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Caravaggio Lost and Found by Ingrid D. Rowland

As two paintings by Caravaggio return to public view, it is possible to hope that his best-known lost work will reappear after almost half a century.

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Private collection/Museo Nacional del Prado

Caravaggio: *Ecce Homo*, circa 1605–1609

Reviewed:

Caravaggio: The *Ecce Homo* Unveiled

an exhibition at the Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, May 28, 2024–February 23, 2025

Catalog of the exhibition edited by Keith Christiansen, Gianni Papi, Giuseppe Porzio, and Maria Cristina Terzaghi
Venice: Marsilio Arte, 167 pp., $39.95 (distributed in the US by DAP)

Caravaggio: The Portrait Unveiled

an exhibition at the Gallerie Nazionali di Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome, November 23, 2024–February 23, 2025

Caravaggio, la Natività di Palermo: Nascita e scomparsa di un capolavoro [Caravaggio, the Palermo Nativity: Birth and Disappearance of a Masterpiece]

by Michele Cuppone
Rome: Campisano Editore, 248 pp., €20.00 (paper)

In its online catalog of April 8, 2021, the distinguished Madrid auction house Ansorena offered, as Lot 229, a medium-size seventeenth-century oil painting from a private family collection, tentatively identifying the artist as a follower of the Italian-trained Spanish master Jusepe de Ribera. The identification was a conservative guess—not an acknowledged old master but an unknown lesser light. A bolder claim for the canvas's authorship would have been risky, with its glazed surface muddied by centuries of grime from candlelit rooms. With equal caution, the opening bid was set at a modest €1,500. (It is a sobering thought that a four-hundred-year-old painting by an evidently competent artist could sell for so little on the contemporary art market.)

Lot 229 caught the immediate attention of experts in Italy and at the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid, whose director, Miguel Falomir, said, "From the start the Prado sensed that the attribution was not correct, and that probably we found ourselves in front of a lost work by Caravaggio." Old masters in general are out of vogue with contemporary buyers, but Caravaggio has never been more universally loved than he is today, his power to communicate seemingly impervious to every barrier of time and space. And of medium: What made so many people sense his presence so insistently in the online reproduction of a dirty old canvas?

Since last spring, the general public has had a chance to make up its own mind about the fanfare. The old canvas is no longer dirty; the Prado swiftly alerted Spain's Ministry of Culture to the presence of what began to look like a supremely important piece of national heritage, Ansorena removed it from auction, and the unassuming object became a sensation. After cleaning and restoration, it was purchased—reportedly for €30 million—by an anonymous buyer who agreed to exhibit the work for nine months at the Prado, although the museum hopes that this will result in a permanent loan.

One of the reasons for the painting's initial low auction price may have been its somber subject: the biblical scene known as the "Ecce Homo"—"Behold the Man," drawn from a verse in the Gospel of John. Jesus, arrested the previous night while praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, has been imprisoned in the dungeons of the palace built by Herod the Great in Jerusalem and now occupied by Pontius Pilate, governor of the recently formed, dangerously unstable Roman province of Judaea. By morning the news has drawn a crowd of both Jesus' supporters and enemies to the citadel of Jerusalem, but in

the governor's courtyard the enemies have arrived first. Jesus, who lacks the rights of a Roman citizen, can be, and has been, swiftly subjected to the empire's most ignominious punishments: flogging, torture, and the prospect of death by crucifixion, an excruciating public form of execution reserved for enemies of the state. Pilate's guards have beaten the prisoner bloody, accused him of plotting with his followers to become the new king of Judaea, and mocked him by dressing him in a crimson mantle and crowning him with a wreath of thorns.

At last Pilate brings the battered prisoner to a balcony of the palace and displays him to the throng, presumably to gauge whether the safest course is to condemn Jesus as a subversive or let him go. John details the governor's attempts to play both sides in hopes of avoiding a riot:

Pilate therefore went forth again, and saith unto them, Behold, I bring him forth to you, that ye may know that I find no fault in him. Then came Jesus forth, wearing the crown of thorns, and the crimson robe. And Pilate saith unto them, Behold the man [in the Latin of Jerome's Vulgate Bible, "Ecce homo"].

When the hostile faction's cries of "Crucify him!" drown out those of the prisoner's supporters, Pilate lets the law of Rome take its cruel course. In the Gospel of Matthew, he literally washes his hands of the whole controversy.

Images of Jesus at this agonizing moment of suspense became popular in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as aids to Christian devotion, reminders, in a harsh world, that true faith will doubtless be tested. The great Sicilian painter Antonello da Messina, for example, focused almost exclusively on the haggard face of Jesus in this extremity of pain and humiliation. According to Christian belief, he would rise from the dead three days hence and ascend into Heaven, but the price of resurrection, even for God's anointed (this is the meaning of *christos*, Christ), was suffering and death. Antonello's several versions of *Ecce Homo* therefore convey nothing but an all-consuming sadness at the depths of human folly. Titian's *Ecce Homo* paintings, as another example, put a greater emphasis on the condemned man's transcendent divinity by giving his body, however ravaged, a radiant dignity that counteracts the despair signaled by his bowed head.

Often, however, early modern portrayals of the scene follow John's narrative, which strives to pin blame for the fate of Jesus on the Jewish faction that opposed him rather than on Pontius Pilate and the Roman state. Christ's tormentors, therefore, and even Pilate himself are often portrayed by European artists as Jews rather than Romans, or Pilate wears the robes and turban of a modern ruler of the Holy Land—an official of the Ottoman Empire, an infidel Turk standing in for the agent of pagan Rome. It took until 1965 for the Catholic Church to declare explicitly that Jesus was killed by the Roman government of Judaea rather than its Jewish subjects.

On all these representations of Jesus at his most vulnerably human and of his tormentors as evidently unlike the viewer, the newly discovered *Ecce Homo* rings a series of startling, unprecedented changes, many of them invisible before the recent cleaning. What showed through from the Ansorena catalog was the pale figure of Christ emerging from the darkness in contrast to the black-haired, black-bearded Pilate in a pose reminiscent of other paintings by Caravaggio. The cleaning, however, has revealed a work of bold originality.

The scowling Pilate, caught in the coils of Roman law, leans over the parapet of his palace, visibly racked by doubt, the tousled hair peeking out from his velvet cap suggesting an official so confused he can no longer bother with his personal appearance—he seems to have been tearing his hair before he put on his headgear, the sign of his rank. If Pilate's face says "Don't make me do this," his hands are obeying the swifter movements of his heart: his right gestures open-palmed at the hopeless conundrum, but his left has stretched out to support the bruised, swollen hand in which Jesus still clutches his mock scepter. Pilate is changing his mind, which means that we, caught in the position of the crowd gathered beneath the governor's window, are the ones who are called upon to shout either "Crucify him!" or "Let him go!"—not the Jews, not the Romans, no one but ourselves.

Jesus, pale, beaten, bleeding, too weak to hold up his head or meet our eye, waits numbly to hear our verdict as a prison guard strips away his mantle. Behold the man; he wears nothing now but his crown of thorns and the ropes that bind his wrists, the visible signs that his condemnation is already irreversible. The violence, we know, has advanced too far to halt its momentum.

Yet the most extraordinary innovation of this *Ecce Homo* is the wide-eyed, open-mouthed boy who lifts the crimson robe from Christ's shoulders, not stripping a wretched prisoner of his last shred of human dignity but rather unveiling an infinite mystery. Biblical scholars have argued whether the phrase "Behold the man" in John's Gospel deliberately echoes the proclamation of the prophet Isaiah (40:9), "Ecce Deus vester," but for this painter the verbal echo between John's Gospel and the Hebrew prophet holds the key to what is unfolding before us:

O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, get thee up on a high mountain; O thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold, your God! (Super montem excelsum ascende, tu qui evangelizas Sion; exalta in fortitudine vocem tuam, qui evangelizas Ierusalem: exalta, noli timere. Dic civitatibus Iuda: Ecce Deus vester.)

So steadfastly, the painter proclaims, does divinity shine forth from the darkness. Behold the man, yes, but in his suffering, behold your Messiah.

No other *Ecce Homo* has dared to turn Pilate into a comforter, or one of Christ's tormentors into a hierophant, but at least two roughly contemporary copies of this radical work have come to light, proof of its influence. If a literal play of light against darkness first suggested the hand of Caravaggio, the depth of this meditation on the Gospel of John is itself as good as a signature. Who but Caravaggio turns these ancient Bible stories so relentlessly back on their witnesses? Only one painter of the dawning seventeenth century distilled the great gulf between humanity and divinity in such an insistent play of hands: here, Pontius Pilate reaching out in unconscious obedience to the laws of basic humanity rather than the statutes of the Roman Empire, just as the praying hands of the grimy pilgrim in Caravaggio's *Madonna of Loreto* nearly brush the foot of the Christ child, who bestows a personal blessing on this deserving soul (and pays no attention whatsoever to the well-dressed parishioners of the posh Roman church where it hangs, who once complained about the pilgrim's lack of shoes); or as the thumb of the disciple in his *Supper at Emmaus* nearly touches the hand of the traveling companion he has just recognized as Jesus returned to life.

Falomir used the word *intuir* to describe the way he and his colleagues arrived at Caravaggio's name when they examined the Ansorena catalog, a word that describes motions deeper than those of intellect alone—and of course this appeal to our deepest understanding is why Caravaggio continues to engage us so irresistibly. In the Prado, we can compare this *Ecce Homo* directly with the work of Ribera, to whose circle it was first ascribed. Ribera is a marvelous painter in his own right, but one who views the world with clinical detachment, from the bearded lady Magdalena Ventura to a charming Neapolitan waif with rotting teeth and a clubfoot. His *Ecce Homo* in Madrid's Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando shows a red-clad Christ emerging from deep darkness to launch a look of blistering accusation. Caravaggio's Christ, by waiting to hear our verdict, holds out a chance for us to be better versions of ourselves.

The brushwork of the *Ecce Homo*, and especially the treatment of the hands, is consistent with Caravaggio's other work, and the painting's documentation, discussed at length in the Prado's informative catalog, presents a plausible history of its provenance. Most of the scholars who have examined the painting date its execution between 1606 and 1607, either during the artist's last months in Rome or after his escape to Naples after impaling the local gang boss Ranuccio Tommasoni with his rapier during a game of tennis. Homicide does seem to have driven Caravaggio into sustained contemplation of mercy and forgiveness, contemplation worked out more successfully in his painting than in the conduct of his own life.

In Rome another Caravaggio painting has emerged from a private collection to be put on public display for the first time: a portrait ascribed to the artist by his great modern champion Roberto Longhi in 1963. Longhi identified the sitter as Maffeo Barberini, an ambitious Florentine prelate and future pope whose avant-garde artistic taste in the late 1590s was developing as swiftly as his ecclesiastical career. Both identifications, as a work of Caravaggio and as a portrait of Barberini, have gathered corroborating evidence over the past sixty years, providing a fascinating glimpse into the unlikely convergence of

two commanding but utterly divergent personalities. Barberini is best known for his long association with the volcanically talented sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini, who gave his portraits of popes, potentates, and his lover the breath of life through artfully dishevelled details rather than images "incised with a skewer" (in the Italianist Walter Stephens's vivid phrase) to reveal deficiencies of character. Caravaggio, on the other hand, went about armed with a whole arsenal of skewers, from the pair of daggers he was forced to give up to the Roman police, to the rude pen he plied against his rivals, to the blade he drove into Tomassoni's private parts, to the paintbrush he took in hand to mark the upward trajectory of a meteor named Maffeo Barberini.

Fine Art Images/Bridgeman Images

Caravaggio: *Portrait of Monsignor Maffeo Barberini*, circa 1598

Barberini, elected pope in 1623, chose the name Urban VIII, a signal, after the strife-torn reigns of the inclement Clement VIII and his quarrelsome successor Paul V, that he would lead Rome and the Church into a new era of civility. Since the eleventh century,

the family coat of arms had featured three brown horseflies, for their original name was Tafani da Barberino. (*Tafano* means horsefly.) By the sixteenth century, transferred to Florence, the Tafani had dropped the flies from their name in favor of their ancestral village, Barberino Val'Elsa, and changed their heraldic insects to golden bees, champions of industry and sweet rewards who also, of course, packed a sting. In 1598 Maffeo Barberini, already ensconced in the Curia as a protonotary apostolic (a high-level record-keeper), put down seven thousand scudi for a prestigious position as *chierico di camera* (cleric of the Apostolic Chamber)—that is, a governor of the Vatican's financial office and close associate of the pope. It was the perfect occasion to commission a portrait, and for this wealthy cleric of thirty, money was no object. Caravaggio, a resident protégé in the palace of Barberini's friend Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte, the Florentine ambassador to Rome, was only beginning to make a name for himself and was a suitably audacious choice to paint it.

What spiky-tempered Caravaggio picks up from the preternaturally suave Barberini in this rather small seated portrait is his energy. His right hand points off into the space at our left, puncturing the picture plane, while his left hand clutches a letter in so vivacious a grip that the thick paper has begun to crumple, and beneath his iridescent black robes his up-and-down knees show that he is positively squirming on the edge of his seat. Like Raphael in his portrait of the Vatican librarian Tommaso Inghirami, Caravaggio has used Barberini's slightly divergent eyes to reinforce the portrayal of character, as if this famously quick-witted man were keeping watch everywhere at once.

Only Barberini's sovereign sense of decorum keeps this firestorm of lively impulses under control, and thus the calm he struggles to impose on his own posture demonstrates what iron discipline governs his easy familiarity with power. A tubular scroll at his side, tied with a green silk tassel, may contain his letter of appointment; it certainly refers to his lofty post within the Church. The sheen on his hat and blue-black robe attests that they, like the tassel, are made of silk or some other costly material, with the barest hint of crimson piping around the armholes to proclaim his status as a monsignor—a curial official. Perched on his isolated, thronelike chair against the blank wall of Caravaggio's studio, he is both a universe unto himself and evidently posing in the way that people of his time and place assumed their positions in what they called the theater of the world. Barberini's destination in that theater was still an open question, though his armchair and his stately posture conspire to present him as a potential pope. The aspiring great man's averted glance suggests that he is far too busy for the likes of us, but it also gives his outward polish an evasive quality. He is being scanned, after all, by the searchlight eyes of Caravaggio, and the scrutiny makes him nervous.

As these marvels of Caravaggio's brush return to public view, it is impossible not to hope that his best-known lost work will reappear after almost half a century: the magnificent *Nativity with Saint Francis and Saint Lawrence* that was cut from its frame and snatched from a Palermo chapel, the Oratory of Saint Lawrence, in October 1969. Most of the painting's subsequent story has been squeezed, bit by bit, from mafiosi who turned state's evidence in exchange for more lenient prison terms: the so-called *pentiti*,

"repentant" drug and arms dealers, hit men, and bosses whose tales are rarely straightforward. The thieves were two young slum-dwellers eager to ingratiate themselves with Cosa Nostra; that much seems reasonably clear, and the aim, of course, was to make money from Caravaggio's unflinching image of Jesus lying on a stable floor adored by his parents, a shepherd, Saint Francis, and Saint Lawrence as an angel keeps watch—an image, that is, of divine love shining through the bleakest poverty.

According to the most recent findings of art historians and the Palermo district attorney's office, the *Nativity* seems to have made its way into the hands of a particularly vicious hit man, Gaetano Grado. At about the same time, the chapel's parish priest received an anonymous call instructing him to put an advertisement in the leading Palermo newspaper, *Giornale di Sicilia*, if he was interested in having the painting back for a price. The priest informed the local superintendent of fine arts, who published the ad. Cosa Nostra replied with an ad of its own, but the superintendent suspected that the blameless priest might be complicit in the theft, dropped the negotiation, and let the good father face an unpleasant and fruitless police interrogation. The mafiosi, in turn, had no idea of the painting's real value until news of its theft appeared in Italian and international papers; then it passed, by hierarchical right, to Palermo's *capo di tutti i capi*, Gaetano Badalamenti. This boss of bosses, faced with, among other demons, a brutish challenger from Corleone named Totò Riina and the FBI (Badalamenti died in 2004 in a US prison), appears to have placed the Caravaggio with a Swiss dealer whose initial intention was to cut the canvas up and sell the pieces, but who burst into tears, so the story goes, when he actually saw it up close.

Despite rumors that Caravaggio's *Nativity* was destroyed on the night of the theft when the thieves rolled it up in a carpet, or when one of the mafiosi used it as a rug, or when it was stashed in a stable and torn apart by pigs, it was apparently intact in the 1980s, if the stories are true that an Italian art historian was taken blindfolded to see it in Sicily. Thanks to digital technology, a full-size reproduction has been installed in the Oratory, which has been beautifully restored in recent years. The only surviving photograph of the painting was in black and white, but the reproduction has been transformed into a color image through comparison with Caravaggio's available works. Thanks to the archival investigations of the art historian Michele Cuppone, one of the greatest experts on the *Nativity* and its vicissitudes, we know that it was always destined for the Oratory of Saint Lawrence, but Caravaggio received the commission and carried it out not in Palermo in 1609, as scholars once thought, but in Rome in 1600, in the same studio where Maffeo Barberini had sat for his portrait a little over a year earlier.

Twenty years after the fact, the ironies of this singularly bumbling act of thievery inspired the Sicilian writer Leonardo Sciascia's final novel, *A Simple Story*, composed and published in 1989, nearly three decades before Grado's evidence changed the details of the tawdry tale as it had been generally understood. Not that any new revelation could change the force of Sciascia's scathing, not-so-simple story and its essential point: for all its greatness and importance to the world of culture, the stolen Caravaggio was only a minor sideline to the Mafia's real business of drugs and arms, a business so lucrative in a

poverty-stricken region that the mob's influence, and the fear of its violence, had long since corrupted every level of society. Caravaggio's altarpiece, known simply as "the painting," is not only physically hidden in Sciascia's account but, more importantly, buried beneath layer upon layer of conspiracy, complicity, the sworn silence of *omertà*, and brute ignorance. Masterfully, in true Cosa Nostra style, Sciascia crafts his story by oblique, menacing suggestion: "the painting" has no author; blunt words like "Mafia" and "drugs" barely appear; a stream of apparently casual conversation provides the soundtrack for a deadly duel.

And yet, in its absence, Caravaggio's *Nativity*, that supposedly inert piece of painted canvas, has created a real-life story of its own: the parable of how a stolen image of divine humility turned on its thieves and robbed them of their own greatest treasures, profit and *bella figura*, revealing them in all their vacuity. By now its keepers might as well give this treasure back to the world. They have nothing more to gain from it—and no honor left to lose.