



1. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (Italian, 1571-1610).
The Taking of Christ, 1602. Oil on canvas, 53 x 67".
Society of Jesus, Ireland, on loan to the National Gallery of Ireland.

Exhibition

PICTURES FROM AN EXHIBITION: SAINTS AND SINNERS: CARAVAGGIO AND THE BAROQUE IMAGE

A SELECTION OF PAINTINGS FROM THE EXHIBITION
AT THE McMULLEN MUSEUM OF ART, BOSTON COLLEGE
1 FEBRUARY — 24 MAY 1999

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*Saints and Sinners*¹ explores the religious and social functions of art in Italy; c. 1580-1680, a period often called the Baroque. The exhibition gathers paintings on religious themes by some of the most important artists working in Italy during these years, which span the early, middle, and late Baroque periods. Unlike most museum exhibitions, which focus on matters of stylistic development and connoisseurship, *Saints and Sinners* asks questions about how these paintings were received by their original audiences. What significances would their contents and aesthetics have had for their viewers? What were they meant to teach viewers? How were they meant to move and persuade them?

Executed in a variety of artistic styles and intended for many different locations and audiences, the paintings, nonetheless, fall into two categories: large works commissioned for public display in churches, chapels, and oratories; and smaller works meant for private display in palaces, villas, and houses of the religious orders. Whether public or private, most religious art of the period was commissioned by wealthy aristocrats and merchants, cardinals and other prelates, religious orders, and popes. However, despite differences in style, scale, and provenance, these paintings share common premises, iconographical traditions, and goals. The latter were *docere, delectare, movere*, that is, to teach, delight, and persuade the viewer. These traditional goals of public oratory were commonly applied to sacred painting, especially to the widely diffused images of saints and sinners, the focus of this exhibition. As the exhibition and catalogue essays make clear, these goals, in turn, reflect the new spiritual-cultural exigencies of Catholic

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society in the wake of the Protestant Reformation and the Roman Catholic Council of Trent (1545-63), two landmark events that profoundly affected the religious culture and sacred art of Italy throughout the period explored in *Saints and Sinners*.

SYNOPSIS OF THE EXHIBITION

Section I of the exhibition explores *The Power of Images*. As this section reveals, in early modern Italy there was considerable diversity of opinion about artistic style, subject matter, and the appropriate audiences for art, but everyone agreed that images were powerful. Indeed, images were regarded as even more potent than words because they were believed to imprint material on viewers' memories in direct and indelible fashion. The power of art was seen as threefold: didactic, devotional, and thaumaturgic. That is, images could be effective teachers of ecclesiastical doctrine and his-

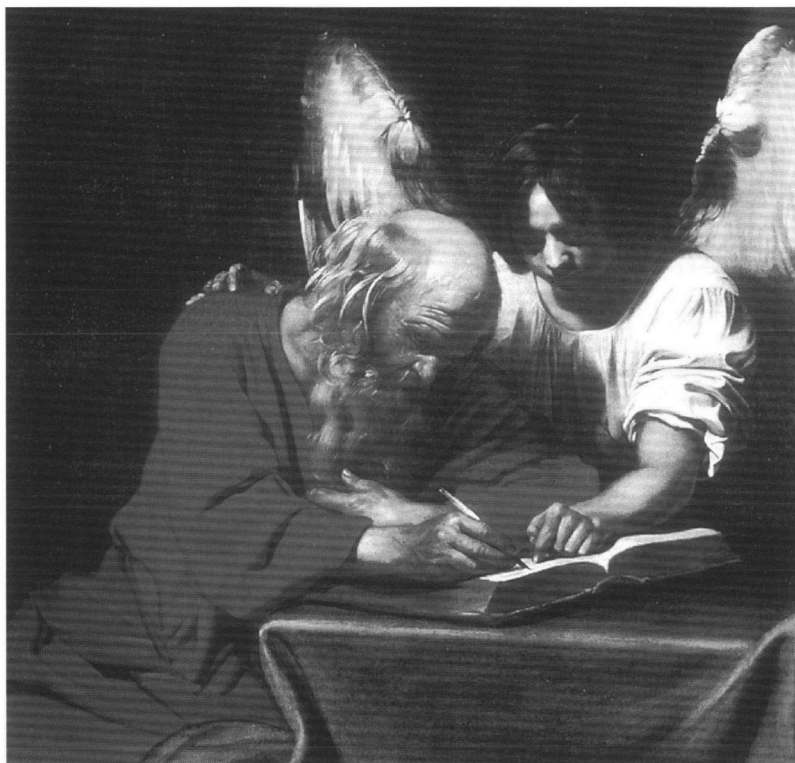


2. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (Italian, 1571-1610). *The Conversion of the Magdalene*, c. 1598. Tempera and oil on canvas, 39 x 53". The Detroit Institute of Arts, Gift of the Kresge Foundation and Mrs. Edsel B. Ford. Photograph © The Detroit Institute of Arts.

Franco Mormando, S.J.

tory; they could inspire spiritual conversion and devotion; and, finally, they could heal the body and mind. This belief applied equally to large works executed for public display and smaller works intended for private use.

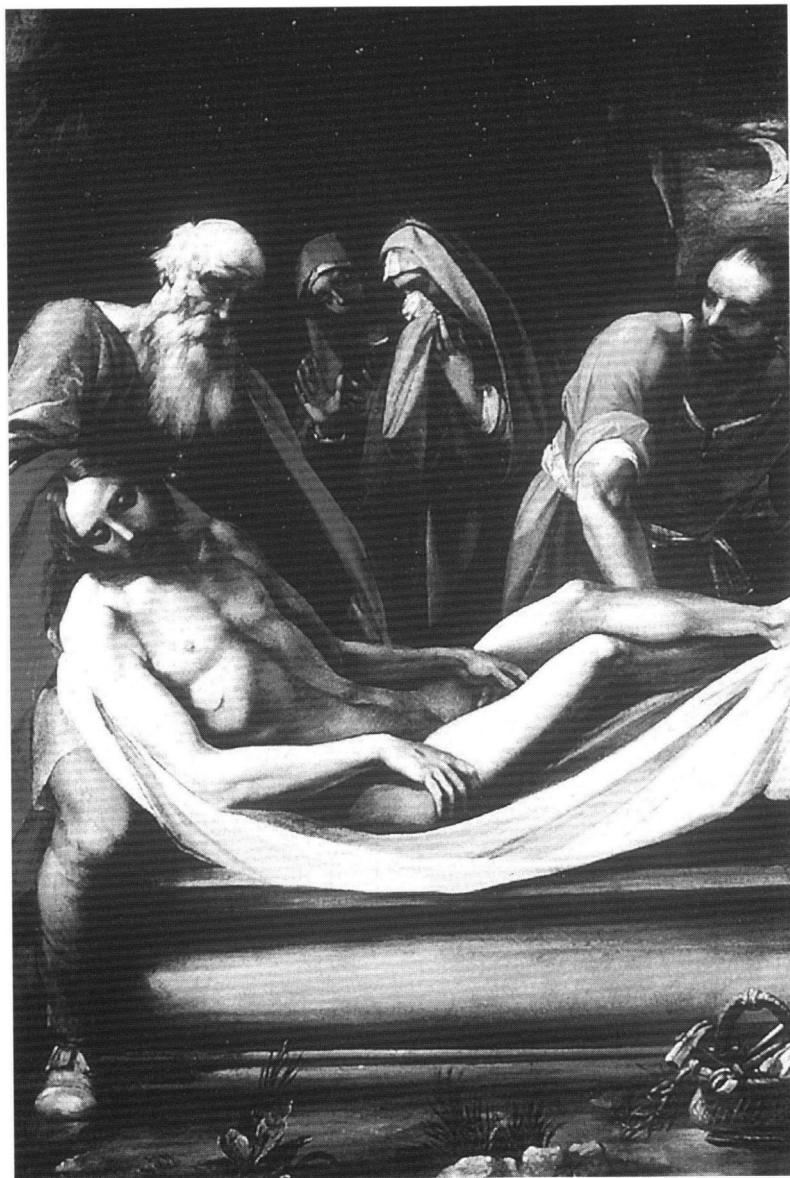
Section 2, "Saints as Sinners; Sinners as Saints," explores the iconography and reception of images of Mary Magdalene and Peter the Apostle, two of the most popular saints in Baroque Italy. The Magdalene was the example par excellence of the reformed prostitute, while Peter served as a symbol of the papacy. At the same time, both saints were accessible role models for all Christians because in their human frailty they had sinned. These two "saints-who-sinned" contrast effectively with the "apostle-who-failed," Judas Iscariot, who figures prominently in Caravaggio's *The Taking of Christ*.



3. Nicolas Régnier (Flemish, 1591-1667).

St. Matthew and the Angel, c. 1625.

Oil on canvas, 42 x 48 7/8". Bequest of John Ringling. Collection of John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, State Art Museum of Florida.



4. Giuseppe Cesari (The Cavaliere D'Arpino) (Italian, 1568-1640).
The Entombment, c. 1615. Oil on canvas, 30 x 21". Collection of Joan
Nissman and Morton Abromson.

Section 3, “Envisioning Sanctity,” examines the Baroque understanding and representation of sanctity as embodied by the men and women – historical, legendary; and contemporary – enrolled in the Church’s official roster of canonized saints. As this section demonstrates, the saints’ roles as intercessors had always made them popular subjects in Christian art, but in the face of Protestant rejection of this traditional role, early modern Catholic Italy witnessed a renewed promotion of their cults. This resurgence led to a proliferation of images of the saints. In addition to their roles as powerful intercessors, the saints functioned as exemplars of the many different paths to sanctity. These paths, which were illustrated and celebrated through art, included prayer, attendance at sermons, martyrdom, works of mercy; penitence, and mystical contemplation.

Section 4, “Representing Sin: Avarice and Betrayal,” looks at counter-examples, or negative role models, in Italian Baroque art. As this section demonstrates, saints were not the only role models exploited in Catholic art; sinners were equally important in teaching the parameters of Christian behavior. Indeed, early modern Christianity thought in terms of Good versus Evil. Adapted from ancient epideictic oratory; the rhetoric of praise and blame, early modern sermons often relied on the stark delineation of moral opposites. The paintings in this section show that this pattern of thought emerges not only in literature, but also in art. Both the traditional Seven Deadly Sins and the Ten Commandments were the basis for visual representations of vice, sin, and evil in the early modern period. Particularly prominent among such representations were the two sins of Judas Iscariot, avarice and betrayal. These two sins pertained to a wide spectrum of issues involving money and the social-religious bond.

Section 5, “Saints and Sinners,” culminates in *Judas Iscariot and The Taking of Christ*, in the ultimate juxtaposition of Good and Evil, as embodied in the figures of Jesus and Judas Iscariot. Baroque artists emphasized this duality by depicting the innocent Jesus as more pleasing and refined in appearance than the wicked Judas, who is represented as unattractive and uncouth. Alongside Caravaggio’s *The Taking of Christ*, two revealingly different renditions of the same episode are displayed. Ludovico Carracci’s painting, the earliest of the three, is a distinctly non-Caravaggesque treatment of the subject. By contrast, the work by the anonymous Flemish artist shows the profound influence of Caravaggio’s style and treatment of the theme on European art.

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NOTE

- 1 This account draws on excerpts from the Editor's Introduction to the catalogue, *Saints and Sinners: Caravaggio and the Baroque Image*, ed. Franco Mormando, S.J. (Chestnut Hill MA: McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, 1999).