

Discovering Caravaggio: The Art Lover's Guide to Understanding Symbols in His Paintings by Stefano Zuffi. New York: Rizzoli, 2010. Illustrated in color, 255 pp.

Review by Gail Leggio

The year 2010 marked the 400th anniversary of the death of Michelangelo Merisi, known as Caravaggio (1571–1610), and interest in this extraordinary painter has never run higher. In part, the current cult of Caravaggio is rooted in fascination about a scandal-rich life, marked by street brawls, freewheeling sexuality and the proto-Romantic tragic early death of the artist. This material has generated a spate of more or less speculative narratives, including Christopher Peachment's *Caravaggio: A Novel*, Francine Prose's biography *Caravaggio: Painter of Miracles* and Derek Jarman's haunting avant-garde film of 1986, *Caravaggio*. The paintings themselves, however, are the real story—daringly realistic, compositionally bold and distinguished by an exaggerated chiaroscuro that would have enormous international influence. Caravaggio's pictures have an immediacy that makes them seem very modern. In trying to pin down the revolutionary aspect of Caravaggio's art, Stefano Zuffi focuses on the "profound sense of participation" the viewer feels in the events depicted. We are aware of the real people Caravaggio brought into his studio to take the roles he selects for them. This strategy gives the often holy figures of his *dramatis personae* a touching, even shocking vulnerability. And as Anne Hollander remarks, in *Moving Pictures* (1989), the way they look back at us has an "erotic quality": "they are feeling themselves looked at, they know themselves transfixed by our gaze, forced to experience our sense of their flesh." This intense interaction between viewer and painted character, Zuffi suggests, is more central to Caravaggio's aesthetic than iconography.

This brings us to a curious aspect of *Discovering Caravaggio* as a physical object. It's a coffee-table book designed for the general reader, with a modest introduction, a chronology of the artist's life and annotated color plates of the works. Plates are overlaid with window sheets that draw attention to significant details. It's easy to see this as an effective tool for works with elaborate iconographic programs. With Caravaggio, the details are interesting but rarely convey the theatrical power of the whole composition. Even when the iconography of a particular painting raises questions, the commentator in this book focuses on other aspects of the composition. *Madonna and Child with St. Anne* (1605–06) presents an idiosyncratic staging of the doctrine of Christ's victory over evil through the agency of Mary as the new Eve. Caravaggio shows Mary crushing a serpent under her bare foot and guiding a strapping boy Jesus to join her in the task—he stands uncertainly on her foot, as if she were teaching him to dance. The commentator singles out the nudity of Jesus, and the bountiful curves of the model for Mary, identified as one of Caravaggio's lovers, Lena

Antognetti. This decorum-be-damned aspect of Caravaggio's religious work is significant, but these remarks are not what might be expected from a "guide to understanding symbols." One savvy feature of the book is a group of thumbnail comparisons of recurring motifs: the extraordinary still lifes of flowers and fruits, executed with a cool but loving naturalism; the disturbing severed heads that capture the terror of the victim; the eloquent hand gestures that encapsulate the drama of his scenes; recurring models; the swords and knives so effectively wielded in violent encounters. This emphasis on formal elements carries over into the window sheets. In *The Martyrdom of St. Matthew* (1599–1600), the commentator points out the way the executioner grabs the saint's arm. Matthew's reaching hand might be an "instinctive attempt to defend himself, or perhaps he reaches for the palm frond offered by the angel." This comment sends the viewer back to the full composition, to take in the vortex of hands at the fulcrum of the action. The diagonals of the menacing executioner and the fleeing acolyte's arms form a V-shaped space which the angel enters with his lowered martyr's palm, an abrupt intrusion of eternity into the temporal plane.

For the stupendous *Entombment of Christ* (c. 1603), the commentator notes details that add to the urgent naturalism of the scene and convey the physical effort needed to support the dead weight of Jesus' body. Nicodemus stands at the center of the composition, turning his head to the viewer and drawing us psychologically into the drama. The solid, working-class power of this Nicodemus, bending under the weight of a corpse, gives the drama the raw immediacy of everyday tragedy. Caravaggio's fusion of sacred and profane reality remains startling, not because it looks at the saints as dirty, common folk but because it makes holiness a messy and contradictory business. There is much more to be said, of course. When visiting the "Vatican Treasures" exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1983, this reviewer happened across the art historian Meyer Shapiro discussing this painting with a couple of friends. He pointed out how the corner of the stone slab juts into the viewer's space and Christ's arm seems about to fall into the gallery, the fan of mournful hands curving down to draw us to his face, the carefully observed plant at the bottom of the scene, the last bit of nature in a stony world of sorrow. The commentary here is not on that level, but at least it gets the viewer thinking about Caravaggio's formal intelligence and deep, if unconventional religious feeling.

No reproduction can convey the physical impact of the paintings or the nuances lurking in their dark, dramatic depths. The illustrations in this volume are frequently a little too dark, and skin tones seem slightly reddened, a common problem when designers want to play up strong contrasts. Still, there is enough visual excitement in the generously sized plates of *Discovering Caravaggio* to whet the appetite for further encounters with this endlessly fascinating master.