible.

Beauty no longer resided solely in the pleasant. Art connoisseur and biographer Giulio Mancini's pronouncement in 1624 that 'beauty will be in all things' sounds like a manifesto: thenceforth the shocking and gruesome was part of the aesthetic canon. And this, above all, is what this exhibition is about: how the art of seventeenth-century Rome led to the depiction and evocation of collective emotions that have lost none of their topical resonance. Art, in short, that surprised, astonished and shocked the public – and still does – and spurred them on to experience empathy and compassion.

The works of Caravaggio, Bernini and their contemporaries generated fresh enthusiasm throughout Europe. Against that background, we are particularly delighted that this universality is expressed in our exhibition project. As well as demonstrating the exemplary collaboration between two prominent European museums, the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, it also reflects the great willingness of numerous international lenders who supported our initiative with enthusiasm and trust. And the same applies, of course, to the sponsors – Uniqa, Österreichische Lotterien, ENIT, OMV and Wienerberger as well as to the donors Ari Rifkin and Andrea and Christian Lippert in Vienna, and Ammodo, ING and Kvadrat in Amsterdam – who made it possible for us to create this ambitious exhibition on a grand scale commensurate with the subject and the outstanding quality of the works of art. We owe them all a great debt of gratitude.

Sabine Haag
General Director
Kunsthistorisches Museum

Taco Dibbits
General Director
Rijksmuseum

Rome

New and old 'navel of the world'

Stefan Weppelmann

In March 1608 certain shadowy figures possessed themselves of Raphael's *Entombment* [FIG. 1] and spirited it away in the dead of night from Perugia to Rome, the cosmopolitan arena of ambitious aristocrats, prelates, artists, collectors[1] and scholars – and equally a place of street brawls, confidence tricksters, ne'er-do-wells and prostitutes[2] – in short, onto the teeming and colourful stage of the Baroque.[3]

Cardinal Scipione Borghese (no. 54), the instigator of this nocturnal operation aimed at upgrading his art collections, was on a mission to burnish his own splendour as well as that of the Papal States. Any collection worth its salt simply had to include a major work by Raphael.[4] What was regarded as theft in Perugia was summarily declared legal in retrospect by Scipione's uncle, who just happened to be Pope Paul V (1605–1621). It was this nepotism that cemented the power structure between the Papal States and society: the pontiffs made their nephews into so-called 'cardinal-nephews', thereby ensuring that their rule over state and city served the interests of their own family.[5]

The Borghese in particular invested great energy in this model, which is why their influence on art and the appearance of the city is still so very much in evidence today. Cardinal Scipione distinguished himself by commissioning the famous Villa Borghese [FIG. 2], while the pontiff himself acquired the family palazzo at the heart of the city. St Peter's was completed under the auspices of Paul V, who also commissioned a new façade by Carlo Maderno for the basilica [FIG. 3]. In addition, Paul had the Quirinal extended, and the Cappella Paolina in Santa Maria Maggiore with its opulent coloured marble décor recalls – as does so much else – the magnificence of the Borghese pontificate [FIG. 4].

The second great builder, collector and patron of the early seventeenth century was the equally splendour-loving Pope Urban VIII (1623–1644) [FIG. 5]. Possessed of literary gifts and with a particular bent for poetry, he was the most important patron of Gian Lorenzo Bernini, in whom he saw a 'new Michelangelo' – and the artist was duly expected to contribute to Urban's glory in the same way as Michelangelo had to the apotheosis of Pope Julius II. Under Urban, Bernini was commissioned with the interior sculptural decoration of St Peter's. In 1633 he completed the colossal twisted baldachin above the Papal Altar, and later Urban's tomb in St Peter's.

The episode surrounding Raphael's *Entombment* shows that a whole century after his death its creator was still in vogue, and indeed his tomb in the Pantheon continues to be venerated even today. The Baroque language of forms was in part founded on a recourse to the Renaissance and its paradigmatic relationship with nature. Annibale Carracci in particular stylized himself as the heir of Raphael, already overcoming Mannerism before leaving his birthplace of Bologna.[6] In 1594 he arrived in Rome, where his elegant figures with their expressive pathos – see the London *Dead Christ Mourned* (no. 34) or the Vienna *Pietà* (no. 33) – found ready imitators.

This 'updating' of the High Renaissance was accompanied as a matter of course by a new appreciation of Rome's ancient roots, by the memory of the erstwhile greatness of its vast empire. Here stood the temples and fora, the columns in honour of the emperors with their elaborate reliefs, the imperial arches of triumph, the statues of the Dioscuri, and the bronze equestrian monument of Marcus Aurelius (see no. 47).[7] Ancient murals and mosaics were being appreciated for the first time,[8] and by the beginning of the sixteenth century Julius II had assembled a collection of important antiquities in the Cortile del Belvedere which have to the present day not only stood for the canon of the ancient ideal of beauty in human anatomy and proportion but have also supplied telling examples of pathos and emphatic emotion: the *Laocoön Group* [FIG. 6], the famous *Belvedere Torso*, the *Sleeping Ariadne* and the statues of Apollo and Antinous. Attempting to emulate this display, nobility and clergy duly funded excavations, uncovering new and plentiful evidence of the ancient *caput mundi*. A multitude of historical and antiquarian publications ensued.[9] Artists were engaged to restore and complete fragmentary works, and at the same time these archaeological finds provided authentic sources for stylistic orientation, as illustrated by – among others – Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *David* (no. 42) or Francesco Mochi's *St Veronica* (no. 43).

The newly discovered antiquities demanded opulent settings for their display. The Farnese family had already built their magnificent palazzo for this very purpose as early as the cinquecento. Painted with frescos for Cardinal Odoardo Farnese by Annibale Carracci and his brother Agostino from 1597, the ceiling of the Great Gallery in the palace was justly famous and had a significant stylistic influence in Rome [FIG. 7]. The complex system of discrete images – *quadri riportati* – was to be of seminal importance for later programmes of monumental ceiling décor.

FIG. 1 **Raphael,** The Entombment of Christ**, 1507. Panel, 184 × 176 cm. Rome, Galleria Borghese, inv. no. 369**

FIG. 2 **Rome,** Villa Borghese**, 1608–17. Design: Flaminio Ponzio; completion: Giovanni Vasanzio**

FIG. 9 **Caravaggio,** The Martyrdom of St Matthew, **1599/1600. Canvas, 323 × 343 cm. Rome, San Luigi dei Francesi, Contarelli Chapel**

FIG. 10 **Caravaggio,** The Conversion of Saul**, 1602.**
Canvas, 230 × 175 cm. Rome, Santa Maria del Popolo, Cerasi Chapel

FIG. 3 **Caravaggio,** Mary Magdalen, **1595/96.**
Canvas, 122.5 × 98.5 cm. Rome, Galleria Doria Pamphilj, inv. no. FC 357

FIG. 4 **Caravaggio,** The Lute Player, **c. 1594/95.**
Canvas, 94 × 119 cm. St Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum, inv. no. 45

FIG. 4 **Francesco Mochi,** Annunciation, **1603–09.**
Marble, h. 185 cm (Gabriel), h. 210 cm (Mary). Orvieto, Santa Maria Assunta


M·DC VIII

FIG. 8 **Gian Lorenzo Bernini,** Apollo and Daphne**, 1625.**
Marble, h. 243 cm. Rome, Galleria Borghese, inv. no. CV

extrovert, dynamic and experimental style.[64] This antithesis, though, ignores both the fact that his work, like all Baroque, also has a strong antique orientation, and the painterliness manifest in Du Quesnoy's oeuvre.

For the Vrijburch memorial, the sculptor harked back to a *cippus*, a small cube-shaped pillar used by the ancients as a grave-marker. Giustiniani had several examples in his collection.[65] From this, Du Quesnoy derived the idea of the two winged putti that hold up the deceased's epitaph. The seemingly ephemeral nature of the memorial, as if it had been only provisionally erected, was radical and innovative. The two well-fed children stand on an animal skin that seems to have been draped against the foot of the pillar for the occasion and on which the funerary urn has been placed, with above them two ram's horns – ancient and biblical symbols of sacrifice[66] – to flank the Vrijburch family coat of arms. Unlike their classical antecedents, Du Quesnoy's putti are not emotionless; they look downcast, as if with repressed grief and mourning. The effect is enhanced by the extraordinary expression of surface and texture with which they are carved, so that they stand out as living, plump little boys against the roughly worked background. The sculptor made their softness even more painterly, with a *sfumato* character, by the way he depicted their hair and wings, with the fine grooves of the tooth chisel like 'brushstrokes' in the marble [FIG. 12].

In the memorial for the Antwerp merchant Ferdinand van den Eynde, which was installed as a pendant to Vrijburch's between 1630 and 1640, Du Quesnoy exchanged the seemingly ephemeral aspect for a sharper contrast between the fleeting and the enduring: the funerary urn made way for a more austere sarcophagus with an inscription chiselled into the architectural surround above it, which is revealed by two putti holding up a shroud. They are even chubbier, more baby-like and 'warmer' than

FIG. 9 **Jan Muller after Adriaen de Vries,** Mercury and Psyche, **c. 1597. Engraving, 510 × 264 mm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. RP-P-OB-32.229**

FIG. 10 **Gian Lorenzo Bernini,** Apollo and Daphne [FIG. 8]

FIG. 4 **Caravaggio,** Head of Medusa, **1597/98. Canvas on panel, diam. 58 cm. Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi, inv. no. 1351**

In 1598 Caravaggio painted a shield with the head of Medusa at the behest of Francesco Maria del Monte [FIG. 4].[28] Intended as a gift for Ferdinando de' Medici, it was evidently meant to rival a Medusa shield painted by Leonardo that was held in the Medici collections at the time and is thought to be the one documented in an engraving by Cornelis Cort. The decapitation of the Medusa is described in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.[29] Perseus employed a stratagem in order to avoid the Gorgon's deadly gaze: by beholding her only in the reflection of his polished shield he was enabled to sever her head. Caravaggio captures the high drama of this moment, projecting the snaky head as a reflection on the convex surface of the shield. The virtuoso chiaroscuro modelling seems to make it float almost three-dimensionally against the green ground, mouth and eyes wide open, blood spurting in streams from the severed neck. The final, horrifically distorted gaze seems frozen, immobilizing and threatening to turn the beholder to stone. Both the pain-racked physiognomy and the impressively animated snakes were painted from living models. The foreshortenings of the reflection are exceptionally complex and were presumably accomplished with the aid of a convex mirror. The spectacular gift was not hung in the paintings collection but used in the Medici armoury as part of a ceremonial display in which a life-size warrior figure, attired in an elaborate suit of armour sent by the Shah of Persia, bore the Medusa shield in order to celebrate the military virtues of the grand duke and his invulnerability as the new Perseus. Above all, however, the *Head of Medusa* is a powerful reflection by the painter on the preconditions for and possibilities of his own art. The myth of Medusa is here reinterpreted as a manifesto of mimetic painting, which breathes life into its protagonists while 'petrifying' them at the same time.[30] Caravaggio has fixed the gaze of Medusa in the mirror of the shield, imbuing her with such life and drama that the astonished viewer freezes in shock and awe. This 'horizon of meaning' is opened up by the very earliest instance of the painting's reception, Gaspare Murtola's madrigal *Per lo scudo di Medusa* of 1603, in which the speaker admonishes the beholder not to succumb to the deceptive illusion of painting and be petrified in amazement by Medusa's deadly gaze.[31]

In 1611 Guido Reni painted the *Massacre of the Innocents* for the Cappella Berò in the church of San Domenico in Bologna [FIG. 5; no. 10].[32] Drawing on Raphael's archetypal pictorial invention as engraved by Marcantonio Raimondi, Reni transforms the subject into a composition that is both dramatic and highly artificial at the same time. Their daggers raised, Herod's henchmen go about their grim task while desperate mothers try to save their children or grieve for those already slain. The painting is a veritable theatre of emotions which is embedded in a strict geometrical composition determined by intersecting diagonals and rhythmic antitheses and which at the same time structures the dense throng of figures crowded into the upright format.

Reni has given one figure in particular a prominent place in the composition, intending it as a figure of identification for the viewer. While all the others are involved in the violent action, the mother kneeling in front of the slain infants in the right foreground has folded her hands in prayer and raised her eyes to heaven, pleading for divine succour and mercy. Nobody has described the expressive qualities of this painting more aptly than Giambattista Marino in a famous poem from his *Galeria*.[33] He invokes the artist emphatically, 'What are you doing, Guido, what are you doing?', reproaching him with reviving the sufferings of the innocent children and perpetuating them in the sublime beauty of his painting. In the final, superbly crafted couplet Marino expresses a fundamental principle of Baroque aesthetics of response, the combination of cruelty and beauty, terror and delight: 'Well you know | That even a tragic subject is a precious subject | And horror oft-times accompanied by delight.' Marino planned early on to devote a whole verse epic to the *Massacre of the Innocents*, which he then proceeded to complete during the course of the second decade of the century, almost certainly in part inspired by his study of Reni's painting. Marino's *Strage degli innocenti* soon circulated in manuscript but was only published posthumously in 1632, then also being disseminated in translations.[34] In a complex process of mirroring, Reni's painting and Marino's verses were subsequently to serve Nicolas Poussin (Chantilly, Musée Condé) and Massimo Stanzione (Schloss Rohrau, Harrachsche Gemäldegalerie) as 'arguments' for their major pictorial inventions on the same subject.[35]

In the years 1618 and 1619 Guercino executed a large painting with a subject taken from Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* for the mosaicist Marcello Provenzale. His *Erminia Finding the Wounded Tancred* [p. 27, FIG. 5] is based on the dramatic account in Canto XIX of the crusader epic.[36] The Christian knight Tancred has slain the giant Argante in single combat but has himself been severely wounded and has sunk unconscious to the ground. Led by Vafrino, Tancred's loyal squire-at-arms, Erminia finds the hero lying on the ground seemingly lifeless. Long secretly in love with

FIG. 5 **Guido Reni,** Massacre of the Innocents, **1611. Canvas, 268 × 170 cm. Bologna, Pinacoteca Nazionale, inv. no. 439**

FIG. 5 **Gian Lorenzo Bernini,** The Ecstasy of St Teresa **(detail), 1652.**
Marble. Rome, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Cornaro Chapel

FIG. 6 **Caravaggio,** The Martyrdom of St Ursula, **1610.**
Canvas, 142 × 180 cm. Naples, Palazzo Zevallos Stigliano, Intesa Sanpaolo Collection

FIG. 7 **Gian Lorenzo Bernini,** The Ecstasy of Blessed Ludovica Albertoni**, 1674.**
Marble, l. 210 cm. Rome, San Francesco a Ripa, Albertoni Chapel

The overlapping of the two figures is such that the painter himself appears to be a participant in Ursula's experience, which is indistinctly both physical and spiritual: he represents the beholder in the picture as a subject touched both physically and emotionally. The saint interlocks her fingers on her chest, spreading her thumbs as if she wanted to frame the pointed arrow, while observing a trickle of blood running from the wound. The red blood turns into the scarlet folds of drapery that fall abundantly from the shoulder, thus glorifying her martyrdom. Light bathes the body, working its way into the weave of the silvery fabric of her chemise and highlighting the whiteness of flesh transfigured by a radiance whose intensity exceeds anything 'natural'. From the point of view of 'painted physicality', this picture shows extraordinary boldness. Although Ursula is presented as having a body with a physical 'interior' of visceral depth, alive and feeling, there is a clear incongruity between her facial expression and the suffering she ought to be showing, a discrepancy made even more explicit through the juxtaposition of Ursula's quietly absorbed face with that of the painter, distorted in a cry of pain. Through its powerful colouring, the painting works to sublimate the intensity of St Ursula's pain: the blinding whiteness of her transfigured body suggests that the arrow is penetrating her soul as in Teresa's transverberation.[30]

After his *St Teresa*, one of the most intensely 'affected' bodies in the history of sculpture, Bernini turned to another figure convulsed by the ecstatic experience with his *Ecstasy of Blessed Ludovica Albertoni* of 1674 [FIG. 7], which deserves a rapid comparison with Caravaggio's invention of *Mary Magdalen in Ecstasy* [FIG. 8; see also no. 25].[31] Seated on a chair, Mary Magdalen is lit from below; her white robe, animated by folds, opens to reveal her bared shoulders; her head thrown back, her mouth is open. The oscillation between pain and pleasure, agony and ecstasy, which characterized the figure of St Teresa is already present in this eroticized representation of the relationship with the divine. The Magdalen has the aspect of a maenad possessed by Dionysus, the ancient figure of spiritual ravishment, a *Pathosformel* that makes its posthumous return both in this painting by Caravaggio and in Bernini's *Blessed Ludovica Albertoni*. In *Mary Magdalen in Ecstasy*, the ecstatic process – in the literal sense of ἔκστασις 'going beyond the bounds' and therefore 'outside oneself' – is presented as a 'spilling over', as if the hands, joined across her belly, had tried to contain or control the effects of a force too intense to be restrained which ends up breaking out of the semicircle of the arms at the moment when the head is thrown back. The mounting wave of this force takes shape in the red drapery, whose fold descends into the lap of the saint and then rises vertically to join the sleeve of the left arm. The movement has an explicable source since the tunic is held in place by the armrest, but this supporting element is shrouded in a shadow so dark that the cloth seems to rise of its own accord. The wave then diminishes slowly, rippling through the vertical folds of the white drapery around the forearm and the diagonals that frame the neck in a progressive arrest, a 'breaking point' that precedes a new rupture, here embodied by the dislocation of the head and shoulders. The intermittent rhythm of the phenomenon is not limited to this wave: it twists and turns everywhere in folds that intensify the expressive power of the saint's body. Along the right arm and towards the shoulder the fine tresses blend with the folds of the chemise, making the cloth appear as a consubstantial extension of the body. We remarked upon this consubstantiality in the continuity of the flesh and drapery in the marble body of *St Teresa in Ecstasy*, and we recognize it again in the *Ecstasy of Blessed Ludovica Albertoni*, where the intimate fusion of the tunic and the body suggests, through figural transfer, the model of another intimate fusion: that of the body with the soul.[32] Even the red jasper drapery which connects the bed to the altar in the Cappella Albertoni is shaken into deep folds: the contractions and distensions of Ludovica's body are transferred to this mass of stone, which seems to take part in the ecstatic event.[33] Two folds mark here that operation of transfer: the first, a horizontal fold, traces a parallel to the bed, and the second, a diagonal, follows the main outline of Ludovica's head and body. Despite displaying the objective appearance of textile, the jasper drapery thus echoes the figure's contours. The outline in the jasper is abstract and simplified, yet the emotionally expressive folds, now liberated from the figurative limits of the body, seem to develop a greater liberty in the stone. While the figure itself is reduced to a minimum in the block of jasper, its tensive and affective components are developed and intensified by the modelling and colouring of the stone. The infusion of divine grace in Ludovica's body and soul is represented as an utterly material phenomenon; by penetrating the stone, light provokes effects of variegating iridescence in its extraordinary folds. The pink colouring and the red jasper vibrate as the light changes, echoing the shape and the lighting of the folds in Luodovica's tunic. I am tempted to recognize in this extraordinary drapery the ultimate outcome of the experiment begun by Caravaggio with the Hartford *St Francis*: here the depth of Ludovica's 'heart' has taken on the appearance of a jasper blanket which, instead of concealing hidden depths, is now expressing across its surface the movement of a soul, like living flesh penetrated by light.

FIG. 8 **Louis Finson after Caravaggio,** Mary Magdalen in Ecstasy**, 1613. Canvas, 112.5 × 88.5 cm. Private collection**

Baroque Bodies

Artistic role play in seventeenth-century Rome

Joris van Gastel

For a play performed during the weeks of carnival of 1638, the great sculptor, architect, painter and playwright Gian Lorenzo Bernini created a model, as a visitor recounts, of the 'collapse of a house, with three people in it, two looking dead and one barely alive, and all three of them were made with the greatest art and equal naturalism, and one in particular, as if broken, almost every bone in his body shattered, truly a most artful thing, that both gave delight and caused fear.'[1] No wonder the scene incited fear among the spectators, as another source confirms: 'In fact, he had truthfully [*ad vivum*] reproduced the corpse of one of the persons who some months before had been crushed by the collapse of the house above the workshop of the swordsmith near the customs. He made the corpse from *cartapesta* [papier mâché] and had it carried around.'[2] Bernini seems to have been playing with what we may call the shock of the real, puncturing the imaginary with the harsh facts of reality.

And indeed, a dead body is a difficult thing to handle. The painting *St Sebastian Thrown into the Cloaca Maxima* of 1612 by Ludovico Carracci clearly caused some unease with Cardinal Maffeo Barberini, who had commissioned it, precisely because of the naturalistic manner in which the body of the dead saint was depicted (no. 41) Intended for the Barberini family chapel in the church of Sant'Andrea della Valle, the cardinal decided to keep it in his own home since, although he felt that the dead body created a forceful image, he considered that it would lead to little devotion.[3] But dead bodies were not the only things that could be a source of unease. According to the Bolognese biographer Carlo Cesare Malvasia, Annibale Carracci caused something of a stir with his youthful *Baptism of Christ* (1584/85) for the church of Santi Gregorio e Siro [FIG. 1]. Local critics suggested disapprovingly that he had got 'some porter' to pose for him and then reproduced him 'directly on the canvas'.[4] The word 'porter' was not intended to refer to a specific person here but, rather, to evoke the lower classes, someone 'from the street', someone used to doing physical labour and possessing the physique to go with it. In other words, the mention of a 'porter' evoked a kind of body image that was clearly controversial. Annibale's critics made little impression upon him. His interest in such marginal figures is in fact confirmed by his sketches of street vendors and other workers published in a series of prints in 1646 and now known as the *Arti di Bologna*.[5] Incidentally, among the prints we also find a *facchino*, that is, a porter [FIG. 2]. A not unrelated though more direct critique was levelled at Caravaggio; as a matter of fact, his *Death of the Virgin*, painted in 1606 for the Cherubini Chapel in the Roman church of Santa Maria della Scala, was controversial from its first conception [FIG. 3]. Although sources vary in their account of the exact reason for its being refused by the monks of the church, it is clear that the core problem was the model Caravaggio had used for the Virgin. The papal physician Giulio Mancini, who must have been well informed, suggested in his biography of the painter that for the Virgin he had portrayed a 'cortegiana'; on another occasion, he referred more explicitly to 'some dirty prostitute'.[6]

FIG. 1 **Annibale Carracci,** The Baptism of Christ**, 1584/85. Canvas, 167 × 233 cm. Bologna, Santi Gregorio e Siro**

FIG. 2 **Simon Guillain after Annibale Carracci,** Il facchino. **Engraving in** Diverse figure al numero di ottanta, disegnate di penna nell'hore di ricreatione da Annibale Carracci **(no. 2), Rome 1646**

1 Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio
(Milan 1571–1610 Porto Ercole)
Narcissus
Rome, c. 1600
Canvas, 113.3 × 94 cm
Rome, Gallerie Nazionali d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, inv. no. 1569; gift of Vasilij Bogdanovič Khvoschinskij, 1916

This painting, now widely accepted as a work by Caravaggio despite some initial scepticism, is still not fully known and deserves some discussion.[1] Not mentioned by the Lombard artist's seventeenth-century biographers, this work is first referred to in an export licence granted on 8 May 1645 to one Giovanni Battista Valdibella (or Valdebella, 'Valtabel' in the original) concerning 21 paintings to be shipped from Rome to Savona.[2] This document, which affirms Caravaggio's authorship, was inspected and signed by the sculptor Niccolò Menghini (1610–1655).[3] Having been appointed Commissario alle antichità di Roma back in 1638, Menghini was a seasoned superintendent of Rome's cultural heritage and, as such, responsible for preventing the illicit export of artworks. Elected Principe of the Accademia di San Luca in 1641, he was also an experienced artist with close links to the papal Barberini family.[4] The significance of his endorsement of the *Narcissus* as a work by Caravaggio has hitherto gone unrecognized.

Valdibella was a member of a family of merchants from Savona, who in this case likely acted on behalf of the Gavottis, a noble family also from Savona; indeed, a painting described as 'Narciso che si specchia alla fonte' is listed in the 1679 inventory of Camillo Gavotti.[5] The next reference, again mostly overlooked in the literature, does not come until 1847, when Federigo Alizeri's guide to Genoa mentions a 'Narciso al fonte, Michelangelo da Caravaggio' in the collection of Marquis Francesco Serra. As well as further strengthening the attribution to Caravaggio, all these facts render it likely that the painting remained in Liguria for at least two centuries.[6]

The celebrated myth of Narcissus, also included in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, tells of a huntsman – young and handsome but heartless – who cruelly rejected all amorous advances. In retribution, the goddess Nemesis condemned him to forever endure the pain of unrequited love. He thereupon fell in love with his own reflection, glimpsed in a spring, and – unable to tear himself away – eventually drowned in the attempt to seize his own image. In contrast to Caravaggio's characteristically original approach, most representations make great play of an outdoor pastoral setting replete with trees and plants.[7] Here, however, an unexpectedly dark backdrop anticipates Narcissus's demise and Caravaggio captures the very moment at which the protagonist, overcome by the beauty of his own reflection, delicately caresses the surface of the water in a vain attempt to seduce his own image. The masterful portrayal perfectly captures the *meraviglia* of the protagonist – and elicits the same feeling in the beholder – by means of the almost perfect circle created by Narcissus and his inverted reflection, centred on the brightly lit knee.[8]

In line with the painting's gloomy urbanity, some scholars have noticed compositional analogies between the mirror-image figure and those customarily found on playing cards.[9] Inspiration for the painting may have been provided by two Roman statues in the Barberini collection representing Narcissus bending over to gaze at his image; such referencing of antique sources was typical of Caravaggio and his contemporaries.[10] However, Caravaggio also recycled his own motifs, and the strong similarities between the pose of Narcissus and that of the figure of Saul in Caravaggio's *Conversion of Saul* from 1602 [p. 15, FIG. 10] suggest a broad contemporaneity. Caravaggio may even have used the same preparatory drawings for both pictures.[11]

Narcissus, a 'profane' subject, falls within the Neoplatonic approach, widely popular in the early modern era, to pagan culture and literature.[12] Indeed, the painting could have been appreciated as a reference to the celebrated Greek aphorism *γνῶθι σαυτόν* (know thyself), in which self-revelation is encouraged as a means of coming closer to God.[13] Alternatively, it could have been Caravaggio's intention to warn against the vanity of egotism and physical beauty, and to exhort the beholders to pursue virtue by looking beyond themselves.[14] **CR**

2 Gian Lorenzo Bernini
(Naples 1598–1680 Rome)
Medusa
Rome, 1638–40
Marble with traces of original patina, h. 46 cm
Rome, Musei Capitolini, Palazzo dei Conservatori
Inv. no. MC 1166

Although this *Medusa* is not mentioned in the earliest records of the sculptor's work by Filippo Baldinucci and Domenico Bernini, the style, the daring with which the wildly writhing snakes on the figure's head are carved and the extremely clever *concetto* of the marble – 'an awful pun'[1] – strongly suggest Bernini's authorship. When it was given to the Palazzo dei Conservatori by Marchese Francesco Bichi in 1731, the inscription on the pedestal referred only to a 'celeberrimi statuarii' (very celebrated sculptor).

The monstrous Medusa's hair was a nest of serpents; those who looked at her would turn to stone. Perseus was able to escape her fatal powers by looking at her only 'indirectly' through the highly polished metal of his shield. Protected like this, Perseus decapitated Medusa in her sleep.

Bernini's bust depicts Medusa's rigid head before Perseus has put an end to the gorgon. The artist was inspired here not so much by Caravaggio's illusionistic shield [p. 50, FIG. 4] with her horrified likeness itself as by the poetic treatment of that depiction in Giambattista Marino's *Galeria* (1619). The poet had used Medusa's own words in order to implicitly invite sculptors to take her petrifaction as their subject: 'I know not if I was sculpted by mortal chisel, or if by gazing into a clear glass my own glance made me so.'[2] Bernini's response to Marino is a demonstration of technical virtuosity and vitality, designed to evoke the viewers' stupefaction (*stupore*) so that they are likewise 'petrified'.[3] He turned his chisel to another line in Marino's sonnet, in which Medusa warns the reader that a glance even from a marble version of her face – a work of art – would be able to turn the viewer to stone.[4] Thus Bernini created – for those in the know, at least – a *paragone* between two sister arts: *ut scultura poesis*, poetry as speaking sculpture and sculpture as silent poetry.[5]

The Italian author and theoretician Cesare Ripa associated Medusa with jealousy and her snakes with the evil thoughts that come from a wicked heart;[6] the sculpture can therefore also be read as an emblem of silencing jealous gossip and thus the victory of wise discretion.[7] The significance for Bernini may even have been more immediate and personal in reference to the abrupt end in 1638 of his passionate affair with Costanza Piccolomini (Bonarelli),[8] whose features are clearly akin to the Medusa's.[9] In this case, the sculpture would have been created around 1638–40 in *contrapposto* to the tender portrait bust of Costanza.[10] FS

3 Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio
(Milan 1571–1610 Porto Ercole)
Boy Bitten by a Lizard
Rome, c. 1597/98
Canvas, 65.8 × 49.5 cm
Florence, Fondazione di Studi di Storia dell'Arte Roberto Longhi
Inv. no. 1980 N.78

Reaching for the succulent cherries in front of him, a handsome youth is surprised by a lizard which darts out from the shadows and bites him. In shock, he snatches back his hand, emitting a small cry of pain and astonishment. The sudden movement makes his shirt slip, sensuously revealing his right shoulder – a detail that Caravaggio deliberately highlights. Physical charms, desire, sensations ranging from astonishment to pain – with all this, the pictorial narrative appears like a kaleidoscope of states of excitation embodied *simultaneously* by the protagonist.

The fascination of this painting thus lies less in the wealth of symbolic or allegorical interpretations that can be applied to it[1] than in the tremendously eccentric depiction of the interplay between physical sensibility, passionate agitation and impulsive movement.

The existence of Flemish and Netherlandish predecessors from the sixteenth century has been rightly pointed out;[2] expressive studies (tronies) in particular play an important role for this work.[3] The *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* thus treads an unusual path between genres, not only because of the mixture of emotions displayed but also on account of the way it oscillates between portrait and genre painting.[4] Comparison with the *Laocoön Group* [see p. 11, FIG. 6], the prime example of human emotional drama from antiquity, is instructive. This shows that while classical formulations of pathos do find their way into dramatic Baroque depictions of extreme emotions – e.g. Bernini's *Anima dannata* [FIG. 3A] – they can also appear fractured and caricatured, as was common at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and not only in Italy.[5]

Caravaggio's boy comes right up close to the spectator, using this immediacy to make a theatrical display of the feigned horror expressed through his face and body: his right arm and hunched shoulder are intended to emphasize the *physical* sensation of the shock, while tension is conveyed in the marked splaying of the fingers, the movement as a whole emphasized with exaggerated nervosity by the folds of the shirt; even the boy's brow is affectedly creased with deep furrows. In even more mannered fashion, the left arm raised in a gesture of defence embodies horror as the motive force for body and soul: here the *orrore* culminates in the hand, which is so animated that it seems to have assumed a life of its own. The boy stares out directly at his opposite number, as if shocked more by the viewer than by the diminutive reptile – and one may indeed safely assume that the lizard's bite was intended as a *scherzo*.[6]

The painting is a provocation, and the existence of many different realizations of the subject it inspired attests that the pictorial concept was successful for this very reason.[7] SW

3A Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Anima dannata, 1619. Marble, h. 38 cm. Rome, Palazzo di Spagna