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CARAVAGGIO'S TWO ST. MATTHEWS

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Thanks to the research of Herwarth Röttgen, undertaken when the Hertziana was unter the benign direction of Wolfgang Lotz, we have a documented chronology for Caravaggio's paintings in the Contarelli Chapel of San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome that is quite different from the one that had previously been accepted¹. We now know that the two large lateral canvases were painted between 23 July 1599 and 4 July 1600, which is somewhat later than most scholars had supposed. Röttgen's new dates for the altarpieces were more disconcerting: arguing from documentary evidence, he showed that the commission for a sculptured altarpiece of St. Matthew and the Angel by Jacob Cobaert went back to 1587 and had been renewed in 1596; the commission was still in force in January of 1602. At that time the statue of St. Matthew (all that Cobaert ever completed) was finally set up in the niche above the altar of the chapel. Once seen, it was immediately rejected by the rector of the church, who at that time was Franceso Contarelli, a nephew of the Cardinal who had first commissioned decorations for the chapel in 1565. The story of the statue's rejection, documented by Röttgen, was told by Baglione (who called Cobaert "Cope Fiammingo"):

Gli fu allogato da' Signori Contarelli il far di marmo una statue di s. Mattheo Apostolo, & Evangelista, per metterlo nella loro cappella in s. Luigi de' Francesi. Cope vi dimorò a far questa statua tutto il tempo di sua vita...

Li Contarelli, quando il videro, pensando, che fusse opera divina, o miracolosa, e ritrovandola una seccaggine, no'l vollero nella lor cappella di s. Luigi; ma in cambio di esso vi fecero da Michelangnolo da Caravaggio dipingere un s. Mattheo².

Cobaert was relieved of his obligation to complete the group by an agreement of 30 January 1602. One week later, on 7 February, Caravaggio contracted to furnish a painting of the same subject by Pentecost, which in 1602

1 RÖTTGEN's articles, which began to appear in the Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte in 1964 (XXVII, pp. 201–227) and ibid. (XXVIII, 1965, pp. 47–68), continued in the Münchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst (XX, 1969, pp. 143–170) and elsewhere. They have been collected with revisions, additions, and an important new article in his Il Caravaggio: ricerche e interpretazioni, Rome, Bulzoni, 1974. It is this edition that I shall cite, giving the original date of publication in parentheses.

2 GIOVANNI BAGLIONE, Le vite de' pittori ..., Rome, 1642, p. 100.

fell on 26 May. Thus Caravaggio's altarpiece dated from 1602, and not from before the time of the lateral canvases as had been universally supposed. The final payment to Caravaggio for the altarpiece dates from 22 September 1602, at which time it was described as being in place over the altar³. There are no other payments to Caravaggio; but there were of course two pictures. The first, rejected by the priests of San Luigi, was taken by Marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani, who lived just across the street (Fig. 6). Like many of Giustiniani's pictures, it eventually found its way to Berlin, where it was destroyed in 1945 by the fire that cost us so many treasures.

Caravaggio's second picture is still on the altar of the Contarelli Chapel (Fig. 7). Röttgen has argued that since the first picture was rejected, the final payment must have been for the second altarpiece; but this is not likely, as we shall see. The arguments against his conclusion have never been fully articulated, although an otherwise inexplicable payment in February of 1603 for a new wooden border for Caravaggio's altarpiece led to some debate and helps to confirm the other evidence leading me to believe that the second altarpiece had been completed only then⁴. My reasoning is more stylistic than documentary, however, and to understand the problem we should review what we know of Caravaggio's development between 1600 and 1603. In order to be as uncontroversial as possible, I shall discuss only securely documented paintings in the hope that something like a stylistic consensus may emerge.

Caravaggio had had little or no experience in painting large compositions or in placing many figures in a believably deep space before the first Contarelli commission. The difficulties that he encountered in composing and completing the *Martyrdom of Matthew* are by now famous. The published X-rays, and numerous *pentimenti* that can be seen in a good light and in certain photographs, reveal how much trouble he had in composing a multifigural composition in space. The somewhat confused picture shows, at times almost painfully, his first efforts at

3 Röttgen, pp. 58-61 (1965); For Cobaert, see ibid., pp. 83-87 (1969). (My date for Pentecost in 1602, slightly different from Röttgen's, comes from A. Cappelli, *Cronologia, cronografia e calendario perpetuo*..., Milan, Hoepli, 1930, p. 68.)

4 For Röttgen's position, and the earlier bibliography on the wooden borders of the altarpiece(s), see his pp. 79ff. and 123ff. (1969). He argued with some logic (pp. 89ff.) that Caravaggio's first altarpiece was originally the same size as the second.

1. Martyrdome of St. Matthew, Rome, S. Luigi dei Francesi



achieving a monumental Renaissance mural style (Fig. 1-2).

The development away from this first painting in the grand manner can be followed quite logically from the left half of the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* to the Odescalchi *Conversion of St. Paul* (Fig. 2–3), which is generally agreed to be his first attempt at a painting commissioned for the Cerasi Chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo in September of 1600⁵. Since Caravaggio's first payment was

5 Baglione (p. 137) says: "Nella Madonna del Popolo a man diritta dell'altar maggiore dentro la cappella de' Signori Cerasi sù i lati del muro sono di sua mano la Crocifissione di s. Pietro; E di rincontro ha la Conversione di s. Paolo. Questi quadri prima furono lavorati da lui in un'altra maniera, ma perche non piacquero al Padrone, se li prese il Cardinale Sannesio; e lo stesso Caravaggio vi fece questi, che hora si vedono, a olio dipinti, poiche egli non operava in altra maniera; e (per dir cosi) la Fortuna con la Fama il portava." The attribution of the Odescalchi painting, originally doubted, is now all but universally accepted, and after inspecting it with some care I am wholeheartedly in its favor. It conforms in material and dimensions to Caravaggio's contract of 24 September 1600. In style, too, I am convinced that it belongs very soon after that date. For the documents, originally published by Denis Mahon, see Mia Cinotti in GIAN ALBERTO DELL'ACQUA, Il Caravaggio e le sue grandi opere ..., Milan, Rizzoli, 1971, pp. 146 ff. All of the known documents (to 1970 ca.) are published there, often with delivered to him by none other than Marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani, we may be safe in assuming that at this time the great patron and connoisseur was taking Caravaggio's affairs as his personal concern. In any event, the circumstantial evidence as well as the style point to the Odescalchi painting as Caravaggio's first effort for Cerasi, done fairly soon after the commission and hence in the months immediately following the Contarelli pictures, in particular the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew*, which in view of its complex subcutaneous history, was probably finished only toward July of 1600, when both of the Contarelli pictures were installed for viewing.

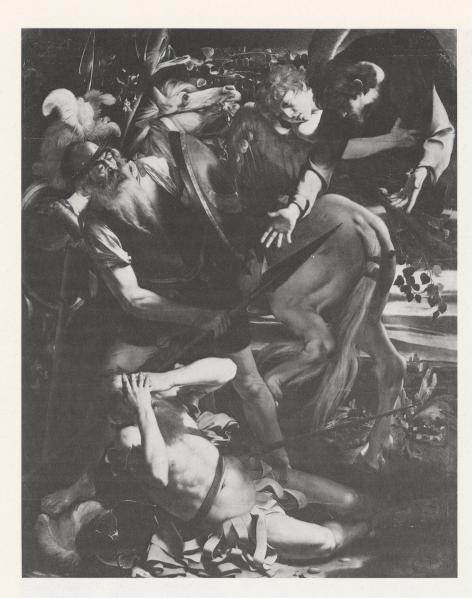
During the thirteen months between the Cerasi commission and the *saldo* of November 1601 there was ample time for Caravaggio to paint two pictures, think better of them, and then paint new ones in a style that is markedly different. Thus the striking changes between the Odescalchi painting and the final version (Fig. 3–4) are not strong evidence for what Röttgen called Caravaggio's polarity of styles in this period (he postulated a very rapid fluctua-

revised transcriptions. Further material, chiefly regarding his birth in 1571, can be found digested in Cinotti, *Immagine del Caravaggio*, Milan, Pizzi, 1973.



2. Martyrdom of St. Matthew, detail

3. Conversion of St. Paul, Rome, Principe Don Guido Odescalchi



tion). I see Caravaggio's stylistic changes in 1600–1601 as part of a deliberate self-education and development away from the Contarelli pictures⁶. He seems to have continued the populous and even busy manner of the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* in his first Cerasi pictures (or at least in the one that survives), and then thought better of it. Whether the dramatic change in style that we see in the actual Cerasi paintings (Fig. 4, 5) was due to competition with Annibale Carracci we cannot be sure, but the idea is attractive⁷.

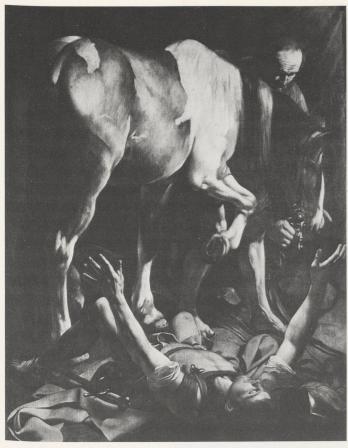
Caravaggio's pictures in the Cerasi Chapel exhibit a simplified, sculptural presentation of relatively few

figures. The forms seem to be pressed against the surface of the painting and even to push through it - an almost belligerent assault on the picture plane (Fig. 4, 5). He reduced the dramatis personae, eliminated supernatural appearances, and produced clear and powerful compositions - brutally unambiguous in the Crucifixion of St. Peter, less obvious or even successful in the Conversion of St. Paul, which despite being a second version still displays pentimenti and other signs of an unresolved struggle to clarify the foreground forms in their narrow space. But in these paintings, finished in mid- or later 1601, we find Caravaggio's first mature style⁸. It combines a kind of hyper-classicism or forced clarity with a newly insistent surface naturalism. And here too we first see real lowlife types - common, even peasant-like people acting out the hallowed old stories of conversion and martyrdom.

⁶ Röttgen, pp. 135ff. (1966), and especially pp. 107ff. (1969). I want to emphasize my great debt to Röttgen's discoveries and insights, since my article is in part a critique of some of his conclusions.

⁷ See Donald Posner, Annibale Carracci, London. Phaidon, 1971, I, pp. 134ff.

⁸ The *saldo* for Caravaggio's Cerasi paintings (10 November 1601) is usually assumed to be artificially late, since the patron,

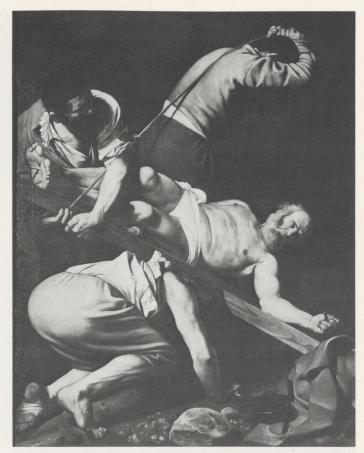


4. Conversion of St. Paul, Rome, S. Maria del Popolo

The assault on the picture plane that we see in the Cerasi pictures increased in the following months. The Contarelli *Matthew* was commissioned in February of 1602. Even from the old photograph (Fig. 6) we can see that it shared close stylistic similarities with the Cerasi *Crucifixion*, as Denis Mahon first insisted⁹. Although

Tiberio Cerasi, died on 3 May, and an avviso of 5 May 1601 reporting on the funeral mentions the "bellissima Cappella ... per mano del famosissimo pittore Michel Angelo da Caravaggio." The passage seems to prove that his pictures were in place – but which pictures? Caravaggio's first versions might have been hastily installed for the occasion, or even one old and one new picture, for all we know. Moreover, the writer was careless (he called the church Santa Maria della Consolazione) and he may not have been present. He may even have meant to write "Annibale Carracci" instead of "Caravaggio" since both painters were involved. Cf. Cinotti, *Il Caravaggio* ..., p. 151, F 35, and Posner, *Carracci*, II, p. 55, no. 126. The saldo is in Cinotti, F 36.

9 In what I can only call a heroic effort to reconcile the evidence of his eyes with the seeming impossibility of the chronology; see D. Mahon, "Egregius in Urbe pictor': Caravaggio Revisited", Burlington Magazine, XCIII, 1951, pp. 223–234, revised in ibid, XCIV, 1952, pp. 3–23. Apart from more recent documentary discoveries, particularly Röttgen's, our basic sequence of Caravaggio's pictures is chiefly indebted to Mahon's brilliant observations. The documents for the Contarelli Matthew are published and discussed by Röttgen, pas-



5. Crucifixion of St. Peter, Rome, S. Maria del Popolo

dated documents do tend to clarify our vision in such instances, I think that we can agree on a progression that culminates in the powerfully three-dimensional, almost *trompe-l'oeil* qualities that we perceive so strongly in the Berlin *Matthew*, which was commissioned as a substitute for actual sculpture¹⁰.

sim. In 1974, Luigi Salerno proposed that Caravaggio could have painted the Berlin Matthew on speculation, immediately after the side pictures in the chapel, which is to say in 1600-1601 (Burlington Magazine, CXVI, p. 587). The suggestion now seems stylistically unnecessary, and indeed wrong. It is possible that a year later, when Caravaggio had finished the Cerasi pictures and Cobaert was still puttering with his statue, that Caravaggio was encouraged to begin an altarpiece on the certainty that the statue would soon be rejected. If so, the painting might be adjusted back closer to the Cerasi Chapel paintings, but it is a dangerous and unnecessary hypothesis since paintings were very rarely begun before funds were free to pay for them. The style of the first Matthew seems to fit very well into mid 1602. Long after this paper was submitted, Luigi Spezzaferro published an article in which he tried to show that Caravaggio's first St. Matthew was a temporary altarpiece painted for the consecration of the chapel in 1599 (Ricerche di storia dell'arte, 10, 1980, p. 49-64). I think he is wrong, and I stick by my stylistic and documentary arguments.

10 Röttgen, pp. 89ff. and 123 (aggiornamento to p. 94), (1969). Despite the presumption that the first Matthew was deliberately sculptural, Caravaggio's style was going in that direction

6. St. Matthew and the Angel, formerly Berlin, Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum



I have already stated that the painting now on the altar of the Contarelli Chapel seems to be so stylistically divergent from its predecessor that it was most probably painted in the winter of 1602–1603 (Fig. 7). Indeed, the

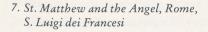
anyway, as the *Crucifixion of Peter* amply proves (5). It must be admitted, however, that the Berlin *Matthew* was an unusual painting, commissioned under unique circumstances. Its extreme three-dimensionality seems to have been the result of a fortuitous conjuntion of the artist's inner evolution and external pressures.

two pictures were formerly dated years apart. The reduced assertiveness of the forms in the second painting, the more subtle toying with the picture plane, the softening of outlines and of fictive materials (to the extent that we can judge an actual painting in comparison with a photograph) – all show a change in style that has impressed everyone. No doubt this change was aided by Caravaggio's rebuff from the priests of San Luigi: the first *Matthew* had been composed and painted with a learned iconographic and theological program that could have

come only from theologians and advisers rather than from Caravaggio himself¹¹, which may have made the painting's rejection all the more surprising and disappointing. But my desire to date the second *Matthew* after September 1602 derives in great part from the date that we now have for a painting that is uniquely similar to it in style, the *Sacrifice of Abraham* now in the Uffizi (Fig. 8).

Caravaggio received three payments from Monsignor Maffeo Barberini between 20 May and 12 July 1603 for an unidentified painting. Since the *Abraham* is the only picture by Caravaggio listed in the earliest Barberini inventories, we may assume that the payments were for the *Abraham* rather than for an otherwise undocumented and

11 I refer to the fact that Matthew not only writes perfect Hebrew, but with a Counter Reformation correction in the text (IRVING LAVIN, "Divine Inspiration in Caravaggio's Two St. Matthews", Art Bulletin, LVI, 1974, pp. 59-81, 590-591), as well as to the supposition that Matthew is deliberately Socratic in appearance, which was commented on by writers even before Lavin's extended discussion. (Lavin, surprisingly, gives no consideration whatsoever to Caravaggio's adviser, although he surely realized that Caravaggio was no Hebraist.) As for whether the inscription should have been in Hebrew or Aramaic (which once led Longhi to suppose that the "mistaken" Hebrew might have caused the picture's rejection), the matter seems to have been settled by the great Baronius. In the Italian version of his first volume of Annales (Il compendio de gli Annali ..., Rome, 1590, p. 234) he writes that Matthew wrote his Gospel in AD 41, "in lingua pure Ebrea", the symbolically correct language to celebrate the coming of the Old Testament Messiah.







8. Sacrifice of Abraham, Florence, Uffizi

unrecorded *Portrait of Barberini*, mentioned by some old writers¹². Presumably Caravaggio painted most of the *Abraham* in the summer of 1603; the *saldo* dates from 8 January 1604. *Saldi* always post-date completion, but in this case Caravaggio had been in legal difficulties and was actually in jail in September 1603, which may have delayed his final touches on a painting that was probably finished in its essentials during the period of the payments *a conto*, May–July 1603.

The model for the old man in the second *Matthew* and for Abraham is obviously the same, just as the model for the Contarelli angel is that of Isaac (Fig. 7, 8). The two pictures are painted with the same relative softness in identical colors, and in numberless ways they seem to be as similar as possible in form and style. Thus it seems reasonable to try to date them as close to each other as the evidence will permit.

Caravaggio (to repeat) was commissioned and paid for an altarpiece of Matthew and the Angel for the Contarelli Chapel between February and September of 1602. In order to reconcile this fact with the stylistic disparity that has always been noted between the two paintings that he produced, we can summon up the reports of the biographers. Giovanni Baglione, in 1642, was the first to state that the altarpiece was rejected. He tells the story after his quotation of Federico Zuccaro's comment on the Giorgionesque manner that he claimed to perceive in the Chapel, which was presumably directed at the Calling of St. Matthew unveiled in July of 1600. The hostile Baglione linked the rejected Matthew with Giustiniani's unbounded love for Caravaggio's Amor, writing:

Per il Marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani fece un Cupido a sedere dal naturale ritratto, ben colorito sì, che egli dell'opere del Caravaggio fuor de'termini invaghissi; & il quadro d'un certo s. Matteo, che prima havea fatto per quell'altare di s. Luigi, e non era a veruno piacciuto, egli per esser'opera di Michelagnolo, se'l prese; & in questa opinione entrò il Marchese per li gran schiamazzi, che del Caravaggio, da per tutto, faceva Prosperino delle grottesche, turcimanno di Michelagnolo...¹³

Giovan Pietro Bellori, elaborating on this story, gives an explanation for the second *Matthew* that seems to be

demonstrably correct. In a discussion that is full of information and misinformation alike, he declared that the decoration of the Contarelli Chapel had been divided between the Cavalier' d'Arpino for the frescoes and Caravaggio for the oil paintings, saying:

Qui avenne cosa che pose in grandissimo disturbo e quasi fece disperare il Caravaggio in riguardo della sua riputazione; poiché, avendo egli terminato il quadro di mezzo di San Matteo e postolo su l'altare fu tolto via da i preti con dire che quella figura non aveva decoro né aspetto di Santo, stando a sedere con le gambe incavalcate e co' piedi rozzamente esposti al popolo. Si disperava il Caravaggio per tale affronto nella prima opera da esso publicata in chiesa, quando il marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani si mosse a favorirlo a liberollo da questa pena; poiché, interpostosi con quei sacerdoti, si prese per sé il quadro e gliene fece fare un altro diverso, che è quello si vede ora su l'altare; e per onorare maggiormente il primo, portatolo a casa, l'accompagnò poi con gli altri tre Vangelisti di mano di Guido, di Domenichino e dell'Albano, tre li più celebri pittori che in quel tempo avessero fama

The difficulty with dating the second painting later than the saldo of September 1602, as Röttgen has argued most forcefully, seems to be that such a payment implied an acceptable painting. But Bellori asserts that it was Giustiniani who commissioned Caravaggio's second Matthew: "... Giustiniani ... interpostosi con quei sacerdoti ... e gliene fece fare un altro diverso ..." (- and himself had Caravaggio paint another picture, which is the one now on the altar). Thus, according to Bellori, Giustiniani saved Caravaggio's face by commissioning a new altarpiece, and then took the first one for himself. It may at first seem inconceivable that an artist would be paid for an altarpiece that was rejected by the church authorities, but the two transactions actually had nothing to do with each other. Caravaggio's commission was private, from the heirs of Cardinal Contarelli who were entrusted with completing the Chapel, namely the Crescenzi family. The rejection came at the hands of the priests of San Luigi, and by chance Cardinal Contarelli's nephew was rector of the church at the time - but he was not the patron. A completely similar situation occurred two more times in Caravaggio's Roman career, with the difference only that no one volunteered to pay for a replacement. Thus Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin, commissioned by Laerzio Cherubini for a chapel in Santa

¹⁴ GIOVAN PIETRO BELLORI, Le vite ..., Rome, 1672, pp. 205–206; ed. E. Borea, Turin, Einaudi, 1976, pp. 219–220 (edition cited).

¹² Marilyn A. Lavin, "Caravaggio Documents from the Barberini Archives", Burlington Magazine, CIX, 1967, pp. 470-473; cf. also her Seventeenth-Century Barberini Documents and Inventories of Art, New York, New York University Press, 1975. For the portrait, see Maurizio Marini, Io Michelangelo da Caravaggio, Rome, Bestetti e Bozzi, 1974, pp. 132ff., no. 29, and pp. 372ff., and Cinotti, Il Caravaggio, p. 126.

¹³ Baglione, p. 137.

Maria della Scala, was rejected by the church after it was put in place, but the painting seems to have remained in the patron's hands until he sold it in 1607, and thus he must have paid for it even though it was rejected for his chapel. In fact the agent of the purchaser, the Duke of Mantua, specifically states that the owner would not sell the great painting for a cent less than he had paid¹⁵. The final payment for Caravaggio's *Madonna dei Palafrenieri* is documented by a receipt in Caravaggio's hand, dated 8 April 1606, at which time the painting had already been set up in St. Peter's. By 16 June it had been rejected and sold to Cardinal Scipione Borghese¹⁶.

Using these later examples as support for what Bellori seems to be telling us, we can now understand that it could only have been Caravaggio's first altarpiece that was paid for by the original patrons on 22 September 1602. It was then in place. When the priests found it unsuitable Caravaggio was crushed; but he had been paid. Then it was that Vincenzo Giustiniani arranged to give Caravaggio a second chance by commissioning another altarpiece. Caravaggio must have painted the second Matthew between September/October of 1602 and January/February of 1603. It was given a wooden border documented by a payment of February 1603, presumably got the customary touching-up by the artist after being put into place¹⁷, and was then duly accepted by the priests of San Luigi. Giustiniani, in turn, must have paid Caravaggio and taken the rejected altarpiece for himself, eventually honoring it with the three companions Bellori described.

With this interpretation of the evidence we can account for the otherwise inexplicable new wooden border of February 1603, since the first picture's border had been

15 Cinotti, *Il Caravaggio*, p. 160, F 79, letters of 17 February–28 April 1607; in the key letter (F 79b) the agent wrote that the price was 280 *scudi*: "... essendosi fatto quanto si è potuto col padrone, acciò si migliorasse de conditioni, ma egli non ha voluto sentir di perder pur un giulio del prezzo pagato ..."

16 The entire story is clarified by LUIGI SPEZZAFERRO, "La pala dei Palafrenieri", Colloquio sul tema Caravaggio e i Caravaggeschi, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Anno CCCLXXI, Quaderno N. 205 (Problemi attuali di scienza e di cultura), Rome, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1974, pp. 125–137.

17 See the remarks made soon afterward by Rubens, with regard to his first altarpiece for Santa Maria in Vallicella: "... it will be necessary for me to retouch my picture in its place before the unveiling; this is usually done in order to avoid mistakes." (The Letters of Peter Paul Rubens, trans. & ed. R.S. Magurn, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1955, p. 16: 9 June 1607).

applied in the fall of 1602 (payment in October). What is more, we can make much better sense of the evident stylistic disparity between the two *Matthews* by giving them a whole year (January 1602–January 1603) to have been conceived and painted. At the same time we can now understand the close stylistic ties between the second *Matthew* and the Barberini *Abraham* of 1603. Finally, my modest proposal allows a more understandable stylistic evolution and development for Caravaggio in 1602–1603. This development is, to be sure, peculiar to a painter who did not draw, and who, when he began a canvas, typically (in Röttgen's memorable phrase) "headed into the unknown".

When Röttgen made his documentary discoveries he was faced with what must then have seemed to be bewildering revisions of an almost hallowed sequence of pictures. He was, in addition, forced to explain dramatic changes of style and content such as are found between the first and second Cerasi Conversions (Fig. 3, 4). With the seemingly documented proof that both Contarelli Matthews had been painted in the space of eight months, he quite naturally sought to explain these drastic stylistic changes by postulating an artist who could switch manners in a few weeks or months18. Thus Caravaggio, for Röttgen, was not an artist on whom one could found a chronology "su un'evoluzione ideale e ad una sola fila". Art historians soon began to make more sense out of his new chronology, however, and I hope that my discussion helps to change the idea that Caravaggio was a Picassolike "modern" who could switch styles as one might try on a new suit of clothes¹⁹. Rather, I suspect that he worked hard over many months at perfecting the new, monumental style that we see first in the Cerasi Chapel. I see the Martyrdom of St. Matthew and the first Conversion of St. Paul as somewhat atypical, transitional works that show Caravaggio trying to adjust his earlier, genrelike manner to the demands of large-scale, spacious, multifigural scenes. But within the space of a year or so he evolved into the artist of the Cerasi Chapel as we know it. Neither the changes of 1600-1601 nor those of 1602-1603 are inconsistent with an ambitious, adventurous, but also thoughtful painter who was determined to make a great name in Rome and who had the knowledge and equipment to do it.

¹⁸ See especially Röttgen, pp. 107 ff. (1969), and p. 136 (1966).

¹⁹ My own stylistic discussion depends on various writers, including Dell'Acqua, Cinotti, and Röttgen himself, who recognized the new sculptural style of c. 1601–1602.