

MICHELANGELO MERISI DA CARAVAGGIO

(1571-Porto Ercole Milan 1610)

Saint Francis in Meditation

(Oil on canvas, 127x 95.7 cm)

PROVENANCE

Private collection

EXPERTISE

C. Strinati, 2015;

N. Spinosa, oral communication.

LITERATURE

Caravaggio. Originale und Kopien im Spiegel der Forschung, exh. Cat. , a cura di Jürgen Harten e Jean-Hubert Martin (Düsseldorf, 9 Settembre 2006 – 7 Gennaio 2007), Hatje Cantz, 2006, p. 194, kat. n. 9;

C. Strinati, San Francesco del Caravaggio in Il Museo dei Cappuccini, Rome 2012, pp. 71-79;

C. Strinati in *Lights and Shadows, Carravaggism in Europe*, exh. cat., Lampronti Gallery, London, 29 June- 31 July 2015, Rome 2015, pp.14-17, cat. n. 3.

This painting is among the most celebrated of all surviving versions of Saint Francis in Meditation. The two other versions, nearly identical to each other, and belonging to the Museum of Capuchins at the Church of Santa Maria della Concezione in Rome (fig. 1) and the Church of S. Pietro in Carpineto Romano (fig. 2), have both been attributed to Caravaggio. However, recent technical investigations have revealed that only the Carpineto version was painted by the master¹.

¹ C. Strinati, *San Francesco del Caravaggio*, in *Il museo dei Cappuccini*, Gangemi editore , Rome 2012, pp. 71-79.

In the absence of documentary evidence, the dating of the painting by Caravaggio and of the version at Lampronti gallery can only be established through stylistic comparisons. In terms of subject, there is no precedent for this type of iconography in ancient literature, and thus scholars fully accord the iconographic invention to Caravaggio - during the time he had spent between Sicily and Malta, and on his final return to Naples, although it is impossible to propose a precise date.

Lampronti's Saint Francis presents some features of the artist's early work, suggesting that this is not a later copy after the artist. Tellingly, this Saint Francis exhibits Caravaggio's "economical" technique of painting. He typically exploited the first layer of paint not only as a priming layer but rather as the starting point on which he modelled forms by applying a few brushstrokes of lighter paint to describe solids and voids. Even the obscure yet gleaming appearance of the saint and the stark treatment of the background are typical of the last phase of Caravaggio's career. It is with these considerations that one can affiliate the present painting to the master.

Yet the question of an exclusive attribution of Lampronti's Saint Francis to Caravaggio remains open. Scholars generally agree that Caravaggio established a workshop or that he had an informal circle of painters who followed him, both in Rome and Naples as well as in Sicily. Those painters emulated his motifs and style as suggested by the Denial of St. Peter (Metropolitan, New York), and the Martyrdom of S. Ursula (Banco di Napoli, Naples), which reveal more than one artist's hand².

The survival of numerous versions of Saint Francis in Meditation shed light on the artist's working process. His oldest iconographic models were used as prototypes for continuous reworking and experimentation, thereby resulting in several variations. Due to the nature of his ever evolving practice, it is therefore difficult to distinguish between his own works and those of his collaborators. However, the process of reworking his iconographic prototypes in several versions becomes apparent in the case of Christ's Capture in the Gardens, the Incredulity of St. Thomas, and his several Mondafrutto; highlighting the issue of collaboration as a relevant concern throughout his career.

The mentioned stylistic features of the Saint Francis supports an early date, and closely resembles the Carpaccio's, particularly in the deeply meditative character and

2 B. Savina, *Caravaggio tra originali e copie. Collezionismo e mercato d' arte a Roma nel primo Seicento*, Foligno 2013, pp. 72-82.

dramatic contrast of light and dark. The subject, is not a generic representation of meditation but rather, a meditation on the death of Christ in adherence to the mentality of the Capuchin Franciscans. Unusually, Saint Francis is not picking up the skull from the ground but returning it to the earth. Light is centred on the skull to suggest an overall motion downwards, to the earth, as an allusion to Christ's fate. And the present version confirms that Caravaggio manipulated the shadows to heighten the palpability of the Saint emerging from the deep, shadowy space into the light. The Saint's fingers touching the surface of the skull further stimulate the viewer's sense of touch. Moreover, the darkness symbolically evokes the Saint's pain and suffering for he is contemplating Christ's death.

Of all the known versions, the present painting is the most delicate, arguably demonstrating the most refined suffusion of light: it succeeds in drawing enough attention to each detail whilst remaining veiled by an all embracing shadow. This is evident in the detail of the cave, almost imperceptible yet visible. Monumental yet humble, the painting at the Lampronti Gallery can ultimately be firmly attributed to Caravaggio by virtue of its elegance, precision and masterly chiaroscuro.

C. Strinati



Fig. 1 Caravaggio, *Saint Francis in meditation*, oil on canvas, cm 128.5 x 97.5, Convento dell'Immacolata Concezione, Ministero dell'interno-Patrimonio del Fondo Edifici di Culto



Fig. 2 Caravaggio, *Saint Francis in meditation*, oil on canvas, cm 128.2 x 97.4, Chiesa di San Pietro a Carpineto Romano, in deposit at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome.