





far left:
Saint Jerome Writing, 1607,
oil on canvas, 117/157cm,
St John's Co-Cathedral
Museum, Valletta

Caravaggio's St Jerome Writing: An Artistic Appraisal

The great fame of Caravaggio's *The Beheading of St John the Baptist* has tended to draw attention from another great work of his also painted and existing in Malta. **Cynthia de Giorgio** throws interesting light on this masterpiece.

The painting by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio depicting *St Jerome Writing*¹, forms part of the artist's output during his short stay in Malta. The attention this painting deserves as a masterpiece in its own right is often overshadowed by the monumental painting depicting the *Beheading of St John the Baptist* that Caravaggio also produced during his stay here. The recent exhibition organised by The St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation, as a part of the celebrations commemorating the completion of the restoration of the Chapel of the Italian langue, exhibited this painting as the focal point, since it once adorned the said chapel.

Caravaggio, who came to Malta fleeing from the accusation of murder, spent just over a year on the island, from July 1607 to October 1608.² He had entered the Order as a Knight of Obedience being obliged to spend a year in the convent. The artist's life had so far been as dramatic as the subjects of his paintings.

Caravaggio is best known for his realism, yet his pictures are infused with a refined theatrical element that, if studied

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left:
Saint Jerome Writing, c.1606, oil
 on canvas, 112/157cm, Rome,
 Galleria Borghese

below:
The Malta Saint Jerome Writing,
 detail of hands

bottom:
The Malta Saint Jerome Writing,
 detail of still life

closely, is far from realistic. The depiction of *St Jerome* (fig. 1), in this instance, portrayed against a dark void and selectively lighting only a prominent part of the saint's forehead and torso, as well as his staged pose in a semi *contrapposto* are pure theatrical elements imbuing in the painting the characteristics of an opening scene at a theatrical performance. Confronted by a Caravaggio is like sitting in the front row of the stalls. The lights have gone down, the curtains have opened, and spot lit before you is a drama that feels intensely real.

This is not the first time that Caravaggio depicted this saint. He had painted *St Jerome* a few years earlier, a work that now hangs in the Borghese Gallery in Rome.³ When compared, the two paintings speak a different language and show Caravaggio's development into a more mature style. In the Rome painting Caravaggio focuses on the large manuscripts as the subject of his composition and depicts the saint as a frail old man, engrossed, almost fretting, over his work. A distinct feature is Caravaggio's three-dimensional special effects breaking down the divide between the picture and the spectator. His art invades the viewer's space, physically involving the spectator.

It is also not the first time that Caravaggio makes use of this composition. The composition of the painting of *St John the Baptist* that he had produced earlier in Rome, is almost identical to the Malta *St Jerome* but in a mirrored version.

Here, the young *St John* is depicted as a rough Roman street boy, sitting in a *contrapposto*, bare-chested and with his red robe falling about his waist. A mysterious stream of light enters the painting highlighting the saint whilst casting the background into darkness. His right arm leans on a stick where a few objects appear. In the Malta painting this is replaced by the table, whilst what seems like the bark of a tree is replaced by the cardinal's hat. But Caravaggio is known to have been able to recall his favourite compositions and characters at will.

In his Malta work, this time he uses a more central position for the Saint focusing on the noble act of writing, for *St Jerome* is best known for translating the bible from Greek to Latin. He represents the saint as an old yet grave and dignified man. It is the sobriety of the painting that gives the work a realistic tone, doing away with the painter's usual extravagant illusionism which invades the viewer's space. The lack of over dramatised actions, together with the restrained palette, gives the painting a distinctive Maltese flavour as it seems to reflect the short-lived serenity he enjoyed as a member of the convent.

Caravaggio now involves the viewer psychologically rather than physically. Alone, in what looks like a monk's cell, he sits at the edge of his bed. Only the bare minimum



right:
Saint John the Baptist,
c. 1605, oil on canvas,
97/131cm, Galleria
Nazionale d'Arte Antica,
Palazzo Corsini, Rome



bottom:
The Malta Saint Jerome Writing, detail of face



is included; the viewer, like the Saint, remains focused on the task that lies ahead. The twist in his posture indicates a sudden wave of inspiration and whilst holding an ink pot tensely in one hand he starts to write the first letter 'S' in the volume. Placed close to the edge of the table are a stone and a crucifix, instruments of penance and meditation, and a skull, a stark reminder of the ephemeral nature of life. The candle is not lit and clearly not the source of illumination. The dark voids and the highlighted yet weathered flesh of the saint's face and hands contrast with the deep folds of his rich crimson gown. The painting, composed mainly of diagonals, is only stabilised by the strong horizontal plane of the table and the vertical jamb. All these elements add to the intensity of the moment.

This painting dates between the Autumn months of 1607 and some time before Caravaggio started working on the painting of the Beheading, which was clearly finished by August 1608 when he is recorded as having been involved in a brawl, followed by his arrest and dramatic escape in October 1608.⁴ In all probability Caravaggio was commissioned the work directly by Fra Ippolito Malaspina Marchese de Fosdinovo,⁵ an important member of the Order, and was intended to adorn the walls of his house in Valletta.⁶ In its present location in the Oratory it is correctly displayed at the eye level at which Caravaggio clearly intended it to hang. This is further established by the highly refined draughtsmanship and painstakingly refined brushwork which can only be fully appreciated at close quarters.

Malaspina had been in Rome at the same time Caravaggio was there, and he may have already known him. He also came to Malta in 1607, most probably on the same galleys that Caravaggio had



The coat of arms of Fra Ippolito Malaspina

travelled on to Malta.⁷ St Jerome, known for his asceticism, would be a subject that a knight of the calibre of Malaspina would want to be associated with.⁸

Thus, it seems most likely that the painting originally formed part of the private collection of Fra Ippolito Malaspina,⁹ as the coat of arms clearly indicates, and was donated to St John's Church some time after his death in 1624 together with another three paintings.¹⁰ These three paintings are one representing *The Penitent Magdalene*,¹¹ which is a faithful copy of a detail from a well-known work by Correggio in Parma (*The Lamentation of the Death of Christ*), *St John the Baptist*, also emblazoned with his coat of arms, and a painting of the *Madonna of Divine Love*.¹²

The *St Jerome* suffered severely when in 1985 it was ripped out of its frame and stolen. After its recovery in 1987 it was subsequently restored by the *Istituto Centrale di Restauro* in Rome.¹³ The paint layer has thinned out with the passage of time and in some parts the underground shows through. The background also could have lost some of its architectural detail,¹⁴ though Caravaggio, especially during his mature years, is not known to have wasted too much time creating deep perspectives and elaborate architectural backgrounds.

There is little about this painting that we can be certain of except for its patron, Fra Ippolito Malaspina. It is ironic that Caravaggio, today a much celebrated artist, was defrocked and expelled from the Order. This ceremony was held in the Oratory in the presence of the venerable council, which comprised several of his patrons, including Malaspina, and in front of the *Beheading of St John the Baptist*, the work he had so proudly and perhaps even defiantly signed *Fra Michelang...*

Notes

1. In modern times the painting was first attributed to Caravaggio by V. Bonello in M. Marangoni, *Il Caravaggio*, Florence 1922, p 41.
2. See K. Sciberras & D.M. Stone, 'Caravaggio in black and white: art, knighthood, and the Order of Malta (1607-1608)' in *Caravaggio the Final Years*, London 2005, and by the same authors 'Malaspina, Malta, and Caravaggio's St Jerome' in *Paragone* LVI, 2005 and J. Azzopardi, 'Documentary source on Caravaggio's Stay in Malta' in *Caravaggio in Malta* ed. P. Farrugia Randon, Malta 1989.
3. Caravaggio also painted *St Jerome in Meditation* dating to the same period and using the same model, now in Montserrat.
4. See K. Sciberras, 'Frater Michael Angelus in Tumultu: the cause of Caravaggio's imprisonment in Malta', in *The Burlington Magazine*, CXLIV, 2002, p 229-232.
5. Malaspina is recorded to have entered the Order in 1556, see F. Bonazzi, *Elenco dei Cavalieri del S.M. Ordine di san Giovanni di Gerusalemme ricevuti nella Veneranda lingua d'Italia, Prima Parte: 1136 al 1713*, Naples 1897-1907. For more on Malaspina see S. Macioce, 'Caravaggio a Malta: IL S. Girolamo e lo stemma Malaspina', in *L'Ultimo Caravaggio e la cultura artistica a Napoli in Sicilia e a Malta* ed. M. Calvesi, Syracuse, 1987. His tombstone lies in the Italian Chapel in St John's Valletta.
6. V. Denaro, *The Houses of Valletta*, Malta 1967, p 122.
7. S. Macioce, 'Caravaggio a Malta e i suoi referenti: notizie d'archivio', in *Storia dell'arte*, 81, 1994, p 215.
8. He was a *Gran Croce* and held several important posts. For the history of the Order see: Abbe de Vertot, *The History of the Knights of Malta*, London 1728, and B. Dal Pozzo, *Historia della Sacra Religione Militare di S. Giovanni Gerosolimitano detta di Malta*, Verona 1703.
9. See K. Sciberras *op.cit.*, in *The Burlington Magazine*, 2002.
10. J. Gash, The Identity of Caravaggio's Knight of Malta, in *The Burlington Magazine*, CXXXIX, no. 1128, 1997, 156-60, see also *Caravaggio*, London, 2003.
11. This painting has recently undergone restoration.
12. Macioce, *op.cit.*, 1994, p 227, 228.
13. The painting had previously been restored by ICR in Rome in 1956.
14. Sciberras and Stone, *op.cit.*, 2005, p 5.

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