

S A I N T S & S I N N E R S
C A R A V A G G I O
& THE BAROQUE IMAGE



Edited by Franco Mormando

McMULLEN MUSEUM OF ART, BOSTON COLLEGE
Distributed by the University of Chicago Press

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This publication is issued in conjunction with the exhibition *Saints and Sinners: Caravaggio and the Baroque Image*, at the Charles S. and Isabella V. McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College

February 1 to May 24, 1999

The exhibition is organized by the McMullen Museum of Art

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Franco Mormando, Boston College

CO-CURATORS:

Gauvin Alexander Bailey, Clark University
Pamela Jones, University of Massachusetts, Boston
John W. O'Malley, Weston Jesuit School of Theology
Thomas W. Worcester, College of the Holy Cross

This exhibition and catalogue are underwritten by Boston College with an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and Humanities and additional support from the following:

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Library of Congress Catalogue Card number 98-68410 ISBN 1-892850-00-1

Distributed by the University of Chicago Press

Printed by Acme Printing

Designed by Office of Publications and Print Marketing at Boston College

JoAnn Yandle, Designer

Typeset in the Hoefler Text family

Paper stock is Potlach McCoy and Monadnock Dulcet

Copyedited by Naomi Rosenberg

Photographs have been provided courtesy of the following:

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FRONT COVER:

The Taking of Christ, 1602

MICHELANGELO MERISI DA CARAVAGGIO
oil on canvas
53 x 67 in.
Society of Jesus, Ireland, on loan to the National Gallery of Ireland

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

YOUR ANCESTORS brought civilization to my people." So remarked Queen Elizabeth II in a formal address to the Italian Parliament on the occasion of one of her official state visits to Italy.¹ Many parts of the globe have likewise been profoundly touched, transformed, and enriched by the prodigious cultural forces emanating from the Italian peninsula, not only in ancient times but throughout the centuries, including the present one. The Italian Studies program at Boston College has long desired to mount an exhibition at the University's Museum celebrating the glorious achievements of Italy's creative genius. That desire has finally become reality in *Saints and Sinners: Caravaggio and the Baroque Image*.

GOALS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EXHIBITION

Saints and Sinners explores the religious and social functions of art in Italy, ca. 1580–1680, a period often called the Baroque.² 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?

A variety of documents—including sermons, popular drama, chapbooks (mass-produced spiritual pamphlets), devotional treatises, religious poetry, biblical commentary—are herein examined to illuminate the themes, figures, and episodes contained in the paintings of the exhibition. Like the paintings, these documents—many of them only recently studied and previously unpublished—reveal what scholars now refer to as the “mentalities,” or ways of thinking, current in this period at all levels of society, both elite and popular. These “mentalities” are uncovered in *Saints and Sinners* by a team of scholars from various academic disciplines, bringing with them multiple points of

view and employing differing methodologies.

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 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*.

THE CATALOGUE ESSAYS

THE essays contained herein expand upon the issues explored in the exhibition and represent the result of original, new research by scholars coming together from diverse fields to “read” the art of Caravaggio and other major Italian Baroque painters from new, hitherto ignored or little explored perspectives.

Four of the essays, those by Pamela Jones, Thomas Worcester, and my two contributions, are largely devoted to questions of reception and significance: What did these paintings signify for early modern Italian viewers? How were they received—in religious, social, and psychological terms—by their original audiences? These questions are answered with respect to representations of Mary Magdalene, Peter the Apostle, and Judas Iscariot in my two essays, “Teaching the Faithful to fly” and “Just as your lips approach the lips of your brothers.” The two essays examine a wide body of contemporary texts that offer

privileged insight into the predominant ideas, notions, and *topoi* circulating about these figures at all levels of society in early modern Italy. I favor the sermons of popular preachers and two classic texts of early modern Catholicism, Cardinal Caesar Baronius's *Annales ecclesiastici* and Cornelius a Lapide's *Great Commentary on Scripture*. Documents pertaining to the commissioning, execution, and subsequent destiny of the individual paintings, as well as the lives and works of the artists, are also integrated into these discussions. The nature of the evidence, however, precludes my or any of the other authors' making apodeictic claims about either the original intentions of the artists or the meanings of the paintings to any given viewer.

Pamela Jones's essay, "The Power of Images: Paintings and Viewers in Caravaggio's Italy," begins with a brief overview of image theory, examining the didactic, devotional, and thaumaturgic powers that paintings were then believed to possess. Jones then turns to a detailed investigation of the reception of three pairs of paintings, representing Saint Sebastian, Saint Mary Magdalene, and the Madonna of Loreto. Expanding our understanding of early modern Italian Catholicism (which scholars have hitherto explored by studying, above all, the upper echelons of society—popes, prelates, princes, and theologians), Jones treats the viewing expectations not only of nameable elites, such as patrons, but those of now unidentifiable viewers, such as ordinary people who saw altarpieces in public churches. To do so, she brings to bear not merely elite literary sources, but also extensive archival research of popular religious theatrical texts and chapbooks, heretofore almost entirely overlooked for this period. Likewise, Jones's essay helps illuminate Seicento attitudes not only toward artistic style, aesthetics, and religion, but also such major social issues as poverty. Among the conclusions which Jones reaches is that of the permeability of elite and popular culture; in their notions and assumptions, these two socio-cultural realms overlapped and influenced each other to a degree far greater than scholars have traditionally assumed.

In "Trent and Beyond: Arts of Transformation," Thomas Worcester considers how devout Italians of the Seicento, when imbued with the spirit of the decrees of the Council of Trent or spiritually formed by two devotional treatises widely read in the seventeenth century—Lorenzo Scupoli's *Spiritual Combat* and Roberto Bellarmino's *Art of Dying Well*—could have viewed or

received paintings in this exhibition. In exploring reception, Worcester responds to the recent, much-discussed work of Piero Camporesi, *The Fear of Hell: Images of Damnation and Salvation in Early Modern Europe*. From the visual evidence presented in the exhibition and the textual evidence examined in his essay, Worcester concludes that Camporesi's thesis—that the fear of hell was the dominant motif in the religious culture of early modern Italy—may need revision.

Essays by Josephine von Henneberg and Gauvin Bailey focus on specific historical developments of the Baroque period: the paleo-Christian revival and the rise of the Jesuit Order. In "Cardinal Caesar Baronius, the Arts, and the Early Christian Martyrs," von Henneberg explores the theme of martyrdom as seen in the representations of Saints Sebastian and Cecilia, especially from the perspective of new historical research on Cardinal Baronius. Von Henneberg considers in her discussion contemporary social issues—especially aid to the poor, sick, and dying—mirrored in these images.

Saints and Sinners comprises several paintings either of Jesuit theme or of provenance, including Caravaggio's *The Taking of Christ*. The Jesuits interacted widely with—and profoundly influenced—the art and artists of early modern Italy in their various roles as patrons, spiritual teachers, scholars, art theorists, and artists themselves. Gauvin Bailey's essay, "The Jesuits and Painting in Italy, 1550–1690: The Art of Catholic Reform," re-assesses the role of the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits, in the world of Italian late Renaissance and Baroque painting, based on new archival material and in relation to the artists, works, and themes of this exhibition. In particular he identifies the crucial role played by Giovanni Battista Fiammeri, a lesser-known Jesuit painter, in the original programs of the Church of the Gesù and the earliest Jesuit churches in Rome, and stresses the intimate relationship between these commissions and the print culture of Antwerp. Bailey also provides a new reconstruction of the iconography of the first Jesuit saints, particularly the image of *The Death of St. Francis Xavier*, which became one of the most popular for the Society. Bailey's essay is the first substantial survey of these issues since Howard Hibbard's seminal "*Ut picturae sermones: The First Painted Decorations of the Gesù*."³

John Varriano's essay focuses on Caravaggio, examining the complex, problematic question of the artist's attitude toward religion. Varriano begins with a review of

the relevant primary sources and subsequent treatment of the subject in the secondary literature, including the most recent studies. He then analyzes selected examples of Caravaggio's work—with special emphasis on those paintings in the exhibition—in light of current knowledge of the prevailing religious attitudes and representational conventions of his time. The essay concludes with a discussion of Caravaggio's self-portrayals in such paintings as *The Taking of Christ*, and the artist's personal engagement with the spiritual issues encompassed by the exhibition as a whole. Continuing the focus on Caravaggio, Sergio Benedetti, the rediscoverer of *The Taking of Christ*, identifies and discusses influences on the artist's paintings in both classical sculpture and religious literature.

John O'Malley's introductory survey provides both the paintings in the exhibition and the other essays in the catalogue with an historiographical "frame." In various ways, the works of art in *Saints and Sinners* are products and reflections of Roman Catholic culture of the early modern period, of that century or so following the Council of Trent, most commonly called the Counter Reformation. Scholarly interpretation of the events, personalities, institutions, and culture of this period of Roman Catholic—and European—history has undergone revision in the past few decades. Scholars have long divided into two opposing schools of interpretation, each, offering a polemically simplistic, monolithic image of the Catholic Church—the Catholic school, as O'Malley reports, usually taking "an unremittingly bright view of the subject," and the Protestant, instead, taking "a correspondingly unremittingly dark view." Now, however, they have arrived at a significantly altered, more nuanced picture of both early modern Roman Catholicism and Protestantism in the wake of new, largely de-polemized research. In summarizing this emerging, revised picture O'Malley reviews the state of the question, placing the exhibition's paintings—as well as the essays—in a more up-to-date, serviceable hermeneutical frame than one usually finds in the writings of art historians and in museum exhibition catalogues.

This collection of scholarly essays is prefaced by Noel Barber's "The Murder Behind the Discovery," in which he recounts the story behind the rediscovery of Caravaggio's *The Taking of Christ*, the visual centerpiece and culmination of *Saints and Sinners*. Painted in Rome in 1602, *The Taking of Christ* "disappeared" in the late eighteenth

century. Two hundred years later, in 1993, amidst worldwide jubilation, it was rediscovered quite accidentally in Dublin in the dining room of the Jesuit Fathers of Lower Leeson Street, under circumstances that Barber, one of the key players in this dramatic episode of art history, explains. Cleaned and restored, *The Taking of Christ* now hangs on indefinite loan in the National Gallery of Ireland. *Saints and Sinners* not only represents the first appearance of *The Taking of Christ* in North America, but is likely to be also its only appearance outside Dublin for many years to come. Indeed, Caravaggio's masterpiece has come to the United States only because of the special concession granted to Boston College, a Jesuit university, by its Jesuit owners in Ireland.

Saints and Sinners represents an endeavor that is not only interdisciplinary but also inter-institutional: co-curators Gauvin Bailey of Clark University, Pamela Jones of the University of Massachusetts at Boston, John O'Malley of the Weston Jesuit School of Theology, and Thomas Worcester of the College of the Holy Cross were all vital, active organizers of this project from its very inception to its conclusion and in all of its multiple facets; they have likewise been prodigious in the scholarly expertise, intellectual insight, creativity, time, energy, and devotion which they unstintingly dedicated to the exhibition during its long and complicated gestation. I would also like to

APPENDIX:
SYNOPSIS OF THE EXHIBITION

acknowledge here my colleague Virginia Reinburg of the Department of History, Boston College, whose consultation was invaluable in the initial phases of this exhibition.

The fine team at the McMullen Museum—Kerry Leonard, Alston Conley, Helen Swartz, and Jennifer Grinnell—have also been a constant, integral, and invaluable part of the preparation and organization of *Saints and Sinners* and the production of the catalogue. It has been a pleasure these years working with individuals of such talent, skill, and cheerful efficiency.

Geographically more remote but nonetheless still vital to our enterprise has been the Italian Embassy in Washington, D.C., in particular, former First Counselor for Political Affairs Daniele Mancini, and First Secretary Giuseppe Perrone, to whom I extend heart-felt thanks. I likewise express my gratitude toward the Honorable Giovanni Germano, *Ministro plenipotenziario*, former Consul General of Italy in Boston. The Jesuit Community of Boston College, Dean J. Robert Barth, and the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures of Boston College, especially its chair Laurie Shepard, must also be gratefully acknowledged for providing the resources that allowed me to devote more of my energies to the realization of this project.

Not only paintings, but books too have been central to this project, and on that front the staff of the Bapst Art Library at Boston College has been graciously unflagging in its help over the past three years, especially the director of Bapst Adeane Bregman. Finally, but with no less gratitude, I thank Jack and Nancy Joyce, Donna Hoffman, Denis Reidy, Walter Hildner, Brian French, Shirley Smith, and Marta Vides, who have likewise been generous in their *appoggio morale* during this whole process.

For the past three and a half years, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio and Italian Baroque art have been the constant companions of my daily life; I hope the viewers of *Saints and Sinners* and the readers of this catalogue will be as enriched and as exhilarated by a more intimate acquaintance with this enigmatic yet soul-stirring artist and with this remarkably creative period of Italian culture as I have been.

FRANCO MORMANDO

SECTION 1 of the exhibition explores *The Power of Images* (Pls. 1–3). 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 history; 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 (Pl. 1) and smaller works intended for private use (Pl. 2).

SECTION 2, *Saints as Sinners; Sinners as Saints* (Pls. 4–12), 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* (Pl. 30).

SECTION 3, *Envisioning Sanctity* (Pls. 13–23), 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* (Pls. 24–27), 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* (Pls. 28–30), 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* (Pl. 30), two revealingly different renditions of the same episode are displayed. Ludovico Carracci's painting (Pl.28), the earliest of the three, is a distinctly non Caravaggesque treatment of the subject. By contrast, the work by the anonymous Flemish artist (Pl.29) shows the profound influence of Caravaggio's style and treatment of the theme on European art.

1 Quoted by Carl A. Pescosolido and Pamela Gleason, *The Proud Italians: Our Great Civilizers* (Washington, DC, 1995), 2.

2 Having, by now, lost much of its meaning and usefulness as a critical category, the adjective, Baroque, is used in the exhibition and catalogue as a convenient *chronological* term to designate the period extending from the late sixteenth through the end of the seventeenth century; no stylistic description or aesthetic judgment is intended about the body of paintings to which the adjective is applied.

3 In Rudolph Wittkower and Irma B. Jaffe, eds., *Baroque Art: The Jesuit Contribution* (New York, 1972), 29–50.