

Abstract

The *Mostra della Pittura Italiana del Seicento e Settecento* held in 1922 at the then Pitti Royal Palace (Florence) was the first in a series of exhibitions defining an art historical chronology, schools and the hierarchies of Baroque art, most of which are still valid to date. This exhibition was also the first to showcase a re-discovered Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610) then presented akin to a revelation. The exhibition undoubtedly dealt with new readings of art history at face value but was also motivated by explicitly political overtones informed by the politics and international ambitions of the Kingdom of Italy.

This paper explores the duality of the exhibitions' complex narrative bridging politics and art history. It also reviews the genesis of 20th century Caravaggio studies and the ways and means how this was acknowledged within the Anglo-Saxon world of academia over time. ●

Resumo

A *Mostra della Pittura Italiana del Seicento e Settecento*, realizada em 1922 no Palácio Pitti (Florença), à época residência oficial real, foi a primeira de uma série de exposições que definiram a cronologia artística, as escolas e as hierarquias da arte barroca, e que, na sua maioria, permanecem válidas até hoje. Esta exposição também foi a primeira a redescobrir a obra de Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610), então apresentada como uma revelação. Se a exposição ofereceu, sem dúvida, novas leituras para a história da arte, ela foi também motivada por razões explicitamente relacionadas com a política e com as ambições internacionais do Reino da Itália.

Este artigo explora assim a ambivalente e complexa narrativa das exposições dedicadas ao barroco italiano, e o modo como elas articulam política e história da arte. Analisa-se igualmente a gênese dos estudos de Caravaggio no século XX e de que forma eles foram sendo reconhecidos pela academia anglo-saxônica ao longo do tempo. ●

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“L’IMMENSO SEICENTO”.

THE 1922 FLORENCE EXHIBITION OF ITALIAN SEICENTO ART AND THE POLITICS OF CARAVAGGIO STUDIES

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The triumph of Baroque art celebrated in art historical studies, exhibitions and publications from the beginning of the twentieth century is perhaps best described in a statement by Italian artist Primo Conti (1900-1988), quoted in the first edition of the journal *Il Centone*, which was published in 1919. Conti uncompromisingly describes the period as “*grande e divino ... immenso seicento*”, broadly translated as “the immensely dominant and spiritual seventeenth century” (Mannini et al. 2010, 27). Conti’s contemplative statements are nothing short of euphoric as he succumbs to being willingly intoxicated by the beauty of the art of the period showcased in various museums, including the Pitti and Uffizi in Florence.

Three years later, Florence hosted the *Mostra della Pittura Italiana del Seicento e Settecento*, which in English reads as ‘Exhibition of Italian Seventeenth – and Eighteenth-Century Painting’, at the then Pitti Royal Palace. This was the first ever exhibition, in a series, to define an art historical chronology for the Italian Baroque, including schools and most of the hierarchies defining master and follower that remain valid to this day. Indeed, the project rethought what had until then been perceived to be a decadent period, instead viewing it as the logical, heroic conclusion or apogee of the Renaissance. In the course of the revised narrative which the exhibition sought to propose, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610) was repositioned as the gateway or introductory linchpin in this now immensely significant period, and his stature reassessed in terms of a colossal revelation. Indeed, we may safely assert that the relevance and significance we attribute to Caravaggio today was set and subsequently consolidated from this point in time.

This paper explores the impact of this major exhibition on art history studies from the immediate to the long term. It also explores the various strands of intent, particularly political, which inform the *raison d’être* of this project and the impact of the proposed narrative for *seicento* art on the immediate reception, understanding and rediscovery of Baroque art. Last but not least, this paper reviews the significance of Caravaggio as he was seen at that time, the political undercurrents related to this

emphatically renewed significance, and the ways and means by which Caravaggio studies connect with and relate to this major exhibition.

The project

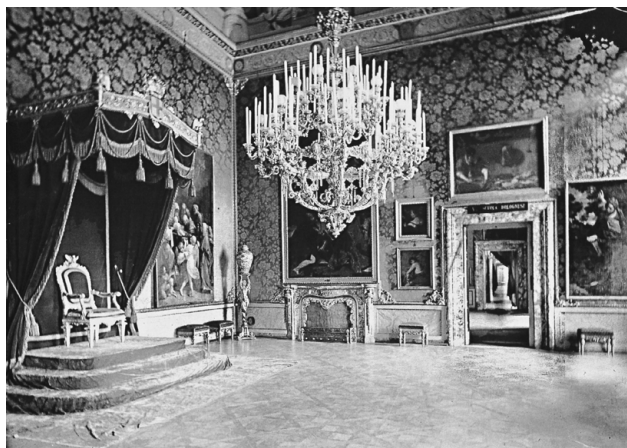
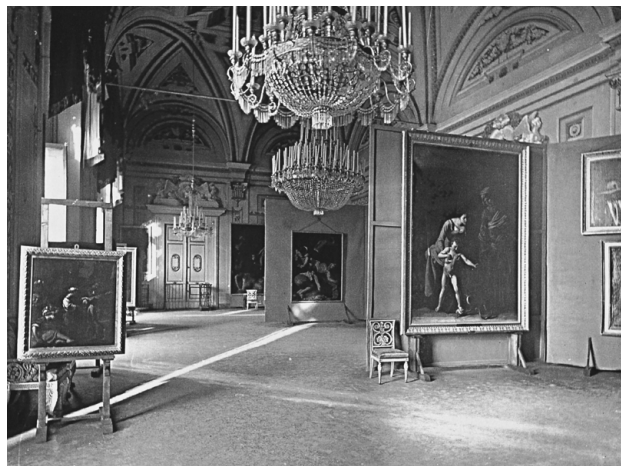
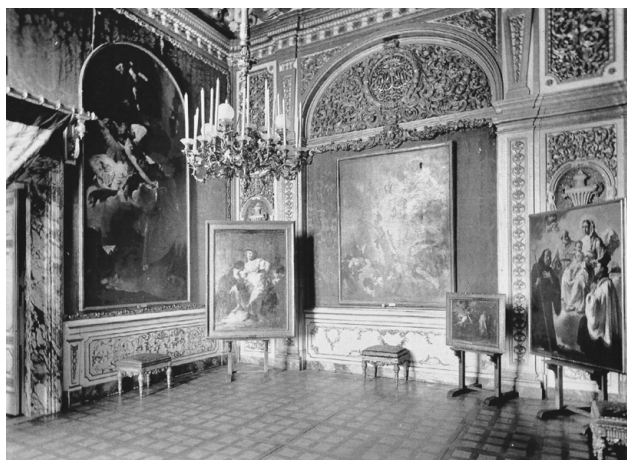
The *Mostra della Pittura Italiana del Seicento e Settecento* was the first in a series of exhibitions to define a general chronology for Italian Baroque art, otherwise described as *seicento* art. The main scope and objective was to validate the period’s relevance and significance in terms of key works by the masters of the period which the exhibition sought to identify for each regional school (Antico 2010, 57). This narrative was articulated thanks to a curated choice of more than a thousand paintings from public and private collections, and with a very broad provenance. Indeed, the selection of works on display was anything but restricted to works in Italy, and included loans from French, German, English and Austrian collections chosen by an international pool of curators and experts purposely convened or handpicked by the organising committee. The exhibition catalogue provides a broad overview of the exhibition layout and the selection of works proposed within each section. The catalogue lists works by artists featured in the exhibition in alphabetical order, with some having a handful of paintings on display. Others would be represented by only one painting, suggesting that the intention was not to hint at a chronology for each artist but to home in on a wireframe hierarchy for each of the different regional schools. The exhibition was laid out across almost fifty halls, and photos of the project suggest that there was no interest in scenography to accompany the hang. The exhibition promoted lesser-known seventeenth century artists, listed as masters, school of and followers, including Giovanni Battista Ruoppolo (1629-1693), Salvator Rosa (1615-1673) and Mattia Preti (1613-1699), amongst others (Mannini 2010, 28).

The concluding report presented by art historian and art critic Ugo Ojetti (1871-1946), the then president of the executive committee of the exhibition, provides insight into the motivations and objectives guiding this project. A superficial reading of the exhibition project based solely on the exhibition catalogue, reviews and photographic documentation may suggest an overtly art historical purpose behind the re-evaluation of Baroque art, which had previously been considered to be the decadent sequel to the Renaissance. This was, indeed, one of the objectives spelt out by Ojetti, although this was to be expected. There was more to this exhibition project, which goes beyond art history. Ojetti has no qualms in confirming that the exhibition was set up to commemorate Italy’s victory over Austria during World War I and adds that this was done with the specific objective of bolstering patriotism and sustaining national pride (Amico 2010, 57-58). Such an uncompromisingly nationalistic objective would have bolstered efforts at re-asserting the supremacy of the Italian schools, now brought together under the remit of the Kingdom of Italy, which had been established a few decades before, in 1861, and their standing as a reference point for European schools, including

the French (connected to Rome), and the Spanish and the Flemish (both inspired by Venice). Indeed, Ojetti claims that the key works of the seventeenth-century European schools had relegated to oblivion their corresponding Italian sources, to which they were clearly indebted. The exhibition would thus reinstate them as the source and inspiration of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European schools (Ojetti in Tamassia 2005, 31-35). Such specifically nationalistic efforts would have also, by consequence, informed a very specific art historical narrative and visual arts practice. The report also underpins a pressing need to expose Italian contemporary artists to acknowledged sources, and the exhibition was officially recognised for its appropriateness as one such source of inspiration (Mannini 2010, 28). Indeed, Ojetti urged Italian artists not to feel intimidated by the challenge seemingly posed by international art movements, and some did indeed take up *seicento* artworks and artists as their inspirational leitmotif. Primo Conti was one of these (Anna Mazzanti et al. 2010, 136 and 168).

Caravaggism: reborn or reinstated?

The linchpin artist of the exhibition can, perhaps, be considered to be Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610), who is described as the project’s rediscovery and the revelation of a new art world (Moschini 1922, 149-152). The exhibition featured twenty out of the then thirty-five works securely attributed to Caravaggio and purposely selected for this exhibition by art historian Roberto Longhi (1890-1970), acknowledged by one and all as the scholar to have rediscovered Caravaggio (Tarchiani 1922, 738-762). This focused selection promoted a formalist reading of the artist’s repertoire rather than underpinning Caravaggio’s realism, which historian Lionello Venturi (1885-1961) actively advocated, or the artist’s classicism, which art historian and critic Matteo Marangoni (1876-1958) sought to prove. Indeed, Longhi believed that the work of art had to be considered in its purest form, independent of subject matter, and connections with the Impressionists, including Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) and Edouard Manet (1832-1883) were actively suggested (Mannini 2010, 28, 31). History was of no interest to Longhi and certainly disconnected from his formalist reading of the artwork. Longhi’s formalist assessment of Caravaggio’s work also includes comparisons with Cézanne, which had previously been proposed in 1913. Both artists are described as *trasfiguratori di materia*, which broadly translates as “alchemical transformers of pictorial matter” (Mannini 2010, 30). Similar juxtapositions of seventeenth-century artists and Impressionist painters were proposed by other scholars, too. Lionello Venturi juxtaposes Valentin de Boulogne’s *Cardsharps* (currently at the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden), then attributed to the school of Caravaggio, with Cézanne’s *The Card Players* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) in *Il Gusto dei Primitivi* (Zanichelli Bologna, 1926). This formalist reading of Caravaggio prevailed in the appraisal of the artist’s work, albeit in sharp contrast to the politico-nationalistic



narrative which co-exists comfortably with the art-historical counter-perspective, and which the exhibition sought to articulate. Ojetti rightly claims that Caravaggio was unanimously chosen by the exhibition’s scientific committee because of his radically innovative style (Ojetti, 1922, in Tamassia 2005, 31). There is also a veiled comment aimed at the supremacy of Italian schools in Ojetti’s claims that Rembrandt was metaphorically born in the arms of this giant. Ojetti thus acknowledged Caravaggio as the supreme artist from which seventeenth-century European art, including the established masters defining its canon, symbolically originates. This major rethinking of Caravaggio’s art contrasts sharply with his standing in art historiography and the generally lukewarm perceptions of his art, until that point in time. The artist’s repertoire had lost its lure by the mid-seventeenth century, and was possibly also mired in the controversy raised by patrons and peers, mostly relating to his iconographical interpretations (Terzaghi 2008, 32-54). Caravaggio’s art is described by Abate Luigi Lanzi in his *Storia Pittorica dell’Italia*, published in 1795, as mundane, particularly in his choice of subject matter, including objects and scenography. This denigratory approach to the artist resurfaces again in John

Figs. 1-4 – Some views of the *Mostra dell’arte Italiana del seicento e settecento* at Palazzo Pitti, Florence, 1922.

Charles Van Dyke’s *A Text-Book of the History of Painting*, published in 1909. Van Dyke titles his chapter “The Decadence and Modern Work,” and his comments are in line with those of Lanzi published a century before:

Caravaggio thought to represent sacred scenes more truthfully by taking his models from the harsh street life about him and giving types of saints and apostles from Neapolitan brawlers and bandits. It was a brutal, coarse representation, rather fierce in mood and impetuous in action, yet not without a good deal of tragic power. His subjects were rather dismal or morose, but there was knowledge in the drawing of them, some good colour and brush-work and a peculiar darkness of shadow masses (originally gained from Giorgione), that stood as an ear-mark of his whole school.” (Van Dyke 1909, 128)

Incidentally, Van Dyke’s book was published concurrently with Roberto Longhi’s earliest studies on Caravaggio.

The clash of art historical narratives

Ojetti’s comments in the exhibition catalogue might be appropriately read within the context of established art historical narratives, particularly British, to which the revised significance of Caravaggio would be an alternative narrative. Almost contemporary to the 1922 *Mostra dell’ Arte Italiana del Seicento e Settecento*, British theorist, artist and art critic Roger Fry (1866-1934) sought to challenge Caravaggio’s reassessed referential status within the Italian *seicento* tradition. Fry’s essay “Settecentismo”, published in the *Burlington Magazine*, can be rightly described as an anti-thesis grounded within the then-established Anglophile narrative (Fry 1922, 158). Fry’s point of departure is aesthetic formalism, which leads him to reject enthusiasm for research into the art of the seventeenth century when still “devoted to elucidating the tangled history of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.” Fry disowns Caravaggio’s art, describing it as the product of “essentially journalistic talent” akin to cinema, and acknowledges the artist’s untapped potential in comparison to what he painted. He also disowns Caravaggio’s significance as a watershed and claims that not “...all Italy went a-whoring after the new idol... among those who were infected by the malady there were many cases of recovery” (Ibid., 163). Indeed, Fry would have still recognised Italian sixteenth-century art as the period worthy of reference and which “holds the supremacy and calls the tune for the sixteenth century,” yet “in the seventeenth century Flanders carries on the more fertile and central doctrine.” (Fry 1927a, 59). Fry acknowledged the seventeenth century as “one of the most prodigious events in the history of European art”, with Peter Paul Rubens as “the only one to uphold and carry on its spirit when Italy herself had lost the clue” (Fry 1927b, 138).

There is, indeed, a streak of politics in Fry’s counter arguments. First of all, he unquestionably points the finger at the perpetrators of these narratives, whom he describes

as “young Italian writers”, which lead “to the formation of a creed and a dogma (...) opposed to the critical spirit.” This, he claims, was true to the nature of Italian identity, frequently marked by a restless style, which he attributes to ethnicity and politics. He claims that “The strange thing is that the aspect of the Italian character which creates Futurism and Fascism should have taken so long to find its expression in art. For, up to the seventeenth century it is hard to find any trace of it” (Fry 1922, 158).

Fry’s reading of Caravaggio’s style is comparable to his reading of Futurism, particularly his “turbulence and impatience”, and his appeal “to the love of violent sensations and uncontrolled passions... Like them he mocked at tradition. Like them he was fundamentally conventional and journalistic” (Fry 1922, 163).

Fry’s reaction might have a context in the general reading of art history from a British perspective. It is worth noting that the artistic production of post-Renaissance Italy had been questioned earlier on by some scholars, including Bernard Berenson who comments in his concluding statements to his 1907 essay on Northern Italian painting – “although in the last three and a half centuries [Italy] has brought forth thousands of clever and even delightful painters, she has failed to produce a single great artist” (Samuels et al. 1987, 47).

This divergence in art historical narratives goes beyond the rethinking of Baroque art promoted by Italian art historians to include the Renaissance itself. The 1930 exhibition of Italian art at Burlington House, London, entitled *Italian Art 1200-1900*, had brought to the United Kingdom some of Italy’s major masterpieces; this in spite of staunch resistance to their loan by museum curators, art historians and others (Haskell 1999, 462-472). Particular requests forwarded by the exhibition committee had also been met with strong reservations on the Italian side. Francis Haskell quotes a letter dated 6 April 1929 which briefly sums up the reaction of the Italians: “they are leaking all over the place: they have included some rubbish unworthy of an exhibition of this kind and omitted other first-class and particularly interesting works which would not be difficult for me to obtain. *Contenti loro, contenti noi*” (Haskell 1999).

Caravaggio scholarship

There is no question that the *Mostra dell’Arte Italiana del Seicento e Settecento* can be rightly acknowledged as a milestone for Baroque art history studies. German art historian Walter Friedlaender (1891-1984) considered the exhibition as the beginning of a research journey that was later to culminate in the *Mostra del Caravaggio e dei Caravaggeschi* held at the Palazzo Reale (Milan) in 1951, curated by Roberto Longhi (Friedlaender 1953, 315). Writing in *The Burlington Magazine*, the British collector and Italian art connoisseur Denis Mahon (1910-2011) gives the 1951 Caravaggio exhibition its due credit, rightly predicting that it would be a defining stimulus for Caravaggio studies (Mahon 1951, 222-235). Indeed, a string of

<> See Ojetti's *Il Martirio dei Monumenti*. Milano: Frateli Treves, Editori, 1917. Available in <https://archive.org/details/ilmartiriodeimonoojet> (accessed on April 2019).

publications by Caravaggio scholars, including Bernard Berenson, Lionello Venturi, Walter Friedlaender and Roberto Longhi himself, followed suit. In doing so, however, Mahon completely ignored the *Mostra dell'Arte Italiana del Seicento e Settecento*. This might have to do with the overtly political connotations of the 1922 exhibition, but its 1951 counterpart informed political readings too, in spite of a radically diverse political climate and a more rigorous scientific approach (see Casati 2015, 81-104).

We can certainly consider that the *Mostra dell'Arte Italiana del Seicento e Settecento* initiated what the 1951 Milan exhibition consolidated (Terzaghi 2017). The focus was undoubtedly on Caravaggio, but in the broader scheme of things, the Italian regional schools were also given due attention in the period between these two major exhibitions. Exhibitions held in response to a need to articulate regional narratives first mooted by the 1922 exhibition include the exhibition on the Venetian *Settecento* held in Venice (1929), the Spanish *seicento* exhibition held in Rome (1930), *La Mostra del Settecento Bolognese* held in Bologna (1935) and others (see Causa 2008, 11). These happened in rapid succession during the second half of the 1930s and concern, more often than not, the same political ambitions as those fostered by the *Mostra dell'Arte Italiana del Seicento e Settecento*.

Post-World War II British scholarship unquestionably acknowledges Roberto Longhi as a Caravaggio scholar. Friedlaender describes him as having become “the almost dictatorial – though not always unchallenged – master of Caravaggio philology” (Friedlaender 1953, 138). Although Friedlaender considered Longhi’s attributions as occasionally containing many “half-truths, and even some incomprehensible misconceptions,” there was no question about the quality and significance of his studies, “often painstakingly detailed and always written in a high literary style, (and which) contain a remarkable number of brilliant attributions and trouvailles; (...) also offer many striking insights into the nature of Caravaggio’s genius” (Friedlaender 1953, 138).

Besides Longhi, Friedlaender also acknowledges Lionello Venturi’s research in *L’Arte* (1909-1910) and his subsequent publication of a small book on Caravaggio (1921) as of equal standing, at least in the early years of the twentieth century. There is, however, little reference to Ojetti in the literature following the 1921 Florence exhibition. Indeed, even though Longhi’s studies had been handpicked for the purpose of nationalistic and politically tainted art historical narratives, there is very little to suggest that Longhi himself was into politics directly and indirectly. Contrary to Longhi, Ojetti had been actively involved in pro-Italian propaganda during World War I and had aspired to become a journalist earlier on in his career, before reading law.

British and Italian scholarship proceed along different tracks in relation to Caravaggio, and this was also the case before World War II. Indeed, there is a sharp contrast between Longhi’s promotion of *seicento* art and Fry’s counterarguments, sharp criticism and dismissive stance. However, both acknowledge and endorse a surprisingly similar methodology. Besides being both formalists, the two also expound the dialectic with Cézanne. Whilst Longhi compares Caravaggio to Cézanne, Fry studied Cézanne

by copying his works, including Cézanne’s self-portrait in the National Gallery, London, besides his publication *Cézanne: A Study of His Development* (1927). In copying Cézanne’s portrait, Fry did not resort to extracting the essential aesthetic idea of the picture but copies his model in an almost slavish manner, suggesting an interest in studying, understanding and emulating the essence of this painter (Reed 1990, 766-772). Like his Italian counterparts, Fry also advocated a new aesthetic language which could only be grounded in the past, unlike the dictates of mainstream modern art. His collection included the works of impressionist and post-impressionist painters, such as Derain, Bonnard and Rouault, but few works which feature dramatic subjects such as those to be found in Caravaggio’s repertoire.

Conclusion

Caravaggio’s reception within British art historical scholarship is a staggered compromise juxtaposed against the political backdrop of Italian nationalism. At first it is openly contested, perhaps due to its strong Italian nationalistic overtones, and considered to be uncomplimentary to an art historical narrative which would have read as an alternative or variant to the Italophile rereading of Baroque art assiduously promoted by Italian art historians. Indeed, the merits and competencies of Italian scholarship and art historians in general is called into question by Anglo-Saxon scholarship as Italian scholars seek to rethink long-established narratives and promote exhibition projects, particularly the *Mostra dell’Arte Italiana del Seicento e Settecento*, with an overtly political agenda. This does not mean that the scientific input to the curatorial choice was missing, but that this was not the only intent, possibly of a secondary nature. The 1951 post-war Caravaggio exhibition seems to have set the record straight in terms of scientific content as the main purpose and objective of Caravaggio’s rediscovery. In the meantime, the end of World War II had ushered in a new world order. Nonetheless, politics were still evident in the exhibition’s outreach and media coverage, and interfered in a reading that is apparently art historical, but has much deeper readings and connections.

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