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# WORKING SPACE

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## Caravaggio

Painting today stands in an awkward position in relation to its own past. Many defenders of contemporary art look backward for sanctions of value and quality. Some suggest the recent past for support, enlisting Pollock and Kandinsky (fig. 1), for example, while others look to the more distant past, citing Titian (fig. 2) or Velásquez. But no one has seriously suggested looking back beyond the Renaissance for anything more than vague affinities. Perhaps this is because we assume that the justification for any new and worthwhile development in painting must be founded in greatness, and although we deeply appreciate art before the Renaissance, it remains qualified in our eyes. Its schematism, however brilliant, is read as undeveloped illusionism. We believe that great painting—painting that is illustratively full, substantial, and real—was born with the Renaissance and grew with its flowering.

But even if we could establish links of value and quality with some of the great art of the past, it is still not certain that abstraction's line of succession is guaranteed. After Mondrian abstraction stands at peril. It needs to create for itself a new kind of pictoriality, one that is just as potent as the pictoriality that began to develop in Italy during the sixteenth century. The problem is not the overwhelming ambitiousness of the undertaking, but rather the difficulty that abstraction has today in relating to the past—for example, in extending its roots beyond Cubism. In the sixteenth century Renaissance artists appeared to profit directly both from their recent and their distant past. Donatello and Phidias were available to Michelangelo in a way that Seurat was, but that Giotto and Celtic manuscript illumination were not, to Mondrian. At least, this is the way it appears if we want

to speak with any certainty about sources rather than similarities.

The reality of abstraction's constricted sources reminds us that picture making is a recent development in Western art and that twentieth-century abstraction is limited by the inexperience encoded in its development. Yet we would like to survey abstraction today and find to our surprise that abstract painting has grown, that it has developed a special sense of pictoriality similar to that which took hold during the sixteenth century—the sense that painting, albeit in the service of belief, can rise above the self-concerns that determine its ends. But we hesitate even to look for an approximation of this result. Something about the essential difference between the imagery and intentions of abstract painting and those of representational painting makes it very hard for us to relate abstraction to the past. This same difference makes it hard for us to look to the future. We seem to be enmeshed in a difficult present.

Nonetheless, if we confine our concern with abstraction's future to its own immediate history in the twentieth century, we can find a parallel with a similar crisis in painting at the end of the sixteenth century, the eventual resolution of which might give us some hope. Broadly speaking, the present crisis can be defined by two major disappointments that twentieth-century abstraction has experienced. One of them is the feeling that Mondrian's example and accomplishment have gone almost for naught. The other is that by 1970, it appeared that the most promising branch of postwar American painting—the successors of Barnett Newman, the color-field abstractionists—had turned to ashes. This predicament was not unlike the situation facing painting in Italy



Figure 1 WASSILY KANDINSKY  
*Sketch 1 for Composition VII* (1913)  
Oil on canvas,  $30\frac{1}{16} \times 39\frac{3}{8}$  in.  
Private collection



Figure 2 TITIAN  
*Presentation of the Virgin* (1534–38)  
Oil on canvas, 131 $\frac{7}{8}$  × 305 $\frac{1}{8}$  in.  
Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice

after the death of Titian. Where were the heirs of Roman classicism and Venetian color going to come from? What painting was going to stand up to Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael? What painting was going to glow as brightly as Giorgione's and Titian's? The answer, of course, was Caravaggio's painting. But few painters in the early part of the seventeenth century would have believed this except Rubens and possibly Velázquez; and today, even though many would concede Caravaggio's importance, few would call him the successor of Michelangelo and a rival of Titian. But that is exactly what he became, and in doing so he created the kind of pictoriality we take for granted when we call a painting great, a kind of pictoriality that had not existed before.

The question we must ask ourselves is: Can we find a mode of pictorial expression that will do for abstraction now what Caravaggio's pictorial genius did for sixteenth-century naturalism and its magnificent successors? The expectation is that the answer is yes, but first we have to try to understand what Caravaggio actually did in order to see if his accomplishment can help us.

In the process of turning to the past I should clarify my declaration of Caravaggio's importance, since by praising Caravaggio I am surely vulnerable to charges of following current art-historical fashion. Fears of modishness notwithstanding, by naming Caravaggio as the successor of Michelangelo I mean just that: a convincing successor to the best of sixteenth-century painting, including especially Raphael. Similarly, I emphasize Caravaggio's enlargement of Renaissance painting, his purposeful addition of immediacy and strength to the character of its pictorial space.

If we assess Caravaggio's importance by posing him as a rival of Titian, however, the story is a little different. Quality cannot be the sole issue, for if Caravaggio had to compete with Titian on Titian's own terms, matching his inspired painterliness, the former would certainly not fare well. A broader, perhaps more salient question asks what contributions each made to the future direction of painting. This

concern signals a more even contest, one between Caravaggio's confrontational, projective illusionism and Titian's impressionistic vitality. With the future in mind, Caravaggio questions the viability of Venetian painterliness, challenging its superficiality (that is, its emphasis on surface) and its materiality (that is, its emphasis on pigment). This confrontation with Titian stands for something more than an encounter of conflicting styles. Caravaggio does not try to present an alternative to Titian by simply looking back to idealized antique past in the way that, say, Poussin's tepid classicism does, but rather he tries to create a pictorial reality that subsumes stylistic differences. He tries to create a pictorial container for both Venetian painterliness and the monumental figuration of Rome without giving in to either of their inherent liabilities. In the case of Venice, the fault lay in a tendency toward awkwardness, with uncontrolled lateness spreading and flattened surfaces. In Rome, a vacuous symmetry often characterized High Renaissance art, where even spectacular perspectival invention and acrobatic foreshortening failed to fill the void.

Caravaggio does present some successful alternatives: for example, the *Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* in Malta offers a kind of cinemascopic depth and an ovoid delimitation of space that enables painting to enhance the theatrical flatness of Venetian muralism, while in another vein his Vatican *Deposition* shows clearly how to activate a classicist vein without falling into Mannerist excesses. In these two paintings Caravaggio signals the advent of modern pictorial space, exhibiting a power whose versatility and vitality may free from the perpetual tyranny of the soft and the hard, the ragged struggle of the successors of Rubens versus those of Poussin. It may be that the sense of balance and proportion that seems so right in Velázquez and Manet comes from a mixing of their gifted painterly bias with this lesson learned from Caravaggio, the lesson that explains the efficacy and utility of expansive, close-up pictorial presence. Unfortunately, the example of Velázquez and Manet does not seem

to have taken hold; as a result, we may have to seek out Caravaggio's way directly to help combat the recent enervation of painterliness. Our contemporary painterliness cannot seem to produce anything like the fullness of Delacroix, Turner, or Monet; it is as though pigment, light, and surface have disappeared into Mondrian's black grid. We are left to worry about pictorial space almost by default.

But, after all, the aim of art is to create space—space that is not compromised by decoration or illustration, space in which the subjects of painting can live. This is what painting has always been about. Sadly, however, the current prospects for abstraction seem terribly narrowed; its sense of space appears shallow and constricted. This seems ironic when we remember that painting had to work so hard to create its own space, or perhaps more accurately, had to work so hard to free itself from architecture. This latter effort is, in effect, the drama that began to play itself out in the sixteenth century; it began with Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* and ended with Caravaggio's *Calling of Saint Matthew*. By becoming more of an artist than a craftsman, more of an individual professional—what we now call self-employed—the Renaissance artist began to direct himself away from decoration and illustration, away from altarpieces and fresco cycles, toward his newfound responsibility: the creation of his own space. This is the task to which Caravaggio addressed himself with amazing success.

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The idea of Caravaggio creating his own space in his painting may not seem very novel, but we should be aware that he was creating a space with a special, self-contained character. Out of habit, we take modern painting to begin with Jan Van Eyck. The increased use of oil paint on the portable wooden panel is seen as emphasizing a significant break with painting's medieval predecessors. At the same time, we see the beginnings of a growing mastery of representational skills as leading inevitably to the individualized idealism of the High Renaissance. But both of these notions may be a bit misleading because oil paints, wooden panels, and an

expanding repertoire of representational techniques do not seem to be enough to make painting an enterprise that is spatially independent and self-contained. The narrowness and artificiality of, say, the space Crivelli created make it clear that the space in painting before Leonardo is not the space of painting as we know it now. It is not the problem of perspective, either linear or atmospheric; nor is it the problem of flatness that makes this space so different, although this often seems the best way to describe it. Rather, it appears to be something in the intention, in the acceptance of commissioned configurations, in the attitude toward covering a given surface that held painting back, that actually kept it from creating a surface that was capable of making figuration look real and free.

One could say that artists before Leonardo accepted the given surface and made the best of it. Most of the time the best artists could squeeze out enough working space to make great art, but we do not see and feel their pictorial space in the same way that we see and feel the pictorial space in great art since the example of Rubens, Velásquez, and Rembrandt. By adding elasticity and flexibility to the promise of High Renaissance space, Caravaggio gave his successors the pictorial roundness and completeness that we call great and that we instinctively use as a standard to judge painting today, whether we realize it or not. It is through the eyes of seventeenth-century painting that we have come to see great art, both before and after the seventeenth century. It may seem odd, but Rubens, Velásquez, and Rembrandt dominate our view of both Raphael and Picasso.

In order to feel the impact of seventeenth-century painting, we have to recognize the limits of fifteenth-century pictorial space and understand its consequent growth in the sixteenth century. Before 1500 the artist had to battle hard surfaces—unyielding panels and walls—trying to create space on surfaces that would have been content to stay flat. After 1500 the artist became critical of his relationship to the surfaces of

architecture and sought to modify it, either by separation, making more use of individual portable panels and canvases, or by accommodation, creating a painted space that interacted in some meaningful, though often competitive, way with the structure.

Leonardo signals the beginning of painting's attempt to free itself from architecture. His *Mona Lisa* (fig. 3) tells us about landscape space, about modeling the human figure, about atmospheric perspective and *sfumato*—all the things that begin to separate sixteenth-century painting from the painting that went before it. But the best news is that the *Mona Lisa* comes in a tidy package, a marvelous, manageable rectangle. How wonderful it would be to see it in the Uffizi, in Florence, where it really belongs, rather than in Paris in the Louvre. In the Uffizi it would be a new dawn, a glass house rising above the jagged Levittown of gold altar pieces. In the Uffizi's opening rooms (fig. 4) its simple rectilinearity would rest our eyes after their arduous tour around the crazy edges of early Italian painting. But wonderful as this experience might be, we have to be careful not to miss something obvious about this half-length figure in a landscape. What surrounds the figure might be hard to see right away: it is the shape of the space that Leonardo has created for the *Mona Lisa*. The configuration of Leonardo's space suggests two beautiful, slightly bulging soap bubbles bound together. Their films join at the painting's main spatial divider, at the columns enframing the landscape and the figure of the *Mona Lisa*. One bubble projects itself out toward us, engaging the balustrade, while the other curves away from us to catch the horizon line.

The image of soap film is meant to suggest a transparent membrane capable of enveloping and encircling space in order to give us a better sense of the idea of shaping pictorial space. By shaping its own space, painting makes itself incompatible with architecture, competing directly with it for

control of the available space. In the *Mona Lisa* the enframing columns and the balustrade are anomalies; they get in the way of the space Leonardo wants to create. But they are not able to dull Leonardo's success with *sfumato*, the smoky chiaroscuro that produced such a profound encapsulation of landscape and the human figure.

What Leonardo does, as no one else could do, is to spin off the shadows of modeling, creating a sense of atmospheric softness that gives way in turn to a kind of magical sculptural impressionism. The result is a pictorial "rounding" of space that paves the way for Caravaggio and becomes, at the same time, part of our basic spatial vocabulary for judging great painting. The delicate inventiveness of Leonardo's space was applauded, but his successors met with a much different reception. The evolution of Leonardo's pictorial space into the manic gargantuanism of Michelangelo was received with skepticism, while the angular, projective assaults of Caravaggio, which ensured Leonardo's perpetual availability to the future of painting, were passionately denounced.

If the idea of an artist shaping space and actually being able to share the vision of that space with the viewer seems far-fetched, we should remember that art offers little in the way of verifiable experience. We try to see as best we can, hoping that our intuitions and insights provide illumination. It is very true that it is hard to see space, especially in paintings, but we are moved by the resonance of color in Titian's Venetian atmosphere and by the presence of light in Velázquez's interiors, things which are equally hard to see.

This ephemeral quality of painting reminds us that what is not there, what we cannot quite find, is what great paintings always promise. It does not surprise us, then, that at every moment when an artist has his eyes open, he worries that there is something present that he cannot quite see, some-



thing that is eluding him, something within his always limited field of vision, something in the dark spot that makes up his view of the back of his head. He keeps looking for this elusive something, out of habit as much as out of frustration. He searches even though he is quite certain that what he is looking for shadows him every moment he looks around. He hopes it is what he cannot know, what he will never see, but the conviction remains that the shadow that follows but cannot be seen is simply the dull presence of his own mortality, the impending erasure of memory. Painters instinctively look to the mirror for reassurance, hoping to shake death, hoping to avoid the stare of persistent time, but the results are always disappointing. Still they keep checking. We can see Caravaggio looking at himself from *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew*, Velázquez surveying his surroundings in *Las Meninas*, and Manet testing the girl at the bar to see if there is anything different about those who have to work rather than see for a living.

It may be that in the *Allegory of Painting* (the artist in his studio; plate 1) Vermeer was the only one really to come to grips with the worrisome blank spots in the artist's vision. Possibly he was the only one to realize that painting has to account for what it cannot see even though it fears this confrontation, and certainly he was the only one to recognize that this accountability implies a line of continuity that is in the end painting's salvation, a line of continuity that can be seen as a connection to the past and an engagement of the present, ensuring its future. By observing the observer observing, by putting a model in artist's clothing, by making the recorder of the pictured event an anonymous mannequin, and by revealing the mannequin's blank, unseeing, unprotected, unaware side, Vermeer created a weightless presence (the artist himself) to complement the ethereal, feminine personification of art.

Our first reaction after pulling back the curtain at the edge of the painting is one of delight. It is as though we have stumbled on the ultimate refinement of art; everything in front of us is suddenly true and clear. Unfortunately this vision is unstable, at times threatening to disappear. Yet we feel that the miraculously lit, encapsulated pictorial space

will endure, that it will drift along with us, accompanying our collective spectating consciousness until we cease to exist, after which we expect that it will quietly latch onto the consciousness of our successors, whoever they may be. Anticipating such an endless journey, Vermeer seems to have deliberately dried the life out of his models, leaving two shells full of chalky, incandescent presence to trace the continuity of art through the ever-present. We have the feeling of invading a private moment as we enter Vermeer's painting, but soon the sense of penetrating detail, the sense of a tapestry unraveling in our hands, suggests that this private moment is merely everyone's accommodation to passing time, and that in the end we are not the observers but simply victims whom Vermeer has trapped. He is, after all, standing behind us, watching us watch art.

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Seeing for the purposes of making art is basically a circular experience. Perhaps this experience is not as sophisticated as our perceptual capacities suggest it could be, but its goal—that of making art—is a difficult one. Art must be a communicable whole, and perception tends to be fragmented and self-serving. In the most obvious and fundamental way the artist wants to see what is going on around himself. His paintings, almost by definition, should have a spherical sense of spatial containment and engagement—a spatial sense, obviously, at odds with the boxlike mechanics most commonly and effectively used for the representation of space. An effective painting should present its space in such a way as to include both viewer and maker each with his own space intact. It is not that this experience should be literal; it is simply that the sense of space projected by the painting should seem expansive: expansive enough to include the viewing and the creation of that space. The artist should strive to encourage a response to the totality of pictorial space—the space within and outside of the depicted action of the painting, the space within and outside of the imagined action of making the painting. The act of looking at a painting should automatically expand the sense of that painting's

space, both literally and imaginatively. In other words, the spatial experience of a painting should not seem to end at the framing edges or be boxed in by the picture plane. The necessity of creating pictorial space that is capable of dissolving its own perimeter and surface plane is the burden that modern painting was born with. No one helped lighten this burden more than Caravaggio.

Now many would find this view of pictorial space unnecessarily complex and confusing. The basic spatial problem of painting has been described simply as one of having to represent three dimensions on a two-dimensional surface. There is obvious truth to this view, but the history of painting from 1500 to 1600 suggests that the artist's concern for how he, first, and then the viewer in turn, should experience art and the space it invoked was more complicated than merely representing three dimensions successfully on flat surfaces. It is safe to say that as the ability for rendering convincing three-dimensionality grew, the idea of what this space should be and should do for painting grew. Unfortunately it began to grow in different directions at the same time, creating a sense of conflict. One direction pointed to a painting with one stationary viewer; the other favored architectural decoration with multiple viewers and multiple points of view. Not surprisingly, the first of these conventions dominates today, while the other has virtually disappeared.

Two great "failures" signal the break between painting and architecture—Leonardo's *Last Supper* and Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*. That both works are about "last" events suggests that in the minds of their creators there might have been some other last thoughts. Wall decoration obviously was not the kind of ambitious goal Leonardo had in mind for painting—witness his inability to make emulsified paint stick on walls. If Leonardo expressed ambivalence about decoration, Michelangelo went even further, unleashing pure anger and frustration. There is no doubt about Michelangelo's intentions in the *Last Judgment*: he totally destroyed the visual coherence of the Sistine Chapel by blasting out the end wall. It is very hard to know what this mural means

to say about painting. Michelangelo's florid aggressiveness seems to attack everything that has gone before, including his own work on the ceiling immediately above. The *Last Judgment* is illusionism run rampant. There is no compositional restraint, no pictorial enframement, no sense of physical weight; the figures float high and wide. Pictorial cohesion, architectonic space, sculptural gravity—all these aspects of Michelangelo's genius become just so many pieces of driftwood. Painting before the *Last Judgment* was painting one could look at, or at least into; after the *Last Judgment* painting became something one could walk through. Michelangelo dissolves the end wall of the Sistine Chapel so that we can exit the church through heaven and hell, moving out of the Renaissance toward Caravaggio's world, a world of sensuality and spatial incongruity beyond even Michelangelo's imagination.

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In the Borghese Gallery there is a Bronzino, *Saint John the Baptist* (plate 2), oil on wood panel, from about the middle of the sixteenth century. It is not a very startling painting, probably because it is a little worn and in need of cleaning, but it is nonetheless worthy of our attention. A catalogue entry notes that "the position of the young man is built up out of a bold use of foreshortening and a bending of limbs which alone constitute the architecture of the work." Nothing could provide a better summary of the tormented relationship of painting and architecture at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and, perhaps, nothing could provide a better introduction to the genius of Caravaggio than the image of "bending limbs which alone constitute the architecture of the work." Of course architecture means structure in this description; but the point is well made, however inadvertently, that the Mannerist figure has built its own space for painting at the expense of architecture as well as conventional pictorial structure.

Bronzino's *Saint John* gives us a good preview of how Caravaggio came to see painting's own self-contained space, what we have come to understand today as strictly pictorial space. Perhaps the twisting of limbs into architecture can be understood better the other way around, so that with a little syntactic license we get the twisting of architecture into the limbs of painting. Hence we see how Michelangelo's chiaroscuro and foreshortening climb over each other in a Mannerist frenzy to push on with what Leonardo had started—the search for an independent pictorial space for painting. Taking a hint from Bronzino, Caravaggio ended the hunt. He took the space that Bronzino had elegantly described, the space from Saint John's left toe to his left thumb, and made it almost inexplicably larger and grander. Toward this end he used light and dark more coherently than it had ever been used before, and foreshortening more cleverly. But more important, where Leonardo had triumphed before him—modeling the human figure, giving life to contour—Caravaggio rose to even greater heights by modeling the whole painting, giving life to pictorial space, creating the roundness and fullness of figure and atmosphere that so impress us in the great painting of the seventeenth century, particularly in the work of Rubens and Rembrandt. It seems clear that Caravaggio's compelling realism extends to the space around his figures as well as to the figures themselves. In fact, in painting after painting we are forced to notice Caravaggio's real genius—a projective displacement of space secured by brilliant right-angled foreshortening. This manipulation of pictorial space gives his painting the familiar close-up realism we prize so often in motion pictures.

To be able to carry in our minds the space of Caravaggio's large commanding works, such as the Vatican *Deposition* and the *Seven Acts of Mercy* from Naples, we need some kind of image to help form an idea about the design and purpose of Caravaggio's pictorial space. The image that comes to mind is that of the gyroscope—a spinning sphere, capable of accommodating movement and tilt. We have to imagine our-

selves caught up within this sphere, experiencing the moment and motion of painting's action. Fanciful as this space may be, it has the cast of reality; we have to take it seriously. Caravaggio's space differs from that of Raphael and Titian before him and from that of Rubens and Poussin after him. The sense of projective roundness, of poised sphericity, is important because it offered painting an opportunity that was not there before, and that was, amazingly enough, diluted soon afterward. The space that Caravaggio created is something that twentieth-century painting could use: an alternative both to the space of conventional realism and to the space of what has come to be conventional painterliness.

The sense of a shaped spatial presence enveloping the action of the painting and the location of the creator and spectator is a by-product of the success of Caravaggio's realistic illusionism. The sensation of real presence and real action successfully expands the sensation of pictorial space. This is the first miracle of Caravaggio, a miracle that with stunning economy both anticipates and deflates subsequent Baroque illusionism.

The second miracle of Caravaggio is the miracle of surface. Skin, flesh, and pigment blend into reality. Painting is acknowledged as an act and as a physical fact, but immediately afterward, almost simultaneously, the presence of the human figure is felt as real, touchably there. Caravaggio is simply a totally successful illusionist. His figures overcome the mechanics of representation; they are neither representations of models trying to appear convincing, nor representations of types trying to appear unique and present.

Caravaggio's advantage comes from his ability to create the sensation of real space within and outside of the action of the painting, powerfully reinforcing his masterful illusionism. Painters before him were encumbered either by the boxiness of measured settings or the ungainly spread of painterliness—not necessarily bad effects in themselves, just patently less real, obviously less focused, and, unfortunately, definitively less whole. Painters after Caravaggio fared no

better; they had to struggle with antique revivals and a naturalism compromised by illustration. Although these handicaps were surmountable, they endured quite stubbornly until the beginning of the nineteenth century, when genius once again overtook painting.

Probably the easiest way to get a sense of the effectiveness and excitement of Caravaggio's realism is to compare his Capitoline *Saint John* (plate 3) with Bronzino's *Saint John the Baptist* in the Borghese Gallery. Caravaggio's boy is caressable, kissable. Bronzino's young man merely offers his toe, while the rest of his features recede into a quasi-antique/Renaissance amalgam. Caravaggio's boy has an aura that cannot be missed—this is the face that launched great painting. Beneath this self-satisfied, cheeky smile lies aggressive ambition, a feeling that this youthful success can rival Titian's glory. The figure in Caravaggio's painting has a glow that makes pigmented flesh one with color and light. At the same time, the alignment of light and dark with figure and ground illuminates the Baptist's naked body. The definition of the figure is both hard and soft, linear and painterly, combining the prejudices of both Rome and Venice.

Furthermore, the colored light of the Capitoline *Saint John* yields a fluorescent afterimage, as if we had squeezed our eyes shut and successfully brought a once dead, but still ferociously desired, image back to life. This gift of Caravaggio's has a lot to say to emotion and psychology, but it also has a lot to say to painting today, especially to painterly abstraction. Caravaggio declares that pictorial drama is everything in art, and that this drama must be played out with convincing illusionism. It is the lack of a convincing projective illusionism, the lack of a self-contained space, lost in a misguided search for color (once called the primacy of color) that makes most close-valued, shallow-surfaced paintings of the past fifteen years so excruciatingly dull and unpromising. This is to say that today painterly abstraction has no real pictorial space—space, for example, like that of Caravaggio, Manet, Mondrian, Pollock, and, surprisingly, Morris Louis.

In order to be able to do what he did, Caravaggio had to change the way things were done in painting in the late sixteenth century. The biggest change was made by giving painting its own space. He freed painting from architecture and decoration, and pointed out what painting's proper relationship to patronage, both clerical and private, should be. But most important, he changed the way artists would have to think about themselves and their work; he made the studio into a place of magic and mystery, a cathedral of the self.

In the studio Caravaggio created his own space. There he embodied it in paintings that were later brought out into public view, installed in churches and private galleries, and abruptly abandoned to critical scrutiny. That they have survived so well is amazing. If one thinks of what painting had been before Caravaggio—Jan Van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, Botticelli, Piero della Francesca, Raphael, Michelangelo, Titian—it seems miraculous that a pictorial space was created that was not beholden to either the architecture of church and state or the architecture of nature, excepting, of course, the human figure. This is Caravaggio's final miracle.

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After absorbing the work in the Contarelli Chapel, Caravaggio's famous St. Matthew cycle in the Church of San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome, we begin to see painting as belonging to the class of individual pictures, and as having almost by definition a sense of self-contained wholeness. In this regard the conglomeration of decorative and illustrative fragments that went into the creation of sixteenth-century Italian illusionism (seen at its best in the Sistine and Farnese ceilings) will seem especially disjointed. The result is that a sense of spectacular coherence and calm permeates our first impression of the Caravaggio paintings of St. Matthew as we unconsciously recall all of the great art trapped above us in Rome.

Although Caravaggio's paintings are obviously at home in this chapel, they do not appear to need the church. This awareness triggers the uncomfortable realization that the paintings do not depend much on spectators either for their meaning or effect. The reason for this strong feeling of pictorial self-sufficiency and self-containment seems fairly clear: the paintings in front of us in the Contarelli Chapel were alive before they were put into the church. Even though we know it is not possible, we sense that we are close to the moment when these paintings were made. We feel that we want to leave the church immediately; we would like to locate the place and fix the moment where and when these paintings were made.

It seems perfectly natural to begin to look for Caravaggio's studio; the feeling from the paintings makes us sure that it is in the neighborhood. We almost expect to recognize some of the models hanging around and to catch Caravaggio at work. We especially want to see the models in the same room with the painting in progress because we want to see them be real in two places at once, in place in the painting and posing in front of it. We remember that Caravaggio has made us see his models as real, an experience altogether different from other painting where we have seen merely a picture of rendered models. We recognize suddenly that this sense of convincing reality within a declared pictorial setting is made absolute by Caravaggio's ability to get the action to us while we are actually looking at the picture. Perhaps this is the sense of immediacy which is often claimed to characterize great art. We want to run to Caravaggio's studio and see how it happens.

If we are to believe Bellori's seventeenth-century criticism, we would have a hard time making out what is going on. Bellori tells us that Caravaggio "went so far in [his] manner of working that he never brought his figures out into the daylight, but placed them in the dark brown atmosphere of a closed room, using a high light that descended vertically

over the principal parts of the bodies" (quoted in Walter Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, New York, Schocken Books, 1969, p. 247). If we take Bellori's description of the dark brown atmosphere of a closed room and combine it with the settings of the *Calling of Saint Matthew* and the *Beheading of Saint John* in Malta, we can fashion a pretty good composite of Caravaggio's working space.

What went on here in this cellar that Caravaggio "did not know how to come out of" is probably what we would most like to know about early seventeenth-century painting. It was here, according to Bellori, that Caravaggio's critical competitors complained with unknowing insight that Caravaggio "painted all his figures in one light and on one plane without any gradations" (p. 248). In this cellar, in this presumably theatrical studio, Caravaggio won a sustaining freedom for painting; one light, one plane makes a nice complement to the idea of one man, one painting, realizing the inevitable individualistic thrust of Renaissance culture. For Caravaggio's detractors the one light was simply too dim: they could not read the depth of his one important plane; they could not comprehend its inclusiveness; and finally, they could not acknowledge the pictorial significance of the planar change that turned the middle ground into the whole ground and stretched the middle distance into a total distance. This kind of contained elasticity was beyond the limits of their imagination.

But even though we believe that the results emanating from this dark cellar were wholesome, we have a hard time believing that what went on there was anything other than fare suitable for mature audiences. There is no doubt that much of the success of Caravaggio's paintings comes from the ability of his model/actors to go both ways—to be total and complete participants, to be both performers and spectators. We know that they are capable of stepping out over the picture frame to join us in the audience. What we suspect from our first impression in the Contarelli Chapel is that their preference is to step out with Caravaggio and become the critical audience. These paintings are self-contained in more ways than meet the eye.

To have been in the studio when the models were setting up for *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* (plate 4) must have been an unusual experience. Even Caravaggio seems to be looking out at the action in amazement. It is very hard to imagine how the ensemble modeling was arranged. The x-rays give us some idea of the changes of composition and poses, but no idea of what idea informed the dynamics of the organization of the ensemble and their actions. We cannot help thinking of Velázquez looking out from behind his canvas in *Las Meninas*, but the tranquillity of his scene is overwhelmingly tame when compared to the agitation we imagine in Caravaggio's studio. Still, the question we really want to ask is where Caravaggio is when he paints. Does he stand behind his canvas like Velázquez and look out at his models? It is hard to imagine him dodging about, looking around a huge canvas at this panorama of the martyrdom; and it is very hard to imagine him placing the canvas at an oblique angle to the action, since he is such a decisively frontal painter. What seems most likely is that we would see the canvas against one of the walls with Caravaggio in front of it, directing his models who would be standing behind him. This might not be the easiest way to imagine an artist working, but it would be in character. Caravaggio would be in the center of his universe, orchestrating the twin realities of pictoriality—subject and object—while his model/actors reveled in the immortalization of their own performance, watching themselves in Caravaggio's canvas mirror.

Yet the organization of the studio is not enough; we want to see more, to move closer. We want to measure the extravagant gestures, test the clever scaffolding, and inspect the tantalizing props. We have to measure, test, and scrutinize because we are driven by a compelling uncertainty: we suspect that the effects we recognize in Caravaggio's paintings—the subjects, objects, and settings that we think we have seen before in Italian painting of the fifteenth and sixteenth

centuries—are not what they seem. Our sense of familiarity is confounded: do we witness references or reality? We are convinced that the only way to know what we see in Caravaggio's painting is to lay our hands on whatever we see. Here sight is reduced to enticement. This might be Caravaggio's only real perversion.

After we have handled the physical objects we remember the subjects, the figures in the paintings. We wonder if the models run through the martyrdom scene freezing at the moment Caravaggio shouts. Does he correct the individual poses as he remembers Raphael, as he remembers Titian and Tintoretto? How long are the exaggerated gestures held intact? What role does Caravaggio himself play—will we find him like Mel Brooks or Ingmar Bergman, like Fassbinder or Fellini? The literature is not likely to yield an account of the studio at the Eight Corners in Rome; as a result, we are thrown back on the paintings themselves.

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If there is one thing that can be said with certainty about Caravaggio, it is that he was better at creating internal space, space among the figures constituting the action and subject of his pictures, than anyone who came either before or after him. When he combined this gift with his ability to project a sense of palpable, moving space external to or extending from the action of his paintings, he earned himself a place in Bernard Berenson's "Palace of Art." He was probably the best "space-composer" (to use Berenson's own term) we will ever see. However, Caravaggio's apparently destructive manner of realizing his gift for spatial composition, the confounding of light and the virtual elimination of landscape and architecture, turned Berenson against him. Berenson constantly complained that there was no space in Caravaggio's paintings, that it was impossible for the spectator to orient himself to really know where he was. Caravaggio's negative emanations, his reductivist bent, blinded Berenson to what now seems obvious—that no one realized Berenson's feeling about space and religiosity better than Caravaggio.

Here Berenson is writing about Perugino and Raphael, but we have a hard time keeping Caravaggio from our thoughts: "Art comes into existence only when we get a sense of space not as a void, as something merely negative, such as we customarily have, but on the contrary, as something very positive and definite able to confirm our consciousness of being, to heighten our feeling of vitality" (*Italian Painters of the Renaissance*, vol. 2, *Florentine and Central Italian Schools*, London, Phaidon, 1968, p. 88). After setting the scene for the importance of the positive effects of space on art and experience, Berenson notes that "space-composition is the art which humanizes the void, making of it an enclosed Eden, a domed mansion wherein our higher selves at last find an abode." He continues: "Space-composition . . . woos us away from our tight, painfully limited selves, dissolves us into the space presented, until at last we seem to become its permeating, indwelling spirit . . . And now behold whither we have come. The religious emotion . . . is produced by a feeling of identification with the universe; this feeling, in its turn, can be created by space-composition; it follows then that this art can directly communicate religious emotion . . . And indeed I scarcely see by what other means the religious emotion can be directly communicated by painting—mark you, I do not say represented" (pp. 88–89, 90–91).

Berenson's description of the space that is possible in painting, coupled with his description of what space-composition can do, aptly and somewhat ironically reinforces my descriptions of Caravaggio's efforts, the efforts that manifest his spatial gifts: the ability to dissolve us into the space presented, the ability to make a domed mansion of the void, and the ability to establish a positive and definite sense of space. These words of Berenson's marvelously illustrate the ways in which Caravaggio manipulated space, the ways in which he created a poised and projective shaping of space whose clear purpose was to break the tyranny of the perimeter and support surfaces that had ruled the space available to painting before his time. Painting before Caravaggio could move backward, it could step sideways, it could climb

walls, but it could not march forward; it could not create its own destiny. Without a deliberate sense of projective space, painting could not become real. The road to pictorial reality must pass through the dissolution of perimeter and surface. This is the road paved by Caravaggio to lead great art toward what we now call great painting. Caravaggio's story is the story of how individual pictures became the successful rivals of great altarpieces and great murals. The agony for us is that the road in this story may turn out to be a one-way street; we may not be able to recover some of the magic that belonged to those inhospitable pictorial surfaces, the altarpieces and murals of past great art.

Berenson was talking about religious emotion, but he could just as well have been talking about illusionism and its search for truth when he said that through the offices of space-composition religious emotion can be directly communicated rather than represented by painting. It is this direct communication, not the representation by painting of a convincing illusion and present sense of reality, that has made Caravaggio as famous as he is. There is an assumption that his realism is related to technique, that it can be learned and understood. But this assumption is itself an illusion. Botticelli, Raphael, Correggio, Titian and Tintoretto before Caravaggio; the Carracci, Rubens, Reni, Velázquez, Ribera, and Rembrandt with and after him—all were less convincingly real in their ability to present a pictorial space within which their subjects could perform. One way or another, they were all controlled by the surface they worked on. They were capable of magnificent alterations, but they could not explode the surface and still contain the action the way Caravaggio did. If we do not understand the success of Caravaggio's illusionism—that which strives to be real and painting at the same time, that which becomes a *pictorially* successful illusionism, one that gives sense to the assertion that painting can be "real" in a multiplicity of ways—it seems impossible that we will be able to understand the

genius of nineteenth-century art manifested in the work of Géricault and Manet, which in turn became the foundation for modern painting. The conviction that the successful depiction of pictorial space and subject, bound to each other as a self-contained whole, carries the necessary germ of painting as we understand it today was born with Caravaggio and nurtured by Manet. Now more than ever we stand sorely in need of both Caravaggio's invention and Manet's insightfulness.

We have to understand the success of Caravaggio's realism in order to recognize its great differences from the painting that surrounded it—that of Titian, Rubens, and Poussin. Of these three, Poussin seems the most distant and the least interesting. Classicism, with its parallel receding planes and its sharp-focused miniaturization, makes itself somehow beside the point. More serious issues are raised by Titian and Rubens: they advance notions of painterliness, impressionistic color, and continuous pictorial surface, three concerns about painting which more than any others have led inexorably toward twentieth-century abstraction. This is the way of Rembrandt, Delacroix, Turner, and Monet. This is also the way to Mondrian and Pollock; but we would do well to remember that if Mondrian and Pollock were heirs only of painterliness, broken color, and a preference for a smooth surface resulting in the conscious lateral extension of modern pictorial space, abstract art would be in deep trouble, and these painters themselves would be less commanding of our attention. What gives Mondrian (fig. 5) and Pollock (fig. 6) the power they have is the strong link through Manet to the genius of Caravaggio. Mondrian and Pollock have “real” pictoriality; they acknowledge the spatial fecundity and compelling image manipulation with which

Caravaggio began modern picture making. This acknowledgment gave to the painterliness, color, and surface manipulation that Mondrian and Pollock had inherited the added dimensions needed to make these effects useful to abstraction. It is the legacy of Caravaggio's space and Caravaggio's illusionism that tipped the scales decisively in favor of abstraction by the middle of the twentieth century.