

Sybille Ebert-Schifferer. *Caravaggio: The Artist and His Work*.

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Since the anniversary of his death in 2010, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610) has been the subject of countless scholarly and popular texts and has headlined numerous exhibitions worldwide. This endless output inspired Richard Spear to dub the phenomenon “Caravaggiomania” (*Art in America*, 2010). Nevertheless, much remains to be said about this master of tenebrism, as Sybille Ebert-Schifferer proves in *Caravaggio: The Artist and His Work*. Newly translated from the German edition (2009), Ebert-Schifferer’s monograph accomplishes the seemingly impossible by offering readers a fresh take on the issues of market, reception, and knowledge that informed Caravaggio’s artistic production.

As one would expect to find in a monographic study of a single artist, the first three chapters of the book are organized chronologically and document Caravaggio’s early training, prodigious ascent to fame in Rome, and subsequent exile and demise. Although this organization follows an established convention in Caravaggio monographs, and the major works contained have already been the subject of thorough scholarly examination, Ebert-Schifferer does a remarkable job of incorporating the extensive bibliography published in recent years, and of revising previous assumptions now rendered erroneous by new documentary discoveries. Her analysis is further distinguished by her reevaluation of certain primary sources, resulting in a more nuanced understanding of Caravaggio’s work. Beginning with a careful disclaimer about the dangers inherent to trusting sources like those seventeenth-century *vite* penned by Giovanni Baglione and Gian Pietro Bellori, Ebert-Schifferer seeks to establish Caravaggio as a far more erudite artist than is typically acknowledged, and to squelch theories about Rome’s bad-boy artist that are based on the biased sentiments of his jealous contemporaries. In so doing, she argues that Caravaggio was as artful in his self-marketing as he was in his construction of visual *concetti*.

In creating a historical context for Caravaggio’s arrival in the Eternal City, Ebert-Schifferer recalls the events of summer 1592, during which time the Cavaliere d’Arpino and his brother were embroiled in what may be described as early modern gang warfare with the Caetano family, just south of the city. The details of such aristocratic in-fighting elucidate the violent skirmishes of both the noble families and the very artists by whom Caravaggio was employed upon his arrival in Rome. Ebert-Schifferer thus suggests a new framework for Caravaggio’s own behavior and reputation that is based on the specific context of his early employment. Here and throughout the text Ebert-Schifferer incorporates the invaluable work of Elizabeth and Thomas Cohen, whose analysis of codes of honor in seventeenth-century Rome has not, until now, been adequately incorporated into a book-length study of Caravaggio’s life and work. It is easy to understand, in Ebert-Schifferer’s telling, how Baglione’s libel suit against Caravaggio in 1603, and Caravaggio’s later, perhaps accidental, murder of Ranuccio Tomassoni in 1606, were not altogether unusual events in the exalted social circles traveled

by the artist. There, criminal behavior and profound religiosity were not mutually exclusive.

Ebert-Schifferer dedicates refreshingly little space to discovering Caravaggio's psychological motivations, and instead scrutinizes his probable artistic and literary sources. Particularly incisive are her analyses of early works in Caravaggio's oeuvre, which she correctly avoids eliding with an ahistorical homoeroticism, and instead interprets anew as manifestations of Caravaggio's erudition and training. The *Boy with Basket of Fruit* (1593–94) for instance, suggests a classical allusion to the *xenion*, or welcoming basket, described by Pliny, while the Uffizi *Bacchus* (1593) becomes an early modern symposiast, his glass a wine-filled kylix. Similarly, Ebert-Schifferer proposes that the Louvre *Fortune Teller* (1594) is a visual *zingaresche*, a literary genre in which the gypsy theme was already ubiquitous. That this genre was known and enjoyed by Caravaggio's patron, Pietro Vittrici, indicates that the artist was likely made aware of the literary themes of heroic beggars and tricksters described in popular Spanish picaresque novels.

Similarly, Ebert-Schifferer suggests that many of Caravaggio's religious paintings draw on contemporary theological beliefs, systematically discounting notions that these pictures represented an affront to conventions of decorum. If Ebert-Schifferer sometimes labors to normalize Caravaggio's innovations and departures from canonical iconographies, the reader is nevertheless pleased to be offered an alternative to prevailing histories that contribute more to sensationalist Caravaggiomania than they do to our scholarly understanding of one of the most important early modern painters.

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