

CARAVAGGIO

Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge

AARON H. DE GROFT, PH.D., EDITOR

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INTRODUCTION

AARON H. DE GROFT



Installation of *Natura Morta: Still Life Paintings and the Medici Collections* exhibition on view at the Muscarelle Museum of Art, Williamsburg, Virginia from November 11, 2006 - January 7, 2007.

This book contains the scholarly papers presented on the second day of a cross-disciplinary symposium that took place on November 9 and 10, 2006, in the Phi Beta Kappa Auditorium of The College of William & Mary. The symposium was organized by the Muscarelle Museum of Art in conjunction with the opening of one of the most important exhibitions ever held at our museum, *Natura Morta: Still Life Paintings and the Medici Collections*, which presented forty-five Italian still life paintings of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries from the collections of the Palazzo Pitti and the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. The speakers comprised an international roster of distinguished scholars—Miles Chappell, Marco Chiarini, Allen Grieco, Isabelle Hyman, Jules Janick, Adrienne von Lates, Catherine Levesque, Chiara Nepi, John Spike, David Stone, and John Varriano. The first day of the symposium discussed the patronage and history of still lifes within the context of the Medici collections. It is hoped that the transcripts of these excellent presentations can be collected and published in the future. The second day was dedicated to the examination of a single work, Caravaggio's magnificent *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (fig. 1). The papers given on that day,

here transcribed and amplified, presented the audience with a cohesive and richly nuanced exploration of this recently rediscovered masterpiece.

The many visitors to Williamsburg during the exhibition, November 11, 2006 to January 7, 2007– the attendance over the Christmas holidays set a record for us – will long remember the upper floor galleries of the Museum transformed into a flourishing botanical garden in the baroque style. One of the connective threads of the installation was the various ways in which the Medici cultivated this genre of painting, beginning with a recreation of the “Gabinetto di Piccoli Quadri,” a special collection of small, precious pictures collected by Gran Principe Ferdinando de’ Medici around 1700. Another gallery was devoted entirely to the celebrated flora and fauna specimen pictures by Bartolomeo Bimbi, a great specialist whose canvases exemplify the horticultural science at the Medici court. The largest of our galleries was installed to evoke a palatial Picture Gallery of important still lifes, featuring works by Giuseppe Recco, Giovanni Stanchi, Cristoforo Munari, Bartolomeo Ligozzi, and Willem von Aelst. The centerpiece was the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge*, which through the kind assistance of all concerned we were able to borrow from the walls of the National Gallery of Victoria, where it had remained on loan following the international exhibition, *Caravaggio & His World: Darkness & Light* (Sydney and Melbourne, 2003 – 2004).¹

The Medici *Natura Morta* show provided the very first opportunity to view Caravaggio’s still life within an overview of Italian still life painting as a whole. The Caravaggio excelled, as I knew it would, for its ambitiousness, spiritual and intellectual depth, breathtaking vivacity, and, simply put, its incomparable command of pictorial technique. The *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* has frequently been exhibited at major museums, including several that have Caravaggio figure paintings in their permanent collection, namely, the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford; the Nelson-Atkins Museum of

¹ *Caravaggio & His World: Darkness & Light*, E. Capon, ed., Sydney and Melbourne, 2003, cat. no. 7.

Art, Kansas City; and the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth.² In 2000, when I was Deputy Director and Chief Curator at the Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* was placed on the end wall of the large Italian gallery, where I often had the pleasure of viewing it in the company of visiting art historians over many years. I remember particularly the lively enthusiasm of the legendary Thomas Hoving, the long time Director of the Metropolitan Museum, famous for his “eye,” who thought the painting was truly impressive.

The rediscovery of a lost Caravaggio still life described in two Barberini inventories is no small matter and needs to be considered from all angles. Gerard Vaughan, Director of the National Gallery of Victoria, told an interviewer that he had made a point of studying it, “every day for the 100 days it was on show and I now believe it is a Caravaggio. It’s a picture of breathtaking quality.”³ In February 2007, when the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* was on exhibit at the Kimbell Art Museum, Malcolm Warner, Chief Curator, commented in the *KAM Calendar*, “Perhaps the most compelling argument in favor of the Caravaggio attribution is the sheer power of the work, in which fruits and vegetables take on the monumentality and sensuousness of great paintings of the human figure.”⁴

These qualities are suggested in the photographs, but only fully experienced in the original materials (the surface relief of brush and paint) and true

² *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* has been on almost continuous view since 1995: from February 1995 to March 1997 at the Wadsworth Atheneum (Hartford, Connecticut); March 1997 to March 2000 at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art (Kansas City, Missouri); April 2000 to October 2003 at the Ringling Museum of Art (The State Museum of Florida, Sarasota, Florida); November 2003 to February 2004 in the exhibition, *Caravaggio & His World: Darkness & Light*, at the National Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia; and March 2004 to May 2004 at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia; and then on long-term loan from June 2004 to July 2006 at the National Gallery of Victoria; November 2006 to January 2007 as a special addition to *Natura Morta: Still Life Painting and the Medici Collections*, Muscarelle Museum of Art (The College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia); January 2007 to August 2007 as the Guest of Honor Program, Kimbell Art Museum (Fort Worth, Texas); and September 2007 to the present at the Denver Art Museum (Denver, Colorado).

³ A Caravaggio—or is it? by Raymond Gill, www.theage.com.au, December 21, 2004.

⁴ Malcolm Warner, “An Early Masterpiece of Still-Life Painting,” *Calendar of the Kimbell Art Museum*, February 2007.



Caravaggio | *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (fig. 1).

dimensions. Indeed, experienced “in the flesh” the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* immediately recalls the artist’s history paintings of the same moment in his career, especially, the *Sacrifice of Isaac* (fig. 33) in the Uffizi. Caravaggio’s most prolific collector, Vincenzo Giustiniani quoted him as saying, rather provocatively for that time, that “it was as much work for him to make

a good picture of flowers as one of figures.”⁵ Recently, Timothy Standring, Director of Collections at the Denver Art Museum, where the painting currently hangs, told me that the late Edmund Pillsbury made a special trip early in this Caravaggio year, 2010, to inspect and discuss the painting in detail with Standring (whose own first encounter with it was at the Ringling during my tenure). Pillsbury followed up with an email in which he stated, “I hope that my fresh approach will encourage more curators and collectors to understand the originality and significance of the painting and its place in Caravaggio’s oeuvre.”⁶

From my first experience with the painting a decade ago, I have followed the picture in the studies and opinions published by scholars. Not all books on Caravaggio have discussed it, perhaps because still lifes are a specialized field in which very few scholars have experience, or the authors have not been able to view it in person.⁷ Having viewed the painting at length and in different installations, I have made some observations in front of the painting that have not as yet found their way into print, and may be of interest. The first

⁵ A. Banti, ed., *Vincenzo Giustiniani: discorso sulle arti e sui mestieri*, Florence, 1981, p. 42: “tanta manifattura gli era a fare un quadro buono di fiori, come di figure.”

⁶ E-mail, Edmund Pillsbury to Timothy Standring, March 24, 2010.

⁷ See the catalogue raisonné by John T. Spike, *Caravaggio*, 2nd revised edition, New York, 2010, cat. no. 35, for the publications and scholars, e.g. Sir Denis Mahon and Mina Gregori, who accept the attribution.

point I would make is that the individual fruits, squashes, gourds, what-have-you, have a higher grade of realism than we find in other painters. I'm referring to a "photographic" realism. Every piece of fruit seems portrayed from life, just as every saint and every sinner painted by Caravaggio reminds us of his studio models. Caravaggio plays with focus in ways that show a knowledge of lenses and "depth of field." In the sliced-off watermelon in the foreground, the near rind is in focus, the red pulp is out of focus – thus emphasizing the depth of the melon— but then surprisingly, the distant edge is in focus again. In any other still life, the melon would be entirely "in focus."



Caravaggio | *Saint John the Baptist* (fig. 2).

This accords of course with David Hockney's theory of images projected in the dark by a mirror or lens, which perhaps would also explain the curious inconsistency in the directions of the cast shadows, the figs at left being studied in an overhead time of day, the melons at right, a few hours later. The shaft of light streaking directionally across the background would traditionally indicate the light source, it seems symbolic as well. But if it is the source of light, then the scattered shadows are in rebellion against the laws of physics and the first rule taught to Renaissance painters.⁸ It seems strange that the artist did not correct this, but Caravaggio often indulged himself in "errors" that flouted the conventions.⁹

⁸ The understanding and study of the camera obscura, and/or a modified and mobile such device, is researched and known. For a very compelling source please see, Studio Art Centers International, *Painted Optics Symposium: Re-examining the Hockney-Falco thesis 7 years on*, Florence, September 7-9, 2008, published papers; and R. Lapucci, *Caravaggio e l'ottica/Caravaggio and Optics*, Florence, Italy: Servizi Editoriali, 2005.

⁹ In this regard, it is interesting to note and surprising to deduce the physical anomalies in the Nelson-Atkins, *Saint John the Baptist*, where there is no cast shadow of the staff across the leg of the figure as there should be, the mid-section is visually out of focus, the unusual length and proportion of the proper left leg to the right leg, and most interesting is the placement and insertion of the proper right leg into the lower mid-riff of the seated figure creating quite the aberration of human anatomy.

Another observation I would like to add is the remarkable distinctness of each fruit: despite the cornucopia abundance on the ledge – which later baroque painters will heap up even higher – every item stands out sharp and clear. This is like the Renaissance clarity that Heinrich Wölfflin first opposed to baroque “relativity” more than a hundred years ago. As generations of art historians have noticed, Caravaggio does not fit into Wölfflin’s definitions of “baroque” composition and treatment of space. The *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* is constructed along two diagonals that cross the central melon, making a horizontal X (on its side). The bottle gourd connects to the melon, the melon stem pokes into a fig, the last fig on the left continues the diagonal out. Baroque compositions employ diagonals to create a forceful sense of receding space.

Caravaggio employs diagonals to lend coherence to a still life that is not so random as it first appears. Instead of seeking depth, he bends the rules of perspective to bring the fruits in the background as near as possible to the front. Part and parcel of this tactic are the remarkable distinctness that I mentioned and Caravaggio’s inventive ways of overlapping them to make them seem both near and distant at the same time. I have always been fascinated, for example, how in such a calculated composition, the large peach at the top of basket seems as near to us as the peach and the apple below it, which should instead seem closer – and none of them seem to “sit” in the basket as much as hover in place. These are three of the elements in which the specialists have most often found symbolism, and I think they are right.

Another idiosyncrasy that takes some attention to discern is Caravaggio’s tendency to leave a thin thread of reddish-brown “priming” (*imprimatura*) between the form and the darkish background. I first read about this approach to modeling volumes in a report on the *Conversion of the Magdalene* (fig. 3) that was published in *The Burlington Magazine* in October of 1974.¹⁰ The

¹⁰ James L. Greaves and Meryl Johnson, “New Findings on Caravaggio’s Technique in the Detroit ‘Magdalen,’” *The Burlington Magazine*, (October 1974): 564-572.

Conversion of Mary Magdalen was then a new, somewhat contested acquisition by the Detroit Institute of Arts. In it, the wooden mirror frame held by Mary Magdalen is composed entirely of the reddish-brown underpainting with a few extra touches. That no one else in Italy painted in this “Impressionist” way was already confirmed by Giampietro Bellori in 1672: “Caravaggio made use of every device of his brush, having worked on it with such boldness that he left the priming of the canvas uncovered in the half-tones.”¹¹



Caravaggio | *Conversion of Mary Magdalen* (fig. 3).



Detail: *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (cf. fig 1).

Once alerted to this technique, it is easy to find the passages in his paintings where the forms have been defined by “wrapping” the background or tabletop around the barely touched *imprimatura*. In fact, Caravaggio painted the entire background around the composition in the foreground, which is also something Caravaggio did in his much earlier *Basket of Fruit* (fig. 6) now in Milan.¹² The reddish-brown figs in the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* are good examples, made realistic by the addition of some yellow, a little shading, and white highlights. Other examples are the green

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 567, publishes this translation and original text in G.P. Bellori, *Le Vite dei Pittori, Scultori ed Architetti Moderni...*, (Rome, 1672), 209.

¹² These observations are facilitated by the good preservation of the painting. Pigment samples that were tested independently by UCL Painting Analysis Ltd. in London, and by Stephen Kornheiser, Chief Conservator, at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford have each confirmed the date of the picture from the time and milieu of Caravaggio. Their results, including the original X-rays of the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* were shown to Maurizio Seracini, Director of Editech, Florence, Italy, the most extensive archive of Caravaggio technical data in the world. Seracini confirmed Caravaggio’s distinctive technique, pointing out, among other observations, his seemingly unique preference to work from the most distant elements towards the front; this approach is in good part responsible for the distinctive overlapping of forms that I mention here.

grapes in the basket in this picture and on the table in the *Supper at Emmaus* (fig. 38) in the National Gallery in London. In each, the grapes, when one looks closely, are colored the same way, by applying a thin slip of greenish tint on top of the *imprimatura*, then adding one of his signature pure white highlights to top it off.¹³

In 2006, I was delighted to host the first scholarly symposium ever devoted to the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge*. This 400th anniversary of Caravaggio's (born 1571) death in 1610 this year made possible the sponsorship needed to edit and publish these papers. As you will read in the papers that follow, the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* had an enormous influence on Caravaggio's prolific followers, artists like Bartolomeo and Agostino Verrocchi, Michelangelo Cerquozzi, and the latest and most famous, Michelangelo Pace del Campidoglio. Its success and then its disappearance sometime in the seventeenth century made it like the missing link or Holy Grail of Roman still lifes. It would be fascinating to gather the best paintings it inspired, most of which at one time or another were ascribed to Caravaggio's own hand. This would be an excellent idea for a future exhibition, not to mention important symposium.

13 In both the London *Emmaus* and the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* Caravaggio uses highlights that are nearly pure white to increase the impact of his modelling. Artists usually used just a lighter tone of the color they wished to model. He had already adopted this innovation as early as the *Borghese Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, in which the effect of sparkling is almost overdone. Seeking flatness, perhaps, he did not use white highlights in the Milan *Fruit Basket*, and then he resumed them, sparingly, in the Uffizi *Bacchus*.



CARAVAGGIO AND THE
ORIGINS OF ROMAN STILL LIFE PAINTING

JOHN T. SPIKE

In 1672, Giovan Pietro Bellori, who was the secretary of the Academy of Saint Luke, published his volume of twelve biographies of the leading painters, sculptors, and architects of his own century. It was a restricted list, by no means an encyclopedia; the selections from Annibale Carracci to Nicolas Poussin were all personal favorites. The single notorious exception was Caravaggio (of course), whose naturalism ran contrary to Bellori's academic instincts.

Bellori took no interest in such a minor genre as still lifes—which makes it all the more significant that he singled out Caravaggio for a rare bit of praise in this context. In an oft-quoted passage, Bellori writes that Caravaggio's paintings of flowers and fruits, which he began to paint in the workshop of the Cavalier d'Arpino in the early 1590s, formed the foundation of "the beautiful style that we enjoy today in Rome."¹ The most admired still life specialists in Bellori's time were Michelangelo Pace, called Campidoglio, (1610-70), and the flower painter par excellence, Mario Nuzzi, called Mario de' Fiori (1603-73). Both of these paragons of the high baroque drew inspiration from the monumental and realistic still lifes painted by Caravaggio's followers.

Long before the publication of the Barberini inventories for 1671 and 1672 documenting an untraced painting by Caravaggio of "*diversi frutti porti sop'a un tavolino di pietra in una canestra*" ("various fruits placed on top of a stone table in a basket"), it had already been observed that Roman still lifes of the early seventeenth century exhibited consistencies of composition, motif, and naturalism that presupposed a specifically Roman source.² With solely works of followers at his disposal, Roberto Longhi reasoned that the Roman still life school stemmed from a lost painting (or paintings) by Caravaggio.³

¹ Giovan Pietro Bellori, *Le vite dei pittori, scultori, e architetti moderni* (Turin: Einaudi, 1978), 213.

² The 1671 inventory of Cardinal Antonio Barberini is transcribed by Marilyn Lavin in *The Barberini Inventories* (New York: New York University Press, 1975): 309, no. 71,354; the reference in the 1672 inventory (no. 72.141) is the same. See John T. Spike, *Caravaggio*, 2nd rev. ed (New York: Abbeville, 2010), cat. no. 35.

³ Roberto Longhi, "Un momento importante nella storia della 'natura morta,'" *Paragone* 1 (1950): 34ff.

For four centuries, the only independent still life identified as of Caravaggio's hand was the *Basket of Fruit* (fig. 6), often known by its Latin title, *Fiscella*, which seems always to have been in the collection of Cardinal Federico Borromeo, founder of the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana in Milan, where it is first cited in 1607.⁴ Small and precious, the *Fiscella* had no discernible influence on the Roman school of still lifes.

Modern scholarship has devoted years to the research of Caravaggio's Roman still lifes. Twenty years ago, reviewing Luigi Salerno's pioneering dictionary of Italian still life painters, I described the book's contributions, noting that "a disconcerting lack of consensus over attributions seems endemic to this field of study."⁵ Great advances have been made in the meantime, and an overall picture of the critical early years of the seventeenth century has now come into focus. The sustained effort has yielded many fruits, including the rediscovery of the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (fig. 1), which was exhibited in a major Caravaggio show in 2003-4, and was on view in the Muscarelle's 2006 exhibition of Italian still lifes from the Uffizi Gallery and Palazzo Pitti in Florence. In this essay, I trace the arc that stretches from Caravaggio's own influences in his native Lombardy to their transfer with him to Rome and their continuing influence until the late seventeenth century when Bellori was writing.

While the question of the origins of still life painting in Europe has generated unending debate, it seems certain that no modern master of Caravaggio's importance had painted an independent still life before him.⁶ Independent still life compositions were exceedingly rare until the end of the sixteenth century, some decades after Netherlandish market and butcher-shop scenes were seen in North Italy and inspired imitations by Jacopo del Ponte and his

⁴ The *Fiscella* was bequeathed by Cardinal Borromeo to the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in a testament codicil of 1607.

⁵ John T. Spike, Review of *La natura morta italiana, 1560-1805* by Luigi Salerno, *Storia dell'arte* 61 (1987): 257.

⁶ Charles Sterling, *Still Life Painting from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century*, trans. James Emmons, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 52-53.

sons in Bassano and Venice and by Vincenzo Campi in Cremona. In Milan and abroad in Prague, Giuseppe Arcimboldo composed allegorical figures consisting of fruits and flowers corresponding to the four seasons or elements, and even made a picture of the comical head of a gardener fashioned out of onions and other humble produce (fig. 4).⁷ These important antecedents struck a chord with the young Caravaggio.

Michelangelo Merisi was born in Milan in 1571, but his parents were natives of Caravaggio, a farming community midway on the road that connects Campi's Cremona with Arcimboldo's Milan. These artists were outstanding masters of the same generation.

Both Campi and Arcimboldo died in the early 1590s. During the 1580s, when Caravaggio was an apprentice in Milan, Arcimboldo was the most celebrated international artist in the city, having returned home from his distinguished service at the imperial court in Prague.

At the end of the sixteenth century, that is, at the end of the Renaissance, the Lombard view of still life painting was that it should offer more than meets the eye and that it should do so in ways that show the artist's ingenuity and education. Vincenzo Campi's pretty *Fruit Seller* (fig. 35) is one of a series of allegories of the four elements—Earth, Air, Water, and Fire—of which Campi made two sets in the 1580s, one at Schloss Kirchheim and the other now in the Brera, Milan. These symbolical compositions are crowded, moreover, with ribald gestures and allusions, as the scholar Barry Wind was the first to point out.⁸ The maid's gesture in *Earth*, in which she holds the bunch of grapes



Arcimboldo | *The Gardener* (fig. 4).

⁷ When turned upside-down, the rustic gardener becomes a still life of vegetables in a bowl.

⁸ Barry Wind, "Vincenzo Campi and Hans Fugger: A Peep at Late Cinquecento Bawdy Humor," *Arte Lombarda* 22 (1977): 108-14.



Galizia | *Peaches in a Pierced White Faience Basket* (fig. 5).

by the stem, is borrowed from an emblem book in which it is explained that it shows the fragility of feminine virtue. In fact, most of the visual jokes are bawdier than this moralizing example.

Fede Galizia was seven years younger than Caravaggio, but she quickly made a success in Milan while Caravaggio was obliged to leave the city in 1591 without having

accomplished much. By the end of the decade, Caravaggio had painted his famous *Basket of Fruit*, and Fede Galizia was doing herself honors with still lifes such as *Peaches in a Pierced White Faience Basket* (fig. 5). The principal element of this painting is a delicate porcelain basket filled to overflowing with red and yellow peaches. That the fruits appear near enough to touch is a *trompe l'oeil* illusion that reveals Galizia's awareness of Arcimboldo.

On the other hand, Galizia never jests. Most of her fruit pieces treat *vanitas* themes. *Peaches in a Pierced White Faience Basket*, perhaps her most famous work, is a dignified allegory of the three ages of man. Every element of this robust and mysteriously illuminated composition combines to make the simple peaches seem larger than life—and more glorious. The peaches in the center are shown at the peak of perfection. They represent maturity. By contrast, the sprig of plums at left is still green while at far right there are two over ripe plums in their old age.

Bellori and earlier sources agree that when Caravaggio came to Rome around 1592, he quickly obtained employment with Cavalier d'Arpino as a specialist in painting still lifes. While an interest in the painting of *cose naturali* (things of nature) was already emerging in Lombardy, from whence Caravaggio came, fruits and flowers had not been featured in Rome since Raphael had made use of the famous Giovanni da Udine to paint festoons and garlands in his frescoes.

It is an open question as to whether Caravaggio's *Basket of Fruit* was commissioned directly by Cardinal Federico Borromeo while he was in Rome (April 1597 to May 1601) or whether he received it as a gift from Cardinal del Monte, in whose palace Caravaggio lived from 1595 to 1600. Longhi praised its "humble biological drama," by which he meant the evocations of mortality in the wormholes and other signs of decay. Actually, we see the same in Fede Galizia's contemporary *Peaches in a Pierced White Faience Basket*. But we now know, through the efforts of many scholars, including Allen Grieco, Adrienne von Lates, and John Varriano, all contributors to the Muscarelle Caravaggio symposium, that there is much more going on in a Caravaggio fruit piece.⁹



Caravaggio | *Basket of Fruit* (fig. 6).

Part of the fascination of the *Fiscella* lies in its stunning originality. For many years, scholars debated whether this unusual composition was possibly a fragment of a larger painting. The cream-colored wall behind the basket and the nondescript ledge on which it sits seems inexplicably plain in comparison to the meticulous fruits. Many have wondered if the background was possibly not original and was only added later. But the *Fiscella* weathered all these challenges. The painting stands as a fascinating unicum of which Borromeo wrote, "I wanted to put another still life next to it, but there were none like it."¹⁰

The still lifes by Arcimboldo and Galizia, as I have already stated, established Milan's preeminent role in the evolution of this new genre. Borromeo also

⁹ Adrienne von Lates, "Caravaggio's Peaches and Academic Puns," *Word and Image* 11 (1995): 55-57; John Varriano, *Caravaggio: The Art of Realism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 26, 41n48 (and earlier bibliography).

¹⁰ *Il Museo del Cardinale Federico Borromeo, arcivescovo di Milano*, trans. Luigi Grasselli (Milan: Umberto Allegretti, 1909), 32-33.



Villa of Poppea | *Basket of Figs* (fig. 7).

played a key role in promoting the genre, in fact, but that's another story. Comparing these works to the *Fiscella*, we can see that they correspond to it in their remarkable illusionism and in the importance given to allegory. Comparison also underscores Caravaggio's major innovation. Although Arcimboldo and Galizia make notable advances over even Campi in the naturalness of the fruits depicted, Caravaggio introduces

a new idea: his fruits and leaves are not merely generic types with added details; rather, they are described so specifically as to seem "portraits" of the plums and figs he bought that morning in the market. Of course, that may only be part of the illusion.

Many questions were cleared up by the realization that the *Basket of Fruit* is *trompe l'oeil*, a kind of archaeological homage to the illusionistic fruit baskets that were among the most common motifs in the frescoes and mosaics in ancient Roman houses. Of the many examples that survive, a recently excavated *Basket of Figs* in the Villa of Poppea in Oplontis near Pompeii comes especially close to the painting (fig. 7). The frescoed basket sits on a fictive shelf viewed from below in perspective. Caravaggio enhanced the *trompe l'oeil* qualities of the simple wall painting by making his fruit appear to project over the front edge of the ledge. He must have appreciated the ancient fresco painter's use of flattened and shaded fig leaves as foils for the roundness of the fruits.

Ancient Roman frescoes are described in Vitruvius and other well-known sources, who refer to them as representations of *xenia*, which were the fruit baskets given as gifts to house guests.¹¹ The idea of painting a modern one for Cardinal Borromeo was ingenious, well worthy of both Cardinal del Monte

¹¹ Vitruvius, *De architectura*, 6.7.4 (cf. Philostratus, *Imagines*, trans. Arthur Fairbanks [London: Heinemann, 1931], 123); Sterling, *Still Life Painting from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century*, 52-53; Spike, *Caravaggio*, 245,n241; Varriano, *Caravaggio*, 26, 41,n48.

and his protégé, Caravaggio. Bellori referred to a carafe of flowers and other independent still lifes by Caravaggio—for example, without figures—as the inspiration for his Roman baroque followers. But the *Ambrosiana Basket of Fruit* was probably not one of the paintings Bellori had in mind, and not merely because it went immediately to Cardinal Federico Borromeo in Milan but also because it was a unique exercise in emulating an antique wall painting.

We have no examples of the still lifes Caravaggio painted for d'Arpino around 1593, two or three years before he painted the *Basket of Fruit*. We know that *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* (Borghese Gallery, Rome) (fig. 25) is one of the pictures that Caravaggio painted for Cavalier d'Arpino because it was still in d'Arpino's possession when his picture collection was confiscated in 1607 by Cardinal Scipione Borghese, although the artist's early biographers do not mention this painting.¹²

The point of decorative pictures is that they are not too deep. Comparing attractive youths to enticing fruits was a theme explored both by Leonardo da Vinci and by the Venetian Renaissance, although usually the subject was a girl. Caravaggio's striking departure, as we have seen, is to paint the portrait not only of the figure, but also of the fruits almost as if they were equivalent. In the Uffizi *Bacchus* (fig. 29), the still life of fruits shows a slightly broader handling, in keeping with Caravaggio's development toward a more tonal style. Like the *Boy with a Basket*, this painting is never mentioned by the early sources. It was rediscovered in the deposits of the Uffizi in 1916 by Roberto Longhi and then debated for several years. We see it as a fine work from Caravaggio's residence with del Monte, probably from around 1597-98.¹³

Through the years, of course, Caravaggio's name was put forward in

¹² *Inventario del sequestro del bene di Cavaliere d'Arpino*, without indication of author, May 4, 1607; see Aldo de Rinaldis, "D'Arpino e Caravaggio," *Bollettino d'Arte* 29 (1936): 110-11; Paola Della Pergola, *Galleria Borghese*, 2 vols. (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1959), 2:75. Despite doubts expressed as recently as 1972, the *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* is generally recognized as an autograph composition that entered the collection of Cardinal Scipione Borghese in 1607 together with the *Young Sick Bacchus* and other works confiscated from the Roman workshop of Cavalier d'Arpino.

¹³ The *Bacchus* is generally believed to have been acquired for Grand Duke Cosimo II by Francesco Guicciardini, Medici ambassador in Rome in 1618.

association with an assortment of Roman still life paintings, many of which became important stations on the road that, in retrospect, ultimately led to our improved understanding of Caravaggio's formative contributions. In 1942, the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, acquired *A Table Laden with Flowers and Fruits* (fig. 36) that was believed to have been painted by Fede Galizia. By now the reader has realized how little scholars knew about Italian still lifes as recently as sixty years ago. Only ten years after the supposed Galizia was purchased by the Wadsworth Atheneum, Charles Sterling astutely pointed out the painting's Roman Caravaggesque qualities.¹⁴ Sterling's observation was by no means obvious. Presumably he had noticed that the overhanging basket on the table edge and the cast shadows in the center of the table were a rough, if almost incompetent, derivation from the still life in Caravaggio's great *Supper at Emmaus* (fig. 38) of 1601 in the National Gallery in London.

Thereafter there were many divergent opinions among scholars, but none as startling as Federico Zeri's announcement in 1976 that the Hartford master was Caravaggio himself.¹⁵ Zeri argued the case with the full force of his personality on the basis of a single circumstantial fact that he had brilliantly deduced from an early document. The Hartford picture and another, similar, still life in the Borghese Gallery, Rome (fig. 37), are apparently described on the list of paintings confiscated in 1607 from Cavalier d'Arpino by Cardinal Scipione Borghese. Neither of the paintings is attributed, but the provenance and date are indubitably significant.

Zeri asserted that the Hartford and Borghese pictures were by the same hand, and indeed in 1983 we were able to prove this by exhibiting the paintings side by side at the National Academy of Design in New York. The Achilles heel in the argument was that the pictures seemed impossibly clumsy to be by Caravaggio. But during Zeri's lifetime few scholars were willing to dispute his

¹⁴ Sterling, *Still Life Painting from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century*, 55.

¹⁵ Federico Zeri, *Diario di lavoro 2* (Turin: Einaudi, 1976), 102.

argument. Eventually, however, as at least twenty-five more canvases by the Master of Hartford came to light, the hypothesis evaporated. The lasting value of Zeri's proposal was to show that Caravaggesque still lifes were being painted in Rome before 1607 and ergo even while Caravaggio was still in the city.

Perhaps the most beautiful of still lifes inspired by Caravaggio is the *Still Life with Fruit and Carafe* (fig. 8), which entered the Kress Collection by 1941 and then entered the National Gallery of Art in Washington. Roberto Longhi never abandoned his proposed attribution of this poetic picture to Caravaggio himself. By 1952, however, once again Charles Sterling had brought clarity, reassigning this still life to a faithful pupil. By 1971, it was recognized that a strikingly similar still life is represented in *The Fruit Vendor* (fig. 9), now at the Detroit Institute of Arts, which was exhibited in Cleveland in 1971 as by the "Pensionante del Saraceni," a Longhi nickname that means "Saraceni's boarder." Since that date, the attribution of the picture to that same artist, evidently a Frenchman influenced by Carlo Saraceni and active in Rome in the 1610s, has been unanimously accepted.



Pensionante del Saraceni | *Still Life with Fruit and a Carafe of White Wine* (fig. 8).



Pensionante del Saraceni | *The Fruit Vendor* (fig. 9).

We turn now to a group of five Caravaggesque still lifes, including Giovanni Battista Verrocchi's *Still Life with Melons, Peaches, and Grapes* (formerly in the



Verrocchi | *Still Life with Melons, Peaches, and Grapes* (fig. 10).

Silvano Lodi Collection, Lugano) that have been repeatedly discussed by scholars since Ferdinando Bologna attributed them to Caravaggio in 1968 (fig. 10). Luigi Salerno and Federico Zeri added to the group; they both regarded these paintings as among the earliest known Roman still lifes, dating from the beginning of the seventeenth century and already showing Caravaggio's influence without being by his own hand.¹⁶ This view

was amply confirmed over time, as it was discovered that these pieces were the sources for a whole Roman workshop of still lifes that repeatedly borrowed motifs from this core group of paintings. In 1983, I published a signed picture that gave us the name of one of the workshop masters, Agostino Verrocchi (or Verrocchius).¹⁷

References to a painter by this name had been found in parish archives in 1973, with a few gaps, from 1619 to 1635.¹⁸ Agostino's older brother, Giovanni Battista Verrocchi lived and worked in the same house until his death in 1626. The birthdates of the Verrocchi brothers, when published in 2005, proved to be the breakthrough discoveries for understanding their respective activities.¹⁹ It had never previously been suspected that Giovanni Battista Verrocchi, the founder of the brothers' workshop, was Caravaggio's close contemporary.

¹⁶ L. Salerno, *La natura morta italiana 1560-1805*, Rome, 1984, pp. 46-47; F. Zeri, *Diario di lavoro* 2, 1976, pp. 102, figs. 100-101.

¹⁷ John T. Spike, *Italian Still Life Paintings from Three Centuries* (New York: National Academy of Design, 1983), 133, signed "AVGVSTINVS VERROCHIVS."

¹⁸ M. Gregori, "Notizie su Agostino Verrocchi e un'ipotesi per Giovan Battista Crescenzi," in *Paragone*, XXIV, 275, 1973, pp. 36-38.

¹⁹ G. Pes, "Nuovi documenti su Agostino Verrocchi e la sua cerchia a Rome," in *Luce e ombra. Caravaggismo e naturalismo nella pittura toscana del Seicento*, Exh cat., Pontedera-Fondazione Piaggio, Pisa 2005, pp. CCLII-CCLVI.

Born in Rome in 1573, Giovanni Battista Verrocchi would have been in a position to witness every phase of Caravaggio's Roman years, 1592 to 1606. Still life specialists Gianluca and Ulisse Bocchi, were the first historians to identify Giovanni Battista Verrocchi as the author of influential pictures such as the *Still Life with Melons, Peaches, and Grapes*, initially assigned to Caravaggio.²⁰ His younger brother Agostino, who was more inclined to sign his paintings, was born in Rome in or around 1586, which means that he would have been a mature painter from 1606 on. These documentary finds thus cleared up confusion caused by the erroneous assumption that the earliest parish record of the Verrocchi from 1619 constituted a kind of milestone in the beginning of Caravaggesque still life painting in Rome, which was already well underway.



Caravaggio | *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (fig. 1).

Shortly after Caravaggio's untimely death in 1610, the Marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani compiled some notes on art. He quoted Caravaggio as having said that "*Tanta manifattura gli era a fare un quadro buono di fiori, come di figure*" ("it was as much work for him to make a good picture of flowers as one of figures").²¹ It was an astonishing affront to the academic point of view. Yet Caravaggio was true to his word: the recently rediscovered *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* is a large, spectacular composition made to hold its own, even on a wall of history paintings.²²

A dating of late 1603 is suggested by the comparable monumentality, drama, and scale of it to the figure paintings of the second Roman decade, for example, the *Sacrifice of Isaac* (fig. 33) in the Uffizi. Its width is identical to the Uffizi

²⁰ Gianluca and Ulisse Bocchi, *Pittori di natura morta a Roma* (Viadana: Casalmaggiore, 2005), 14-16.

²¹ Vincenzo Giustiniani, *Discorsi sulle arti e sui mestieri*, ed. Anna Banti (Florence: Sasoni, 1981), 42.

²² See note 2 above. The painting corresponds to descriptions of a heretofore untraced still life by Caravaggio in the 1671 collection of Cardinal Antonio Barberini in Rome.



Cecco del Caravaggio | *Still Life* (fig.11).

picture, in which Caravaggio employed the same palette of deep green, orange, and red. Cardinal del Monte's circle of Florentines in Rome included Monsignor Maffeo Barberini (the future Pope Urban VIII). In 1603, Barberini paid Caravaggio for three paintings that can be identified in later Barberini inventories with a high degree of certainty. All three were rediscovered in the twentieth century: they were the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge*, the *Sacrifice of Isaac*, which was donated to the Uffizi, and a portrait of Barberini himself.

Other factors demonstrate the composition's early date: one of the most interesting is a still life in a private collection in Germany, which pays it direct homage in a style that suggests it is a nearly contemporary effort by Caravaggio's pupil and model, Cecco del Caravaggio (fig. 11). The picture shows the harsh shadows and stony modeling associated with Cecco. If by him, it would have to be one of his earliest efforts, relatively lacking in finesse. The serpentine bottle gourd has an unmistakable sexual innuendo that confirms our suspicions regarding the influence of the Caravaggio, even if it is but a pale reflection.

The erotic imagery in *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* has been pointed out by other scholars, including in other papers presented at the Caravaggio symposium in November 2006. As it is off my topic, I will not delve into the iconography in this paper, save only to note that the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge*, like the *Ambrosiana Basket of Fruit*, draws on literary texts, and on Caravaggio's characteristic inclination to compete with his most famous predecessors. We can assume that Caravaggio knew by heart Vasari's 1565 life of Giovanni da Udine, the only still life specialist honored with a biography. In it, Vasari gleefully describes an amusing *caprice* painted by Giovanni in the

border of Raphael's frescoes in the *loggia* of Agostino Chigi: "Above the flying Mercury, he simulated a Priapus out of a squash crossed by vines, with two eggplants for testicles; and near to the squash's flower he feigned a bunch of large figs, one of which has opened and inside of which the squash's stem enters."²³ As one who never passed by a challenge, Caravaggio painted his own version of this motif in the left foreground of *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge*.

The long tradition of ribald jokes, comparing fish, fowl, and fruits to parts of the body, was a mainstay of Campi's art, as we have seen, and was contemporaneously developed in Bologna by Bartolomeo Passerotti. Passerotti's *Poultry and Vegetable Vendors* (fig. 12) illustrates popular proverbs of the day. The boy, for example, who is lucky enough to get a hug, recalls two: "*Donna e popone, beato chi se n'appone*" ("Women and melons, lucky is he who leans on one") and "*Chi sa ben trovar meloni, trova buona moglie*" ("He who knows how to choose melons will find a good wife"). And in case we didn't get it, he puts his hand right on top of a plump melon.

Since Passerotti was active in Bologna in the 1580s, one might well ask what his relevance is to Caravaggio's works in Rome twenty years later. In fact, the possibility of a connection is excellent because in 1603, Ciriaco Mattei, one of Caravaggio's major patrons, bought a series of four jocular fish and fruit pieces by Passerotti; indeed Caravaggio was living in the Palazzo Mattei at that time. In the *Fishmongers*, now in the Palazzo Barberini (fig. 13), the haranguing fishwife compares her husband's head to a blowfish, while he looks bemused



Passerotti | *Poultry and Vegetable Vendors* (fig. 12).

²³ Vasari, *Opere*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi, 10 vols. (Florence: Sansoni, 1878-85), 6:142.



Passerotti | *The Fishmonger's Shop* (fig. 13).

at all the pointed fish. The cascade of fish and crustaceans on the stone countertop is remarkably close to the arrangement Caravaggio used in the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge*.

It was Caravaggio's discovery that even the most humble elements in nature could take on the stature of protagonists if raised up to the level of our eyes. It is the point of

view and the portrait-like description of the elements that links the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* with the *Fiscella* in the Ambrosiana, despite the transformation in the artist's technique around 1599, the year he began work on the Contarelli Chapel. Caravaggio's pictures of the 1590s are executed in what is sometimes called his blond style. Relatively small and bright in tonality, even the Uffizi *Bacchus* of 1597-98 is on the earlier side of this divide in comparison to the National Gallery *Supper at Emmaus* of 1601 or the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* of 1603. Caravaggio's Roman palette, from 1602 to 1605, is dominated by a remarkably limited range of colors, mainly scarlet, yellow, and two or three tones of brown and tan. This point can be seen if one compares three paintings of similar composition, monumentality, and color scheme: the *Crowning with Thorns* (fig. 34), *Sacrifice of Isaac*, and *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge*. As incredible as it seems, the *Crowning of Thorns* in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, which was once in the house of Caravaggio's great collector, was long doubted as a work by Caravaggio. It was still a question mark for many scholars when I was a student in the 1970s.

One of the first artists to grasp the significance of Caravaggio's innovation in the realm of still lifes was a visiting foreigner, Frans Snyders, who came to Rome and Milan and stayed for at least a year around 1605. Snyders came highly recommended from Flanders and would have had entry to see Caravaggio's

originals and those of his followers in private collections. Snyder's typical arrangement of fruit in a basket set down on a table or ledge was directly inspired by the Barberini *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge*.

"If music be the food of love, play on!" Duke Orsino's exhortation to his musicians was already a cliché when Shakespeare wrote it and when del Monte asked Caravaggio to paint it. Classical literature is filled with stories of persons enchanted and enamored by the strains of music. The four madrigals in the open music book in the *Lute Player* (ca. 1596) (fig. 43) are love songs, madrigals, that Caravaggio painstakingly transcribed from four different pages of Arcadelt's *Libro primo a quattro voci*, published by Antonio Gardano in Venice in 1539. The theme struck a chord, if you will, among Caravaggio's followers, and by 1615 we have a documented case of Bartolomeo Cavarozzi's *Lament for Aminta*, being sold as an original Caravaggio to the unsuspecting Spanish viceroy of the *Two Sicilies*. It shows two shepherds, who look more like studio models to tell the truth, in mourning for their lost love (fig. 14). The musical instruments and riped fruits are given leading parts in the composition.



Cavarozzi | *Lament for Aminta* (fig. 14).

By the early 1620s, young Michelangelo Cerquozzi (1602-1660), who had been in the Verrocchi workshop, had emerged as the protagonist of the second generation of Roman still lifes. Although his style is considered an outgrowth of Caravaggism, Cerquozzi's prolific career marks the transition from the thematic and literary inspirations of Caravaggio and his followers to the purely decorative interests of the baroque (apart from *vanitas* exceptions). In Cerquozzi's still lifes (fig. 15), the fruits are lifelike but at the same time general types—they no longer seem as individual as the basket brought home that day from the market. Caravaggio's prototype, which was evidently on view in the Barberini collection, looks distinctly controlled and Renaissance by comparison (fig. 1).



Cerquozzi | *Still Life with Fruit* (fig. 15).



Campidoglio | *Still Life with Fruit* (fig. 16).

Cerquozzi was quickly succeeded, and his reputation challenged by more flamboyant decorators, especially the short-lived, but influential Michele Pace del Campidoglio (1625-1669), who arranged his luscious fruits in colorful cascades (fig. 16). Campidoglio's compositions were imitated, sometimes even copied by Abraham Brueghel, who came from Flanders to Rome in the 1660s. Together they led the way into the second half of the seventeenth century, practicing in Rome, then Naples, as Bellori put it, "the beautiful style that we enjoy today," which, as we have seen, was yet another legacy of Michelangelo Merisi, called Caravaggio.



THE FINAL INSULT: CARAVAGGIO, BAGLIONE, AND
STILL LIFE ON A STONE LEDGE

JOHN L. VARRIANO

Until today, Caravaggio's *Still Life on a Stone Ledge* (fig. 1) has not received the attention it deserves from scholars and curators alike. It is to the credit of Aaron De Groft, the enlightened director of the Muscarelle Museum, as well as to Miles Chappell, professor emeritus at The College of William & Mary, that this remarkable painting was finally afforded proper illumination on the stage of the 2006 symposium at the Muscarelle. I'm delighted to join the conversation and share a few of my thoughts and speculations regarding the picture's genesis and meaning.

Attributions of portable works of art like this are usually made on the basis of two independent but overlapping intuitions, the first involving *concept* and the other *execution*. The concept consists of the choice of subject and the artist's interpretation of it; the execution has to do with the formal and stylistic expression, as well as the facture or technique, with which the paint was applied to the canvas. My essay focuses on the conceptual basis of the *Still Life on a Stone Ledge* and suggests why I believe that that conception not only supports the attribution to Caravaggio but actually reveals the underlying motive behind its creation.

We know that Caravaggio painted still lifes early in his career. His biographer G. P. Bellori reports that soon after arriving in Rome in 1592, "he painted flowers and fruit, which he imitated so well that from then on they began to attain the great beauty that we love today. He painted a vase of flowers with the transparencies of the water and the glass and the reflections of the window in the room, rendering flowers sprinkled with the freshest dewdrops; and he painted other excellent pictures of similar imitations."¹ Moreover, in a famous letter written by one of his most important patrons, the Marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani, Caravaggio is even quoted as saying that "it was as difficult to make a good painting of flowers as one of figures," a remark suggesting that the artist made no great distinction between the two.²

¹ Quoted in Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press), 361.

² Vincenzo Giustiniani, *Discorsi sulle arti e sui mestieri*, ed. Anna Banti (Florence: Sasoni, 1981), 42.



Caravaggio | *Basket of Fruit* (fig. 6).

Still lifes appear on a table in several of Caravaggio's figure paintings like the *Uffizi Bacchus* (fig. 29) and the *Hermitage Lute Player* (fig. 43), but only one independent still life is universally accepted by scholars today. That, of course, is the *Basket of Fruit* (fig. 6) in the Ambrosiana in Milan. Occasionally other paintings of fruit or flowers have been attributed to him, but none has the expressive power of the *Still Life on a Stone Ledge*, and the provenance, if indeed, as John Spike suggests, this is the painting cited in the inventories of Cardinal Antonio Barberini in 1671 and 1672. To proclaim this as an autograph work by Caravaggio is thus to add a significant addition to his canon.

Like the *Ambrosiana Basket of Fruit*, I believe the *Still Life on a Stone Ledge* is a polemical work. But how, you might ask, could a picture as decorous as the *Basket of Fruit* be polemical? Given Caravaggio's known sympathy for the traditional hierarchies of painting, how could it not be? Unlike some of his contemporaries and followers, Caravaggio moved warily through the new secular iconography. He painted no bearded ladies, no likenesses of his dog, no scenes of street life, no landscapes, and few—precious few—memorable portraits. Yet his *Basket of Fruit* is intensely naturalistic, the fruit itself blemished, bruised, and beset with insect predations. Moreover, the “low” status afforded still life painting in general seemingly sinks even lower when one considers how closely the work resembles the workmanlike renderings of contemporary scientific illustrators like Jacopo Ligozzi. As Eugenio Battisti pointed out years ago, Ligozzi's drawing of a *Ficus carica*, or common Mediterranean fig, offered a model of empirical observation that Caravaggio may have found irresistible.³ Despite the differences in format, Ligozzi's watercolor and Caravaggio's painting are roughly similar in size, each measuring approximately 20 x 30 inches. For a work on paper (or parchment?), the Ligozzi is therefore quite large, while the *Basket of Fruit* is by far Caravaggio's smallest painting. The *Basket* is also the only picture Caravaggio ever painted with so light a background, a fact in itself suggesting a certain affinity for graphic works like the Ligozzi.



Detail: Caravaggio | *Basket of Fruit* (cf. fig. 6).

Nevertheless, I am convinced that Caravaggio deliberately sought to forestall criticism of the *Basket of Fruit*, cleverly invoking an art historical tradition of which his literal-minded critics were seemingly unaware in order to subvert both its nominal realism and its “low” subject matter. To justify his effort, I believe Caravaggio looked to the ancient world and to verbal rather than visual precedents.

³ Eugenio Battisti, *L'antinascimento* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1962), 269ff.

One of the *topoi* of aesthetic criticism in antiquity was the power of certain realistic images, and still life in particular, to fool the eye into confusing art with life. A variety of amusing anecdotes are offered by Pliny, Lucian, Philostratus, and others as proof of this phenomenon. The most common tale is that of an animal confused by a painted image. The urtext of the genre is the story told in Pliny's *Natural History* of the Greek painter Zeuxis who painted grapes so lifelike that birds flew up to peck at them. Pliny was well known during the Renaissance, and according to both Dolce and Lomazzo, the Zeuxis tale was "known even by young children."⁴

While Caravaggio may have seen an ancient representation of such things, it is more likely that his source for the *Basket of Fruit* was an ekphrastic verse in Philostratus's *Imagines*, a volume reprinted no fewer than five times in the course of the sixteenth century. One still life in particular, a picture the author claims to have seen in a villa outside Naples, resonates in the Caravaggio:

Here are gifts of the cherry tree, here is fruit in clusters heaped in a basket, and the basket is woven . . . from branches of the plant itself. And . . . look at the vinesprays woven together and at the clusters hanging from them and how the grapes stand out one by one. . . . You would say that even the grapes in the painting are good to eat and full of winey juice. See too the pears on pears, apples on apples . . . all fragrant and golden. You will say their redness has not been put on from outside, but has bloomed from within.⁵

Caravaggio's *Basket of Fruit* required a mimetic exercise of the kind he liked best, but the authority of the classical past stood behind him, bracing his confidence as he elevated his lowly subject to the higher realms of Art. He could have been merely testing his skills against those of his ancient forebearers or teasing his critics with reminders that the seemingly mindless realism they accused him of promoting had a classical pedigree after all, but either way I

⁴ Lodovico Dolce, *Dialogue on Painting*, reprinted in M.W. Roskill, Dolce's "Aretino" and Venetian Theory of the Cinquecento, 151 (cited by Orr, "Classical Elements," 126); E.H. Gombrich, "Dark Varnishes," 52 (cited by Orr, "Classical Elements," 126).

⁵ Philostratus, *Imagines*, trans. Arthur Fairbanks (London: Heinemann, 1931), 123-25.

believe Caravaggio fashioned the *Basket of Fruit* as a manifesto of his pictorial ideals and a reification of that remark he supposedly made to Giustiniani that “it was as difficult to make a good painting of flowers as of figures.”

It is unlikely that the *Still Life on a Stone Ledge* was made around the same time as the *Basket of Fruit*, that is, the years around 1595-1600. Compared to that of the latter, the composition of the former is more complex, the lighting more dramatic, and the energy level more like that of narrative paintings such as *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (fig. 17), the *Madonna di Loreto*, and the *Deposition of Christ* (fig. 18), all of which have similar criss-crossing diagonals and are viewed from close perspectives. In his *FMR* article of 1995, John Spike dated the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* to the years 1604-5 but revised the dating to late 1603 in his subsequent monograph on Caravaggio.⁶

My interpretation of the iconology of the picture turns on its having been painted in late 1603. I say iconology and not iconography, following Panofsky in distinguishing between the two, iconography being concerned with conventional symbolism—like a beautiful



Caravaggio | *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (fig. 17).



Caravaggio | *Deposition of Christ (Entombment)* (fig. 18).

⁶ John T. Spike, “Caravaggio Erotico,” *FMR* 75 (1995); John T. Spike, *Caravaggio* (New York: Abbeville, 2001).

young woman holding a sword over the head of a sleeping man signifying Judith and Holofernes—and iconology, which in his words is the study of “those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion—unconsciously qualified by one personality and condensed into one work.”⁷

The summer of 1603 was a troublesome time for Caravaggio. In August he had to appear in court to defend himself against libel charges brought by his fellow painter and eventual biographer, Giovanni Baglione. Baglione accused Caravaggio and some of his cohorts of writing slanderous poems that defamed his reputation. Honor meant everything at the time, and elaborate rituals were enacted to avenge real or imagined slights against one’s character. The Roman police archives are full of detailed accounts of window stonings, door foulings, and every manner of verbal and physical abuse. Matters had gotten so out of hand that in the year 1600 a papal edict was issued targeting those who “sought to detract from the fame and honor of others.”⁸ In recent years a considerable literature has arisen on the subject of what one scholar has called “the lay liturgy of affront.”⁹ And as most readers are probably aware, Caravaggio was the poster boy for bad behavior during the years he spent in Rome between 1592 and 1606. His rap sheet begins with assault charges in 1597 and runs with recidivist regularity through a series of weapons violations and physical altercations that culminate with his murder of Ranuccio Tomassoni (after a disputed tennis match) on May 28, 1606, the event that triggered his hasty departure from Rome, as he sought to escape the *bando capitale*, or death sentence, that had been placed on his head.

For some time bad blood had been simmering between Caravaggio and Baglione. According to a witness at the trial, the discord had begun a year earlier when Baglione had painted a picture of *Divine Love* (fig. 39) “in

⁷ Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 7.

⁸ Bassani and Bellini, *Caravaggio assassino*, 95n.4.

⁹ Thomas Cohen, “The Lay Liturgy of Affront in Sixteenth-Century Italy,” *Journal of Social History* 25 (1991-92): 857-77.

competition with the *Earthly Love of Caravaggio*".¹⁰ In the autobiography that concludes his own biographies, Baglione informs us that he made not one but two versions of the subject for Cardinal Giustiniani, the brother of the man (Vincenzo) who owned the Caravaggio. Baglione then goes on to identify the figures as "Divine Love who has under his feet Profane Love, the World, the Devil, and the Flesh."¹¹ A few years ago, the German scholar Herwarth Röttgen made the intriguing proposal that the figure of the devil in the second version was modeled after the likeness of Caravaggio himself, the most telling evidence being the remarkable similarity between Baglione's depiction and Caravaggio's *Young Sick Bacchus* (fig. 24), known, again from Baglione's biography of Caravaggio, as a self-portrait of his despised rival.¹²

Divine love seems to be interrupting something in Baglione's picture, and we might well ask what the satanic Caravaggio and the recumbent boy been up to. Since the boy resembles the ephobic youth in Caravaggio's own *Victorious Love* (fig. 40), we may assume a relationship between the two. In 1989 a rediscovered travel account written by a visiting Englishman, Richard Symonds, provided the boy's name and told us something about him. Symonds saw the *Victorious Love* in the Giustiniani collection in 1649-51 and noted in his journal that "Checco da Caravaggio . . . twas his boy" and "twas the body and face of his owne boy or servant that laid with him."¹³ Subsequently the Italian scholar Gianni Papi identified "Checco" with the younger Caravaggesque painter Francesco Buoneri, long known simply as Cecco del Caravaggio.¹⁴ Caravaggio's personal and professional relationship with the young man, as reported by Symonds and elaborated on by Papi, is corroborated in the *Stato delle Anime* (Easter) census of 1605, which records the artist living in an apartment in the Campo Marzio with a boy named Francesco.

10 Gian A. Dell'Acqua and Mina Cinotti, *Il Caravaggio e le sue grandi opere da San Luigi dei Francesi* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1971), 155.

11 Giovanni Baglione, *Le vite de' pittore, scultori, et architetti* (Rome, 1649).

12 Herwarth Röttgen, *Il Caravaggio: Ricerche e interpretazioni* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1974): 183-190.

13 Gianni Papi, *Cecco del Caravaggio* (Florence: Opus Libri, 1992), 13.

14 Papi, *Cecco del Caravaggio*, 14.

The key phrase in Symonds's account is that Cecco was Caravaggio's "owne boy or servant that laid with him." Taking the word laid to have meant then what it does now, Röttgen went on to interpret Baglione's *Divine Love* as "a personal denunciation, moral and criminal, against the sodomitical relationship between Caravaggio and Cecco."¹⁵

The next year, 1603, Caravaggio and his friends Onorio Longhi, Orazio Gentileschi, and Filippo Trisegno penned the pair of verses that led to the libel suit. Both poems indulge in sexual insults, rhyming the name Baglione with *coglioni* (testicles) and calling him a useless prick and a cuckold. The trial seems to have ended without reaching a conclusion, and only on September 25 was Caravaggio released from the Tor di Nona prison after spending nearly a month in confinement. His release, which was guaranteed by the French ambassador Philippe de Béthune was not unconditional, however. He was not allowed to leave his house without written permission and was enjoined from further offense against Baglione, "either in life or honor."

If it is true that Baglione's painting of *Divine Love* initiated the exchange of sexual barbs with what, in Röttgen's words, was "an unequivocal invective against Caravaggio accusing him of sodomy," what better way would there have been for Caravaggio to retaliate once he had been released from prison than with an insulting painting of his own?¹⁶ It is my conjecture that the *Still Life on a Stone Ledge* was intended to do just that.

Adrienne von Lates has written a brilliant article on the nature of the puerile verbal and visual puns that proliferated in sixteenth-century Rome. Renaissance "learned erotica," as opposed to popular pornography, was steeped in metaphors, allusions, and elaborate rhetorical devices.¹⁷ The allusions to sex

¹⁵ Röttgen, Herwarth. "Quel diavolo è Caravaggio. Giovanni Baglione e la sua denuncia satirica dell'Amore terrano," *Storia dell'Arte*, 79 (1993): 326ff.

¹⁶ Röttgen, *Quel diavolo è Caravaggio*, 326ff.

¹⁷ Adrienne von Lates, "Caravaggio's Peaches and Academic Puns," *Word and Image* 11 (1995): 55-60.

via food, and especially fruits and vegetables, was particularly widespread. The humor was usually fairly crude, with peaches, figs, melons, and squash being perennial favorites. Take the peach, for example. The first English-Italian dictionary (published in 1598) defined *pesca* “a young man’s bum” and *dare le pesche* as “to give one’s taile, to consent to buggerie.” The sixteenth-century fascination with the penis occasionally expressed itself directly in numerous portraits of “dickheads” (fig. 19) and with particularly explicit homoeroticism in a little treatise by Antonio Vignali entitled *La Cazzaria*; or, *The Book of the Prick*.



Emblem from *La Cazzaria* (fig. 19).

The humorous potential of fruit and vegetables was further grounded in the popular belief that the shapes of certain plants were inherently anthropomorphic. This notion, the so-called doctrine of signatures, had been invoked for centuries by herbalists searching for signs of the efficacy of God’s creations. The idea gained currency in 1588 with the publication of Giambattista della Porta’s *Phytognomica*, a semi-scientific volume with illustrations that compared various botanical species with human organs. Together, wit and pseudoscience sustained the metaphorical play of food and sex for nearly a century, beginning in the high Renaissance and ending in the early years of the seventeenth century. In papal Rome, demographically the most male of European cities, sexual puns were more widespread than anywhere else.



Raphael | Mercury from the *Loggia di Psyche* (fig. 20).



Detail: Raphael | *Mercury* from the *Loggia di Psyche* (cf. fig. 20).

In the visual arts, the first painted still life to carry an erotic charge seems to have originated within the circle of Raphael. Garlands of fruit and flowers abound in the decorative surrounds of frescoes in the *Loggia di Psyche* (fig. 20) in the former Villa Chigi (now Farnesina) painted in 1517-18. Framing Raphael's narrative scenes of classical deities is Giovanni da Udine's suggestive depiction of fruit and vegetables, which embellishes the iconography with a coarse and lusty wit. Half a century later, the biographer Giorgio Vasari acknowledged the conceit in his life of the artist, observing that "above the flying figure of Mercury, he fashioned a Priapus from a gourd and two eggplants for testicles . . . while nearby he painted a cluster of large figs, one of which, overripe and bursting open, is penetrated by the gourd." "But why say more," Vasari concludes, his distain apparent for what by the middle of the century had become a popular comic genre.¹⁸

¹⁸ Vasari, *Opere*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi, 10 vols. (Florence: Sansoni, 1878-85), 6:142.

Caravaggio partook of the game early in his career—and that is the subject of Adrienne Von Lates’s contribution to this volume—but if I am not mistaken, the *Still Life on a Stone Ledge* is the first erotic still life to stand alone, its imagery no longer confined to the margins or overshadowed by the human presence. Most still lifes of this period are, by nature, fairly reticent, but the composition here is as dramatic and aggressive as any of Caravaggio’s altarpieces. Nearly every piece of fruit suggests sexual tumescence or receptiveness to penetration. In this group encounter, rapture and rapaciousness know no boundaries. Once one notices the stem of the central melon aimed toward a burst fig and the two meaty bottle gourds lying languidly over a pair of freshly sliced melons, is any other reading possible?



Manfredi | *Faun Gesturing with a Basket of Fruit* - “giving the fig” (fig. 21).

Fulfilling, as it were, the erotic promise invested in figural compositions like the *Young Sick Bacchus* and the *Victorious Love*, Caravaggio may here—and here alone—have given vent to the ambivalence of his own sexual preferences. Just as the phallic stems and gourds seem somewhat aimlessly pointed, the cleft peaches that surmount the basket are every bit as enticing as the vulvar figs, melons, and pomegranates strewn beneath them. If, as I am suggesting, the iconology of the picture is steeped in a verbal and inter pictorial exchange with Giovanni Baglione, its intended meaning was then to “give the fig”—a euphemism for an obscene gesture first found in Dante—to the adversary he had been enjoined by the court from verbally or physically attacking (fig. 21).

The picture is certainly not typical of the work Caravaggio painted either before or after he received his first public commission in 1599 in the Contarelli Chapel—and that fact, more than anything, may make some viewers feel



Detail: Cecco del Caravaggio | *Cupid at the Fountain* (fig. 22).



Detail: Caravaggio | *Saint John the Baptist Drinking at the Fountain* (fig. 23).

a little diffident about the attribution, but to my mind the intelligence and mordant wit of the conceit point to no other artist as clearly as it does to him. It is fascinating to contemplate Caravaggio creating a still life so late in his career expressly in order to redress a personal grievance. Yet as I have argued elsewhere, Caravaggio seems to have been more disposed to paint for himself than for anyone else.¹⁹ For me, that is the only conclusion to draw from the frequency with which he immersed himself in his own paintings—which are rife with self-portraits and portrayals of his friends—and the extent to which in his public works he ignored his patrons' contracts only to have his efforts be repeatedly rejected.

I would like to conclude with a postscript of sorts. Years after Caravaggio left Rome, his young friend Cecco emerged as an artist of recognized success. In an undated painting unfortunately now lost, Cecco painted a tribute to his master, *Cupid at the Fountain* (fig. 22), that offers a witty riposte to Caravaggio's own *Victorious Love*. The composition is a *trompe l'oeil* with an illusionistic canvas appearing as if it were leaning against the wall. The painted drapery may allude to the real drapery that according to one early commentator covered the Caravaggio in Giustiniani's gallery. The winged Cupid, in turn, also resembles the young man—Cecco himself—in *Victorious Love*. His pose, however, is derived from another Caravaggio, a small painting of Saint John the Baptist in which a similarly posed youth drinks from a sourceless spring (fig. 23). Cecco's picture, by contrast, has Cupid, not Saint John, kneeling in a buttocks-

¹⁹ Varriano, *Caravaggio: The Art of Realism*, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

bearing pose with his mouth eagerly drawn to a prominent cylindrical waterspout. The waterspout could hardly be more phallic and the allusion to oral intercourse more obvious. Gianni Papi is surely correct when he signals the “homoerotic context” of the picture’s creation.²⁰

In my view, the *Still Life on a Stone Ledge* was produced in a sexually libertine culture that prized bawdy puns while at the same time adhered to the strictest honor codes when it came to defending one’s personal and profession reputation. Once the mutual distaste Baglione and Caravaggio held for one another had reached a stalemate in the courtroom, and the authorities had been alerted to be guard for further provocations from Caravaggio, what would have been more natural than for him to turn from the verbal to the visual in seeking redress? Just as Baglione may have initiated the feud with his painting of *Divine Love*, I believe Caravaggio brought closure to it with this canvas.

In the end, I am reminded of the legendary remark attributed to Annibale Carracci in which he admonishes his brother Agostino with the gibe “*Noi altri dipintori habbiamo da parlare con le mani*” (“We painters have to do our talking with our hands”).²¹



Caravaggio | *Saint John the Baptist Drinking at the Fountain* (fig. 23).

²⁰ Papi, *Cecco del Caravaggio*.

²¹ Agucchi’s version is transcribed by Mahon, *Studies in Seicento Art and Theory*, 254; Bellori’s in *The Lives of Annibale and Agostino Carracci*, 16, and Malvasia’s in Anne Summerscale, Malvasia’s



Cecco del Caravaggio | *Cupid at the Fountain* (fig. 22).



CARAVAGGIO IN THE GARDEN OF PRIAPUS
THE ACADEMIC, SEMIOTIC, AND POETIC CONTEXTS
OF *STILL LIFE WITH FRUIT ON A STONE LEDGE*

ADRIENNE VON LATES

What makes Caravaggio's *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (fig. 1) stand out among other examples of the nascent genre of *natura morta* produced in Italy between 1590 and 1620 is its rollicking theatricality.¹ The eye is immediately drawn to a pair of outrageous bottle gourds, the presence of which disrupts the “decorum” of the display. One gourd defies gravity as it leaps up to nudge a melon, while the other advances forward to confront the viewer. In his novelistic account of Caravaggio's life, Peter Robb characterizes this painting as “a tumultuously physical free-for-all of vegetable love.” It is obvious to the modern observer that the artist has exploited the physical resemblance between produce and intimate body parts. Robb goes so far as to declare that one of the gourds is “unmistakably the head of an engorged penis.”²



Caravaggio | *Young Sick Bacchus* (fig. 24).

That Caravaggio's titillating depiction of thrusting gourds, bursting melons, juicy figs, and other ripe fruit celebrates the sexual potency of nature has been asserted by John Spike and John Varriano, both of whom cite my study of a provocatively posed pair of peaches in Caravaggio's so-called *Young Sick Bacchus* (fig. 24).³ One of the aims of this essay is to illustrate how the array

¹ Regarding the method of theatrical presentation in Caravaggio's paintings see Stephan Bann, *The True Vine, Visual Representation and the Visual Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 68-101.

² Peter Robb, *M: The Man Who Became Caravaggio* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998), 321.

³ John T. Spike, “Caravaggio Erotico,” *FMR* 75 (1995): 14-22; John T. Spike, *Caravaggio* (New York: Abbeville, 2001), 143-46; John Varriano, “Fruits and Vegetables as Sexual Metaphors in Late Renaissance Rome,” *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture* 3 (2005): 75-80; John Varriano, *Caravaggio: The Art of Realism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 69-70; Adrienne von Lates, “Caravaggio's Peaches and Academic Puns,” *Word and Image* 11 (1995): 55-60.

of verbal and visual puns in the still life painting reference a form of burlesque poetry that was performed during Carnival, the holiday associated with sexual liberation and cultural inversion in the early modern period in Europe. This depiction of *cose naturale* is one among a group of what I call “banquet paintings” produced by Caravaggio between 1592 and 1603. These works depict Bacchus, sensual young men with fruit, dreamy musicians, and boys being cheated by gypsy fortune tellers and cardsharps. Despite the variety of subjects, these scenes have a common “season” of inspiration, because the same themes were explored in the course of Carnival celebrations and festival banquets. At these events musical, theatrical, and poetic entertainments were organized by male sodalities, known as academies, devoted to the pleasurable study of the arts.⁴ In *A Feast of Words: Banquets and Table Talk in the Renaissance*, Michel Jeanneret surveys the plethora of books that were written on the topic of banquets, alimentary metaphors, and exuberant language from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries. For example, Erasmus includes six dialogues on feasts, known as *convivia*, in his collection of *Colloquies*. At least one of these meals, the “Poetic Feast,” emphasizes bawdy wordplay. After dining, the guests at the poetic feast venture out into the host’s garden to pick fruit and proceed to recite improvised sonnets in praise of the produce, with the aim of presenting a parody of learned discourse.⁵ Inspired by ancient and modern texts, such as Plato’s *Symposium*, Plutarch’s *Table Talk*, and Stefano Guazzo’s *La civil conversazione* (1574), some academies went to extravagant lengths to decorate their banquet hall with paintings, tableaux, and statues made out of marzipan and pastry that illustrated the themes of the event’s program of dining and debate.⁶

⁴ Caravaggio’s visual wit is the topic of a forthcoming book by this author.

⁵ Michel Jeanneret, *A Feast of Words*, trans. Jeremy Whiteley and Emma Hughes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 176-185. For the *Convivium poeticum*, see Erasmus, *Colloquia*, in *Opera omnia*, 2 vols. (Basel, 1576), 597.

⁶ For a description of the elaborate preparations undertaken for four days of feasting and entertainment hosted by the *Accademia de’ Filomati* during the Carnival season of 1604, see François Quiviger, “A Spartan Banquet in Siena,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 54 (1991): 206-25; François Quiviger, “The Presence of Artists in Literary Academies,” in *Italian Academies of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. David S. Chambers and François Quiviger (London: Warburg Institute, 1995), 104-12.

John Spike's suggestion that the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* dates from 1603, which I accept, establishes a time frame for the production of this painting that may give us a better idea of its original function and significance. I intend to establish the context for this lusty display of fruits and vegetables within the social milieu of two Roman academies that were newly established in 1603. One group, the *Accademia degli Umoristi*, was a literary association founded by a group of young men who presented a program of burlesque entertainment for a wedding that was celebrated during Carnival. The other group, the *Accademia dei Lincei*, sought to uncover the mysteries of reproduction by examining the sexual organs of plant life. Over time the membership of these two groups overlapped, as did some of their interests.

Many people associated with Caravaggio were academicians or friends of the ringleaders of these organizations. John Spike suggests that Cardinal Maffeo Barberini was the first owner of Caravaggio's painting. The future Pope Urban VIII, Barberini was a serious poet and a leading member of the *Umoristi*. Cardinal Del Monte was an exceptionally enthusiastic participant in humanist academies and, as a promoter of Caravaggio's career, may have advised the painter on how he might gain attention by producing such a witty composition. Filippo Colonna, who was the founding *principe*, or "prince," of the *Umoristi*, played a role in giving Caravaggio asylum after the painter killed Ranuccio Tomassoni in self-defense in 1606.

The favorite topics of discussion among the *Umoristi* and the *Lincei* illustrate the chief obsessions of many early modern humanists—etymology and the classification of the objects of the natural world, marked by a study of Latin and vernacular texts. There was a hybrid quality to their course of study. The *Umoristi* analyzed Pliny's *Natural History* to learn about the classical tradition of ekphrasis, whereas the *Lincei* proffered hundreds of side comments on the virtues of their acute brotherhood of naturalists via an annotated translation

of Latin satires by Persius.⁷ The *Umoristi* even had a quasi-scientific reason for choosing a rain cloud as the group's emblem—namely, that it illustrated the processes of evaporation and distillation, hence visualizing the method of refining one's ideas.⁸

It is important to note that in 1603 Caravaggio got into big trouble over some scandalous poetry. In September of that year he was arrested and had to defend himself in court over a libel suit filed by the painter Giovanni Baglione against him and three other artists. One of the codefendants, Onorio Longhi, was a member of *Accademia degli Umoristi*. The judge attempted to determine whether Caravaggio or his friends were the authors of two scurrilous sonnets that crudely attacked the talent and manhood of Baglione and his associate Mao Salini. The punning poets rhymed the name Baglione with *coglioni* (testicles). The authorities were never able to lay the blame on anyone, or perhaps Caravaggio's influential patrons persuaded the court to look the other way. In any case, when Caravaggio was released from jail on September 25, he had to agree to house arrest. John Spike and John Varriano argue that Caravaggio made the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* during this period of confinement.⁹

⁷ For a characterization of the *Umoristi* and the *Lincei* in Rome during Caravaggio's era, see Ricardo Bassani and Fiora Bellini, *Caravaggio Assassino* (Rome: Donzelli, 1994), 169-72. For a discussion of the activities of the poets, see Helen Langdon, *Caravaggio: A Life* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1998), 191-221. David Freedberg describes Francesco Stelluti's translation of Persius into Tuscan blank verse in *The Eye of the Lynx: Galileo, His Friends, and the Beginnings of Modern Natural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 18.

⁸ For an illustration of the emblem, see *Italian Academies of the Sixteenth Century*, fig.10. For the early history of the academy, see Piera Russo, "L'accademia degli *Umoristi*, fondazione, strutture e leggi: Il primo decennio di attività," *Esperienze letterarie* 4 (1979): 58ff.; Laura A. Lemanno, "L'Accademia degli *Umoristi*," *Roma moderna e contemporanea* 3 (1995): 97-120.

⁹ Spike, *Caravaggio*, 143ff.; The original court documents have been transcribed by Gian Alberto Dell'Acqua and Mia Cinotti in *Il Caravaggio e le sue grandi opere da San Luigi dei Francesi*, (Milan: Rizzoli, 1971), 153-57; for a vivid translation of the libelous sonnets and an analysis of Caravaggio's relationship with contemporary poets, see Anthony Colantuono, "Caravaggio's Literary Culture," in *Caravaggio: Realism, Rebellion, Reception*, ed. Genevieve Warwick (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2006), 57-68.

It is my opinion that Caravaggio's painting makes a variety of points; it can be interpreted as commemorative, emblematic, polemical, and satirical in nature. Like the basket of mixed fruit depicted on the left side of the canvas, this painting is a miscellaneous collection of verbal and visual quotations. In fact, a *πάγκαρπον*, or "basket of fruit," is a term that Pliny uses in the preface of his book on natural history to describe the miscellany, or mixture, of literary genres, languages, and topics that are combined in his rambling text.¹⁰ The word "miscellany" derives from the Greek word for "garland," which was the title of the earliest surviving literary anthology by Meleager of Gadera. Meleager's *Garland* became the seed that grew into the *Greek Anthology*, a popular collection of epigrams, some of which were descriptions of votive fruit offerings to Priapus, the god of agricultural fertility.¹¹ Another literary miscellany that would have been well known to Caravaggio's audience is Anton Francesco Doni's *La zucca* (*The Gourd*) dating from 1551, which I describe below in a survey of gourd lore in literature. The very notion of banquet conversation emphasizes miscellany. Discerning hosts sought to promote the proper mixture of table talk ranging from the absurd to the profound. Ultimately, this "monumental" still life celebrates an important year in Rome, when agile young minds made a public commitment to pursue their passions with the aim of ushering in a new golden age for Counter-Reformation culture.

The Lure of the Academy

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries more than four hundred so-called humanist academies are known to have been formed in towns throughout the Italian peninsula. They were an alternative to university and courtly forums, and their adherents were students, professors, noblemen, members of the

¹⁰ Emily Gowers, *The Loaded Table: Representation of Food in Roman Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 111n9.

¹¹ *The Greek Anthology*, trans. W. R. Patton (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916). The Elizabethan linguist John Florio defined the Italian word *miscellióni* as "such as hold no certain opinion but are of divers and mixt judgements." See his *Queen Anna's New World of Words; or, Dictionarie of the Italian and English Tongues* (London, 1611), 316.

merchant and professional classes, artists, musicians, and clergymen. By the 1530s the poet Pietro Aretino quipped to Duke Federico Gonzaga that he was surprised that an academy dedicated to the exchanging of the latest jokes had not been founded in Mantua as in so many other places.¹²

An academy, very broadly speaking, was a secular men's club that met regularly at the home of its chief sponsor. Some academies were formed for the express purpose of sponsoring festival plays and banquets; others were short lived or had only a few members. In Florence, the *Umidi* began as a circle of friends who met to study Dante, Petrarch, and Carnival verse, but the group was eventually co-opted by the Medici and turned into the government-sponsored *Accademia Fiorentina*, thus becoming a platform for Florentine propaganda. In the 1580s a dissident academy was formed and dubbed the *Accademia della Crusca* (Bran Academy). Its founders declared that they aimed to study only the hilarious forms of literature. The earliest Crusicans were famous for demonstrating their wild sense of humor during improvised banquet speeches, called *cruscate*, that exploited the puns suggested by the food at the table.

In general, the academy had a social purpose as a venue for festival celebration and fellowship, but it was also a "world" apart from mundane existence, where the sensuous realm of Arcadia or Parnassus could be conjured up in an antique-strewn garden, villa, or private study. In these places an atmosphere of escapism and nostalgia could be cultivated, tinged with skepticism and an ironic attitude toward authority. Many academies strove to replace boring pedantry with light-hearted fun and games. But there were always rules, a

¹² See Scipione Bargagli, *Discorso delle lodi dell'academie* (Florence, 1569), repr. in *La prima parte dell' imprese . . .* (Venice, 1589). An encyclopedic survey of academies is presented by Michele Maylender, *Storia delle accademie d'Italia*, 5 vols. (Bologna: L. Capelli, 1926-30). On literary academies see Eric W. Cochrane, *Tradition and Enlightenment in the Tuscan Academies (1690-1800)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) 1-35. Aretino's comment is cited by David S. Chambers in "The Earlier 'Academies' in Italy," in *Italian Academies of the Sixteenth Century*, 15n80.

referee known as a “censor,” and a jury of peers who crowned the winner in each battle of wits with a wreath of laurel or, if the victor needed to sober up, with cabbage and ivy.¹³

To avoid being labeled as pornographers and heretics, academicians disguised the true nature of their discourse by adopting bizarre nicknames, embracing euphemism and the rhetoric of paradox as their main forms of communication. They were obsessed with devising emblems and other esoteric devices that could only be deciphered by insiders. By participating in after-dinner speeches, games of wit, and musical and theatrical performances, members could hone their rhetorical skills and have their ingenuity validated by group approbation. Above all, the academy enabled its members, who were almost exclusively men, to maintain an alternative identity by participating in its obscure rites of passage. In the dynamics of the relationships that were formed between younger and older academicians there was much recourse to aggressive sexual teasing, mainly jokes about sodomy and homoeroticism.¹⁴

The Priapic Realm of the “Orti Letterari”

The *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* can best be understood in the context of the academic garden. The use of the term “academy” by these groups indicates that they were inspired by the *akademos*, or sacred grove, where Plato taught. At the so-called Roman Academy founded by Pomponio Leto in the 1460s, humanists gathered in the *orti*, or gardens, of Leto’s home to

¹³ In a letter written in 1529, Jacopo Sadoletto, a member of the Roman Academy, describes hinting to the arch poet Camillo Querco that he needed to restrain his drinking by crowning him with laurel intertwined with cabbage leaves. See Federico Ubaldini, *Vita di Mons. Angelo Colocci*, ed. Vittorio Fanelli (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1964), 67-75. For ivy as a cure for drunkenness, see Quiviger, “A Spartan Banquet in Siena,” 212. See also Marc Fumaroli, “Academia, Arcadia, Parnassus: Trois lieux allégoriques de l’élégie du loisir lettré,” in *Italian Academies of the Sixteenth Century*, 15-36.

¹⁴ Roberto Paolo Ciardi, “A Knot of Words and Things’: Some Clues for Interpreting the *Imprese* of Academies and Academicians,” in *Italian Academies of the Sixteenth Century*, 37-60. For a description of the sexual tension in the Roman Academy, see Ingrid Rowland, *The Culture of the High Renaissance: Ancients and Moderns in Sixteenth Century Rome* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 10-25; see also Leonard Barkan, *Transuming Passions: Ganymede and the Erotics of Humanism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

study classical Latin texts, examine archeological artifacts, and perform rituals that recalled the golden age of ancient Rome. Leto was a professor of Latin rhetoric at the Collegio Romano. As part of his studies of Roman antiquity he edited the agricultural writings of Columella and Varro. In his commentary on the treatise of Columella, Leto advocated that rulers and scholars devote themselves to the cultivation of their gardens. He imitated the simple country life of the old Romans by tending the garden of his house on the Quirinal, where he served austere meals consisting of vegetables.¹⁵

But Leto's imitation of Stoic frugality was in stark contrast to the salacious descriptions of succulent fruits and vegetables as metaphors for sex in classical poetry, satire, and comedy. Ritualized obscenity became a ubiquitous element in the fertility rites practiced by the Greek and Romans in their offering of the bounty of the harvest to the agricultural gods Ceres, Bacchus, and Priapus. According to Aristotle this rough language was the inspiration for the genre of comedy.¹⁶ One of Roman Academy's first projects was the performance of a comedy by Plautus.¹⁷ In 1468 Pope Paul II ordered the arrest of twenty members of Leto's academy and charged them with sodomy, republicanism, irreligion, neopaganism, and heresy. To justify his attacks, Paul pointed to the academicians' choice of Greek and Latin aliases and their reading of "obscene" classical poetry. Leto had given lectures on the more lascivious Latin poets, such as Martial, and had argued that Virgil was the author of a compilation of phallic poems known as the *Priapea*. Along with this text, the erotic works of Ovid and the ribald satires of Juvenal and Persius became topics for discussion.¹⁸

15 Giulio Sanseverino (1427-98) had assumed the three-part Latinate name "Julius Pomponius Laetus." On Leto's academic activities, see Rowland, *The Culture of the High Renaissance*, 10ff., and David R. Coffin, *The Villa in the Life of Renaissance Rome* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 182.

16 Aristotle, *Poetics* 1448b-1449a; see also Robert C. Elliott, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), 4ff.

17 Coffin, *The Villa in the Life of Renaissance Rome*, 182; on food imagery in Plautus see Gowers, *The Loaded Table*, 50-108.

18 A. J. Dunston, "Pope Paul II and the Humanists," *Journal of Religious History* 7 (1973): 299-304. Regarding Leto's study of Martial and the *Priapea*, see John P. Sullivan, introduction, in *Martial*, ed. John P. Sullivan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 13; and W. H. Parker, *Priapea: Poems for a Phallic God* (London: Croom Helm, 1988), 32.

Priapic humor dominated the early academies, but it was a dangerous pleasure that had to be kept away from the prying eyes of authorities. In 1545 Nicolò Franco, an ex-protégé of Pietro Aretino, composed his own panegyric on perpetual erections in a work that he unimaginatively entitled *Priapea*. Franco's *Priapea* was placed on the Catholic index of banned books in 1559, and ten years later Franco was executed by hanging in Rome for inciting pasquinades against Pope Paul IV.¹⁹ In the 1540s, the Venetian Council of Ten, concerned that academic gatherings would lead to homosexual behavior, banned private banquets. In 1545 the Venetian authorities ordered the public burning of a book entitled *Il dio Priapo* along with similar texts.²⁰ The Tridentine index of 1564 reduced the number of banned books by restoring the classical authors to the list of the permissible, although it stipulated that “the reading of ancient books by pagan authors is permitted for the elegance and quality of their style” and warned that “they must absolutely not be read by adolescents.”²¹

The repeated references to *orti* or *vigna* (vineyard) and the cultivation of crops may be observed in the names of various Italian academies founded in the sixteenth century, such as the *Vignaiuoli* of Rome, the *Ortolani* in Piacenza, the *Cruscans* in Florence, and *Val di Blenio Academy* in Milan. The *Accademia dei Vignaiuoli* was founded in 1527. Most of its members were employed as secretaries and librarians for cardinals or worked in the papal court. Nevertheless, they indulged in sexy wordplay and produced a cornucopia of a type of verse known as the paradoxical encomium, which had antique roots, and is found, for example, in Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*. Every object they extolled had to be a euphemism for sexual acts or genitalia. Using high-flown language to praise lowly and sordid things, the poets gleefully

¹⁹ See Adele Materazzo, “La penna e la forza: Vita e morta di Nicolò Franco,” in *Rivista Storica del Sannio* 1, s. 3 (1994): 31-74.

²⁰ For the banning of banquets, see Guido Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 139; Ugo Rozzo, “Italian Literature on the Index,” in *Church, Censorship and Culture in Early Modern Italy*, ed. Gigliola Fragnito (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 198.

²¹ Rozzo, “Italian Literature on the Index,” 203.

composed *capitoli* on the topics of eels, urinals, and needles, as well as a kitchen full of foodstuffs—including sausage, cheese, marzipan, fava beans, and everything in the greengrocer’s cart, especially peaches, which resembled buttocks.²²

Group members addressed one another by their organic pseudonyms, such as “big-branch,” “fig,” “carrot,” “cardoon” or “seed.” The poet Francesco Berni, a founding member of the group, was the most notorious burlesque poet of his era. His inexhaustible taste for double entendres may be noted in a letter that he wrote to his fellow academicians: “May God grant you his blessing in giving you a big “thing” [priapic phallus], with a pitchfork as long as a beam between your legs and a big scythe in your hand.”²³ Since Priapus was the son of Bacchus, the patron god of burlesque poets, the wordsmiths naturally celebrated the phallus as the source of their (pro)creative power. A copycat group, the *Accademia degli Ortolani*, or academy of market gardeners, was formed in Piacenza and included the writer Anton Francesco Doni, author of *La zucca*. On their *impresa*, or group emblem, they put the phallus of Priapus. Doni chose to be known as *Semenza* (seed) and others picked *Cetriolo* (cucumber), *Popone* (melon), and *Cocomero* (watermelon), all fruits notably filled with seeds. In a letter, Lodovico Domenichi describes the *Ortolani*. “Before leaving the subject of academies I must mention another, set up by a few lively wits in Piacenza in 1543, more as a joke than for anything serious; this academy was put under the protection of the Dio degli Horti, and although organized by carefree young men mostly for fun and games, nonetheless we spent our time honorably and with profit for those who took part.”²⁴ The

²² Varriano, *Caravaggio*, 69; Silvia Longhi, *Lusus: Il capitolo burlesco nel Cinquecento* (Padua: Antenore, 1983). For an encyclopedic study of erotic equivocations in burlesque poetry, see Jean Toscan, *Le carnaval du langage: Le lexique érotique de Burchiello á Marino (XVe - XVIIe siècle)* 4 vols. (Lille: Atelier Reproduction des Thèses Université de Lille, 1981).

²³ As translated by David O. Frantz in *Festum Voluptatis: A Study of Renaissance Erotica* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989), 29.

²⁴ As translated by James Haar in *The Science and Art of Renaissance Music* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 274, from Lodovico Domenichi, *Dialoghi* (Venice, 1562), 173.

group studied books on philosophy, logic, rhetoric, Latin, and Tuscan poetry. They also compared the meaning of words in various languages.²⁵

Carnival Songs as a Major Source for Verbal and Visual Puns on Produce

In the activities of the Florentine academician Anton Francesco Grazzini (1503-1584) we witness the mature phase of academic activity, which entailed the editing and publishing of books. Grazzini had been a member of the “moist” academy, known as the *Umidi*. The group studied the oral tradition of Carnival songs because they were fascinated by the inventive vocabulary of illiterate peasants and laborers, who made sex jokes out of the words they used to describe their professions, the food they ate, and the tools they used. Grazzini later helped form the *Accademia della Crusca*, whose members aimed to “purify” the Italian language from foreign influences, which often involved finding the etymological sources of the mother tongue in popular proverbs, Carnival songs, and slang. The Crusicans refer to this type of literature throughout their seminal dictionary, the *Vocabulario*, first published in 1612.²⁶

Grazzini made it his mission to publish the song lyrics written by Lorenzo de’ Medici (1449-92), who exploited the vernacular folk tradition of Carnival and festival songs by developing *mascherate*, tunes sung by groups of men and boys who impersonated people in various professions. In the dedication to his compilation of 289 songs (Florence, 1559), Grazzini notes that the men of Florence used Carnival as an excuse to dress up like women and parade down the streets while singing naughty songs. Among the eleven songs attributed to Lorenzo de’ Medici is the “*Canzone delle Forese*,” or “Song of the Village Lasses.” Thus, men in drag pretending to be hard-working farm girls warble:

²⁵ On the *Ortolani*, see Maylender *Storia delle accademie d’Italia*, 4:146-49; and Alessandra del Fante, “L’Accademia degli Ortolani,” in *Le corti farnesiane di Parma e Piacenza (1545-1622)*, ed. Amadeo Quondam (Rome: Bulzoni, 1978), 149-70. The description of the *Ortolani*’s Priapic emblem and motto can be found in Giovanni Ferro, *Teatro d’Imprese* (Venice, 1623), 2:282.

²⁶ *Vocabulario degli Accademici della Crusca* (Venice, 1612); see Robert J. Rodini, *Antonfrancesco Grazzini: Poet, Dramatist, and Novelliere, 1503-1584* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1970), 1-30.

“Our work is cultivating fields/ We gather certain lovely fruits/ The countryside around us yields. If one of you is so courteous/ To tell us where our husbands are/ You’ll have these fruits as gifts from us.”²⁷ The “maidens” go on to sing about large warty cucumbers, which they peel back and suck, along with fat melons and phallic bean pods (“firm and big”). They make sly suggestions as how this fruit is to be “eaten.” “If you first take the tail in hand/ Then rub it gently up and down/ He threatens, but will do no harm at all.” Lorenzo also winks at the potential for sodomy, by alluding to the “before and after” parts of this bodily feast: “Such fruits are eaten after dinner,/ A way now held in high regard./ This seems to us all wrong:/ Digesting them is really hard/ Once Nature’s full, one shouldn’t start/ Again, but do it as you will,/ Before or in the after part.”²⁸

Academicians throughout Italy tried their hand at bawdy wordplay. A case in point is the Carnival practice of the Sienese academy of the *Intronati*, whose members were famous for organizing *veglie* (soirées or evenings) of entertainment for small groups of men and their female guests. The evenings featured masquerades, games of wit, wordplay, and debates on the art of love, combined with singing, instrument playing, and dancing. During a Carnival *veglia* the poet Girolamo Bargagli and an associate played a *giuoco degli ortolani* (gardener’s game), dressing up like peasants and singing in a rough Sienese dialect “rustic eclogues” that were loaded with obscene equivocations.

The pair then went about offering fruit to the female guests, who must have blushed at having to accept such eroticized “gifts.” This game is one of 130 that are described in Girolamo Bargagli’s popular book *Dialogo de’giuochi*

²⁷ Lorenzo de’ Medici, “Song of the Village Lasses,” in *Lorenzo de’Medici: Selected Poems and Prose*, trans. John Thiem (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 158.

²⁸ Antonfrancesco Grazzini, *Tutt i trionfi, carri, mascherate ò canti carnascialeschi andati per Firenze, dal te[m]po del Magnifico Lorenzo vecchio de’ Medici; qua[n]do egli hebbero prima cominciame, per infino à questo anno presente 1559* (Florence, 1559), xvlii; de’ Medici, “Song of the Village Lasses,” 159. On erotic equivocation see Giulio Ferroni, “Il doppio senso erotico nei canti carnascialeschi fiorentini,” *SIGMA*, n.s. 11(1978): 233-50; Charles Singleton, ed., *Canti carnascialeschi del Rinascimento* (Bari: Laterza, 1936); *Trionfi e canti carnascialeschi toscani del Rinascimento*, ed. Riccardo Bruscaagli, 2 vols. (Rome: Salerno, 1986).

che nelle vegghie sansei si usano di fare del materiale *Intronato* (*Dialogue of the Intronato Materiale Concerning the Games Customarily Played at Sienese Soirées*) (Venice, 1572), which was reprinted in 1591, 1592, and 1598, making it readily available to Caravaggio and his Roman clients.²⁹ Girolamo's brother, Scipione Bargagli, recounts playing the same game during the nights of Carnival in his *Trattenimenti, or Entertainments* (Venice, 1587). Scipione comments that lowbrow jokes were made about "plowing" the garden and "planting" the seed.³⁰ These Sienese games were imitated by academicians in towns throughout Italy. In Venice in 1604 the Modenese composer and librettist Orazio Vecchi published a satirical madrigal comedy entitled *Le veglie di Siena overo i varii humori della musica moderna . . . a tre a 4. a 5. eta 6. voci composte e divise in due parti piacevole e grave*. In Vecchi's treatment, fictional members of the *Intronati* organize the games. A *principe* acts as the author or guide of the game and in the first half of the comedy challenges individual guests to carry out specific musical tasks, such as pretending to be a flirtatious peasant girl or singing in Italian using the dialect of a Spaniard, a German, or a Jew, while in the second half the *principe* directs the singers to act out one of fourteen different humors, which are categorized as either pleasurable or grave, with licentiousness being among the delightful humors and melancholy among the serious.³¹

Caravaggio's *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* as a Carnival Singer

It can be argued that from the time of his entry into the Roman marketplace, Caravaggio made "fruitful" work that was designed to appeal to dabblers in erotic wordplay and fans of Carnival songs. Caravaggio's earliest known rendition of copious fruit is the *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* (ca. 1593) (fig. 25). This painting is listed in the inventory of the items seized from the

²⁹ See Laura Riccò, "L'invenzione del genere veglie di Siena," in *Passare il tempo: La letteratura del gioco e dell'intrattenimento dal XII al XVI secolo*, 2 vols. (Rome: Salerno, 1993), 1:373-98; and Nino Borsellino, *La tradizione del comico: L'eros l'osceno la beffa nella letteratura italiana da Danti al Belli* (Milan: Garzanti, 1989), 83-91; on the musical component of the *veglie*, see Dinko Fabris, "Giochi musicale e veglie 'alla senese' nelle città non toscane dell'Italia rinascimentale," 213-32, in *Musica Franca: Essays in Honor of Frank A. D'Accone*, ed. Irene Alm, Alyson McLamore, and Colleen Reardon (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1996), 213-32.

³⁰ Riccò, "L'invenzione del genere veglie di Siena," 381n13.

³¹ Riccò, "L'invenzione del genere veglie di Siena," 373.



Caravaggio | *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* (fig. 25).

residence of Giuseppe Cesari, the Cavalier d'Arpino on May 4, 1607, and presented to Cardinal Scipione Borghese. During his first year in Rome Caravaggio worked in Cesari's studio painting fruits and flowers. The Cavalier d'Arpino was a well-connected member of Roman society who joined two literary academies, the *Accademia Insensati*, or "nonsensical" academy, and (later) the *Umoristi*. He also had a theater built at his Roman palace for use during Carnival. Cesari was thus well aware of the kinds of festival celebrations that took place at various Italian literary academies and in

private residences. As a picture dealer, he might have advised Caravaggio to create subjects that would appeal to a niche market of academicians.³²

The *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* can certainly be understood in terms of the masquerading and amorous musical games played in the palaces and gardens of Rome during the Carnival season. Here we observe a seductive young man whose physical beauty is comparable to the enormous basket of fruit that he offers up to the viewer. Because of his exposed shoulder and the togalike wrapping on the left side of his body, the boy has often been regarded as a figure from of the realm of classical antiquity. He has been identified as Vertummus, the mythical god of the gardens (with no sign of his paramour Pomona); Silvanus; or a re-creation of a painting by Zeuxis of a boy with some grapes.³³ But none of these interpretations have addressed the fact that the

³² On Caravaggio's time with Cesari, see Langdon, *Caravaggio*, 63-76. On Cesari's cultural connections see Herwarth Röttgen, *Il Cavalier Giuseppe Cesari d'Arpino, un grande pittore nello splendore della fama e nell'incostanza della fortuna* (Rome: Ugo Bozzi, 2002).

³³ The subject has also been interpreted as representing an allegory of taste, the resurrected Christ, and either sacred or profane love; for a summary of the scholarly opinions, see Giacomo Berra, "Il 'Fruttaiolo' del Caravaggio, ovvero il giovane dio Vertunno con cesto di frutta," *Paragone* 73 (May 2007): 3-54; see also John F. Moffitt, *Caravaggio in Context: Learned Naturalism and Renaissance Humanism* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), 63-78, and Avigdor W. G. Posèq, "Caravaggio and the Antique," *Artibus et Historiae* 21 (1990): 149-51.

boy's mouth is open as if he were singing. His expression may be compared with that of the costumed boy in both versions of Caravaggio's *Lute Player* (ca. 1596) (fig. 43) who is observed in the midst of a performance.³⁴



Details: *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* (cf. fig. 25). | *Lute Player* (cf. fig. 43). | *Lute Player* (cf. fig. 44).

I am persuaded that Caravaggio is showing us a young Carnival performer who is playing the role of a lovesick gardener or fruit vendor. The main attraction of Carnival festivities was that they allowed participants to break the boundaries of proper social behavior and engage in sexual role play. There are a pair of prominent visual puns in the basket. Just above the boy's hand, Caravaggio has painted a grape leaf in such a way as to create an oval "vaginal" opening, revealing the glistening red seeds that are inside a pomegranate but not the round exterior of the fruit. The painter has lavished similar attention in painting the depth of the cavity of a split-open fig to the left of the pomegranate vignette. Two songs in Grazzini's collection of Florentine *canti carnascialeschi*, in addition to the Siense musical parlor games I have described, are relevant here. One song is attributed to a Filippo Cambi, who was active in the sixteenth century, and is entitled "*Canzone de fruttaiuoli*" ("Song of the Fruit Vendors"). The song, which is meant to be sung by a group of young men in peasant costume, begins with a long list of produce that the singers offer up for tasting, including apples, pomegranates, and figs,

³⁴ See the comparative photographs of the faces of the boys in Robb, M, between pages 304 and 305.

all of which are associated with female sexual organs. They invite the ladies to come visit them at their market stall, promising that once inside the stall there will be a “*bella mostra*” (beautiful show), meaning a session of lovemaking.³⁵ Another Carnival song, which is anonymous, is devoted to “*dovizia di frutti*” (an abundance of fruit) and presents a similar list of eroticized produce that is offered to the ladies in an attempt to arouse their passions.³⁶

The young man’s neoclassical chemise is not inconsistent with my observation, because the literati were known to cultivate the atmosphere of the ancient Roman festivals of Saturnalia and Lupercalia during their Carnival celebrations, and songs and poems inspired by the pastoral poet Horace were performed alongside modern vernacular burlesque compositions. Girolamo Bargali specifically linked the *Intronati*’s interest in playing parlor games to the revival of interest in the game culture that existed in antiquity, citing the *Attic Nights* of Aulus Gellius as a direct inspiration.³⁷ Of course Caravaggio is killing two birds with one stone here. Nominally, the artist has decided to portray a Carnival performer, but the subject is also an opportunity for him to show off his technical skill in rendering both nature and the human body. On an aesthetic level the *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* is ripe for comparison with the works of such legendary naturalist painters as Zeuxis, and it undoubtedly gave poets a new opportunity to practice ekphrasis.

Back to Caravaggio’s Gourds and Melons: Why They Are Beloved by Poets

In the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* we see Caravaggio attempting to stimulate ingenious wordplay by literally “projecting” words onto objects. Just as groups of academicians amused one another with exaggerated renditions of Carnival songs, so Caravaggio created a highly theatrical display of anthropomorphic produce for a select audience of connoisseurs,

³⁵ Grazzini, *Tutt i trionfi, carri, mascherate ò canti carnascialeschi andati per Firenze*, 308; see also Toscan, *Le carnaval du langage*, 1100.

³⁶ Singleton, ed., *Canti carnascialeschi del Rinascimento*, 163-64.

³⁷ Girolamo Bargagli, *Dialogo de’giuochi che nelle vegghe sansei si usano di fare del materiale Intronato*, ed. Patrizia D’Incalci Ermini (Siena: Accademia Senese degli Intronato, 1982), 67-68.

who would have savored the verbal and visual equivocations being enacted by the artist-*impresario*. The bulbous white bottle gourds at the center of the painting have an aggressive and bestial quality. One gourd appears to rise up and move toward a beautiful melon that is split open to reveal its wet seedy core. This action brings to mind a common joke that Carnival celebrates *carne levare*, or the “raising of the meat.”³⁸ Another gourd plays a dominance game as it mounts its companion and stretches out its round and warty head to view the scene.



Detail: *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (cf. fig. 1).

These gourds are truly acting like guardians of the produce. As Amy Richlin notes in her book, *In the Garden of Priapus: Sexual Aggression in Roman Humor*, the menacing presence of the phallic god of agriculture is invoked in satirical poetry and in epigrams. In the poems of Horace, and in the *Greek Anthology*, Priapus repeatedly threatens to rape anyone who attempts to steal his precious offspring. In one poem Priapus is identified as the “guardian of the gourds.”³⁹

Caravaggio’s unruly cucurbits also behave like the phallic “dragon gourds” described in the festival song by Lorenzo de’ Medici that was performed by men masquerading as village girls introduced above: “Among the fruits there is a squash/ As big as any gourd you know;/ We save it for its seeds so that/ from a multitude it can grow/ The seeds will make the tongue turn red./ From stem to tip. It’s like a dragon/ Handsome and inspiring dread/ A terror that will do no harm at all.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Toscan, *Le carnaval du langage*, 120.

³⁹ *The Greek Anthology*, ed. Alan Cameron (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 57.

⁴⁰ de’ Medici, “Song of the Village Lasses,” 158. The original Italian reads: “Mellon c è cogli altri insieme/Quanto è una zucca grossa;/Noi serbiam questi per seme,/Perché assai nascer ne possa/Fassi lor la lingua rossa,/L’alie e’ piè: e’ pare un drago/A vederlo e fiero e vago;/Fa paura, non fa male” (“Canzone della forese,” in *Opere di Lorenzo de’ Medici*, ed. Attilio Simioni [Bari: Laterza, 1914]).

Jules Janick, a professor of horticulture, points out that Caravaggio has represented four different genera of the cucurbit species.⁴¹ This is a very polymorphous plant—the three melons, the watermelons, and the pumpkin in the picture are all genetically related to the bottle gourds, which in infancy are known as zucchini. An entire “family” is represented beside the family of figs and the basket of mixed fruit. This motley crew of cucurbits can be regarded as surrogates for the academic brotherhood.

A very useful reference for this essay has been *Nature and Language: A Semiotic Study of Cucurbits in Literature* by Ralf Norrman and Jon Haarberg. Having surveyed ancient and modern sources, the authors conclude that cucurbits have chiefly been used as symbols of fertility, abundance, and promiscuity: “Since cucurbits grow so fast and die so easily (none can tolerate the frost) they are symbolic in that they stand for an acceleration of the life cycle.”⁴² In antiquity, the various names of this species were thought to reveal the vitality of nature itself. Norrman and Haarberg note that because all the cucurbits—including melons, cucumbers, squash, gourds, and pumpkins—are often connected with sex, they are regarded with suspicion in many cultures, especially during periods of repression and prudery. In European legal documents dating from the medieval period and later, the words *cucurbitare*, *cucurbita*, and *cucurbitatio* are used to describe the act of illicit impregnation. In DuCange’s *Glossarium mediae et infirmae latinitatis* (1678), the verb *cucurbitare* is defined as “to dishonor by adultery another’s wife; esp. of a vassal who dishonors his master’s wife, and inflates her belly like a pumpkin [or gourd], i.e. makes her pregnant.”⁴³ Surely a man like Caravaggio’s close friend Ornorio Longhi, a member of the *Umoristi* who studied law at the Collego Romano before he became an architect, would have been familiar with such a colorful term.

⁴¹ Jules Janick, “Caravaggio’s Fruit: A Mirror on Baroque Horticulture,” *Chronica Horticulturae* 44 (4) (2004): 9-15.

⁴² Ralf Norrman and Jon Haarberg, *Nature and Language: A Semiotic Study of Cucurbits in Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 15.

⁴³ Norrman and Haarberg, *Nature and Language*, 22.

Cucurbits are also connected with gluttony. Several Roman emperors were overly fond of cucurbits. Such a food obsession turned fatal for a Chinese emperor, who was so partial to musk melons that he actually died from overeating them.⁴⁴ This kind of story is repeated endlessly in Renaissance books on diet and nutrition, and that is why melons in particular were considered a “forbidden fruit.” Along with peaches and plums, melons were considered dangerous to the digestion, but they were nevertheless, popular and expensive items at the dinner tables of noblemen.⁴⁵ In John Florio’s 1611 dictionary, the word *popone* is defined as “musk melon,” and *popinatione* is defined as “gluttony or gourmandizing.”⁴⁶ Germans will chuckle on reading the word *popone*, because of its similarity to *popo*, their slang for the posterior.

This is a good place to bring up the related category of melon verse. The great Seicento poet Giovanni Battista Marino, who was a celebrity member of the *Accademia degli Umoristi*, was known to have written and recited poems in praise of melons, which are now lost. But they may have been similar in character to two burlesque *capitoli* composed by Anton Francesco Grazzini in praise of *poponi*, i.e. “melons”.⁴⁷ To complicate matters, the word *mellone* (note the additional “l”) was used by Tuscan writers when they wanted to specify a long squash or gourd.⁴⁸ Even though a split melon can suggest the female privates, in Carnival verse melons also have manly qualities. The round and compact shape of this fruit suggests the buttocks, just as peaches do, and when the burlesque poets sang of melons that “split easily” (*essere spiccato*),

⁴⁴ Norrman and Haarberg, *Nature and Language*, 15.

⁴⁵ Ken Abala, *Eating Right in the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 12.

⁴⁶ Florio, *Queen Anna’s New World of Words*, 390-91.

⁴⁷ On Marino’s lost poem and his equivocal verse, see James V. Mirollo, *The Poet of the Marvelous: Gianbattista Marino* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 11. Grazzini’s poems are published in *Le rime burlesche edite e inedite Antonfrancesco Grazzini ditto il Lasca*, ed. Carlo Verzone (Florence, 1882), 534-38, 631-34.

⁴⁸ Adriano Poli, the Sienese lexicographer, writes the following in his *Dittionario toscano* (Rome, 1614): “Mellone. Fiorent. frutto simile *alla zucca lunga*, di colore simile al cedruolo, ma più sciapito. Se chiamano questo frutto col nome cedruolo. E per mellone intendono il popone.” For more references to the variety of words used for melons and squash in burlesque poetry, see Toscan, *Le carnaval du langage*, 1450.

they were suggesting that they may be entered from behind, not just the front.⁴⁹ Sodomy jokes were a staple of Carnival songs.

In one of his poems Grazzini declares that while others may extol peaches, he believes that there is nothing more worthy of royalty than the *popone*. Nothing is more perfect in nature, and its cultivators revere it. If famous authors of past ages have not written on the subject, it is because fortune has not granted them the privilege of living in Legnaia (a neighborhood in Florence) where the best *poponi* are grown. The *popone* has curative powers and is worth more than gold and is therefore divine among fruits, whereas the other fruits bring on many ills. Double entendres from mythic and epic stories ensue favoring the *popone* and deprecating other fruits.⁵⁰ In a second version of his melon poem Grazzini declares that he has as much reverence for a *popone* as for a painting of a beautiful figure.⁵¹ And when astute ladies go shopping for the best *poponi*, they pick only those with *grosso e membruto* (“fat and veiny”) (phallic) stems.⁵² In Caravaggio’s still life, one melon has a big long stem that is pointing directly at the rosy gash in the feminine fig next to it.

Gourds and pumpkins were also commonly associated with inanity. John Florio’s Italian/English dictionary has an entry for the term *zúcca sénza sale* (unsalted gourd), which he interprets as “a sponce without wit, a noddy, a block-head, a shallow-pate.”⁵³ Under the word *zucca*, the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca* of 1612 describes the plant species but also notes that

⁴⁹ See the notes to the song “Poconi,” in *Alfonso de’Pazzi: Canzone e mascherate di Firenze*, ed. Aldo Castellani (Florence: Olschki, 2006), 49; see also the *Canzona de’ poconi* by Massa Legnaiuolo in *Trionfi e canti carnaschialeschi toscani del Rinascimento*, 81.

⁵⁰ *Le rime burlesche edite e inedite Antonfrancesco Grazzini ditto il Lasca*, 535-36.

⁵¹ “Quei che si danno alle coltivazioni,/il quicumque con ordine e misura/danno all reverencia de’ poponi/E chi guarda ben, par che natura/si sia sforzata a fare il fatto lore,/come un buon dipinto qualche figura” (*Le rime burlesche edite e inedite Antonfrancesco Grazzini ditto il Lasca*, 632).

⁵² “Quan’ io m’ abbatto ad un ch’è ben segnato/e grosso e tondo e ha l’fior largo e paffuto/io non lo lascerei per un ducato./E quelle donne ch’hanno dall’astuto/ne vanno a comperare; e no ’l tirrieno/se l’gambo non è ben grosso e membruto (*Le rime burlesche edite e inedite Antonfrancesco Grazzini ditto il Lasca*, 632).

⁵³ Florio, *Queen Anna’s New World of Words*, 313.

the word was used to describe the *caput*, or head, and provides an illustrative proverb: “*Aver poco sale in zucca, a chi ha mancamento di senno. Lat. parum sapere.*” So when you wanted to call someone witless, you could have said he had very little salt in his head. The Latin *sal* is another word for “wit.”⁵⁴ The proverb derives from the fact that dried gourds were used as saltcellars. Funnily enough, an empty salt container made out of a dried gourd appears as the emblem of the *Accademia Intronati* of Siena. This ironic emblem was the invention of a founding member, Antonio Vignali. Crowning the saltless gourd are two pestles for pounding the intelligent spice into the “head.” The name of the academy indicates that the members wished to distance themselves from the noises of the world, by which they felt stunned out of their wits, in order that they might cultivate literature and liberal arts in private.⁵⁵

In 1568, the Medici, worried about political dissent in the ranks of Sieneese sodalities, closed them all down, including the *Intronati*. But in 1603, Ferdinand I de’ Medici decreed that the academies could resume their public activities. The *Intronati* celebrated their reinauguration in December of that year with a grand banquet that re-created Plato’s Athenian academy. Cardinal Francesco Maria Del Monte became an inducted member, choosing “*Tranquillo*” as his academic pseudonym.⁵⁶ If we think of 1603 as the year the academic movement in Italy was reborn, than Caravaggio’s witty *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* could be regarded as a timely commentary, as it celebrates the efflorescence of erotic wordplay about nature’s bounty. The symbolic cultivation of cucurbits is illustrated in the frontispiece of a

⁵⁴ Gowers, *The Loaded Table*, 133, 230-32.

⁵⁵ Antonio Vignali was the author of the scatological work *La Cazzaria* (1525) in which an academician attempts to initiate a younger member into the mechanics of sex by presenting a dialogue between talking genitalia. Therefore the reference to “sal” may also refer to the Roman belief that salty food was an aphrodisiac. On Vignali and the founding of the *Intronati*, see Ian Frederick Moulton, introduction, in *La Cazzaria: The Book of the Prick*, ed. and trans. Ian Fredrick Moulton (New York: Routledge, 2003), 12.

⁵⁶ On the *Intronati* banquet, see Quiviger, “A Spartan Banquet in Siena,” 209; regarding Del Monte’s membership see Zygmunt Ważbiński, *Il cardinale Francesco Maria Del Monte, 1549-1626*, 2 vols. (Florence: Olschki, 1994), 82.

book published by the *Intronati*, *Fasti Senenses* in about 1661 (fig. 26).⁵⁷ Here an allegorical figure has laid down her spear and cornucopia of fruit and vegetables to splash water on a bursting pumpkin and a vine of gourds that climbs up an oak tree, on which is hung the saltcellar gourd-and-pestle emblem of the academy.

The flamboyant presence of the two bottle gourds at the center of Caravaggio's painting may also pay homage to the most famous guide to the metaphorical use of cucurbits—Anton Francesco Doni's *La zucca* (1551), which is a classic miscellanea of encomiastic letters, burlesque panegyrics, satirical observations, folk tales, and moral reflections that make repeated references to the beloved ingredient. Once again John Florio's Italian/English dictionary gives us an indication of this mixed usage of cucurbits and its rhetorical context. His definition of the word *zuccàta* is "a kind of meat made of Pompions or Gourdes. Also any flim-flam tale or idle discourse without heade or foote."⁵⁸ Doni's anthology literally represents the stuffed "head" of the author, who displays his prodigious and varied wit with the aid of his "muse," the divine gourd. This book was popular with the literati because in it Doni defined the ideal practices of the humanist academy, especially the use of images to stimulate new maxims and promote original thinking. *La zucca* was a best seller and was reprinted in many editions.⁵⁹

In the prologue to *La zucca*, Doni acknowledges the inspiration of an emblem by Andrea Alciato entitled *In momentaneam felicitatem*, meaning "transitory

⁵⁷ On this print, see Jennifer Montagu, "Canini Versus Maratti: Two Versions of a Frontispiece," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 18 (1984): 123-28.

⁵⁸ D. G. Rees, "John Florio and Anton Francesco Doni," *Comparative Literature* 15 (1963): 33-38.

⁵⁹ On Doni, see Paul F. Grendler, *Critics of the Italian World, 1530-1560* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969). On *La zucca*, see Cristina Del Lungo, "La 'Zucca' del Doni e struttura della 'grottesca,'" *Paradigma* 2 (1978): 71-91; Elena Pierazzo, "Iconografia della 'Zucca' del Doni: Emblematica, ekfrasis e variantistica," *Italianistica* 27 (1998): 403-25. Quiviger, "The Presence of Artists in Literary Academies," 106, points out that Doni describes an academy where an imaginary painting of Fortuna presented by Giuseppe Salviati prompted an entire session devoted to the devising of maxims; Francois Quiviger cites *La zucca* (Venice, 1556), fol. 209v.



Vallet | frontispiece of *Fasti Senenses* (fig. 26).

happiness” or “momentary success,” and relates it to his ambitious enterprise. Alciato’s *Emblemata*, dating from 1531, illustrates a gourd vine climbing up the trunk of a pine tree. The accompanying motto is as follows:

A gourd, it is said, grew beside a lofty pine and flourished with abundant foliage. When it had enveloped the branches and grown taller than the treetop, it then thought itself superior to the other trees. The pine said to it: This glory is exceedingly brief. For winter will shortly come which will utterly destroy you.

In *Iconologia* (1598 and later), Cesare Ripa adds gourds as an attribute of the allegorical figure representing *Felicità Breve* (brief happiness). Regarding the symbolism of the gourd, Ripa cites Alciato’s emblem as his inspiration: “*La quale in brevissimo spazio di tempo altissima diventa, e in pochissimo tempo poi perde ogni suo vigore, e cade a terra.*” So Caravaggio’s leaping gourd may be intended to suggest the idea that an ejaculatory burst of creative energy will quickly fall to earth. Alciato’s emblem is also a cautionary tale on the consequences of arrogance and overambition.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Andrea Alciato, *Emblemata*, Lyons, 1550, trans. Betty I. Knott (Aldershot, UK: Scolar Press, 1996): “Aëriam propter crevisse Cucurbita pinum/Dicitur: & grandi luxuriasse coma./Cùm ramos complexa, ipsumque egressa cacumen,/Se praestare aliis credit arboribus./Cui pinus: Nimum brevis est haec gloria. nam te/Protinus adveniet quae malè perdet hyems.” The emblem “In momentaneam felicitatem” is in the section on good and bad fortunes (Andrea Alciato, *Emblemata* [Lyons, 1550], 136). For Ripa’s reference to Alciato, see *Iconologia del cavaliere Cesare Ripa* (Perugia: Piergiovanni Costantini, 1765), 61.



The Fruits of *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge*

Allen J. Grieco

The following report should be seen as a contribution that a food historian particularly interested in the history of fruit can make in looking at *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (fig. 1) by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. I broach the matter in two distinct ways. First, I tackle the problem of identifying the fruit depicted, pointing out some of the problems one encounters in the process. Second, I make a few observations about the cultural and historical context in which this still life might be placed that to my knowledge have not yet been made, even in the specialized literature.

Identification of Fruit and Problems Encountered

The fruits in the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* are not easy to identify because the varieties grown in the past are in most cases different from those grown today. The painting was not conceived as a botanical illustration and therefore does not present the viewer with all of the elements that are needed to identify a given fruit variety. Thus, for example, the fact that the *ostiolum* of the figs is not visible makes them harder to identify. Similarly, because the grapes are lying in the basket we are not able to see the shape of the bunch, an important factor in identifying the variety. However, it is possible to look at the slightly later paintings of Bartolomeo Bimbi (where we have precise representations coupled with the name and variety) and derive the likely variety by comparing the representations.

A great number of varieties of pear known in central Italy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had, like the pear in the painting, a yellow color with a red blush toward the neck.¹ The period in which these different varieties ripened varied enormously; it extended from the month of June to the winter, thus covering the entire gamut of the pear season.

¹ Concerning this, see Elvio Bellini, Pierluigi Mariotti, and Piero Luigi Pisani, “Pere,” in *Agrumi, frutta e uve: Firenze di Bartolomeo Bimbi Pittore Mediceo* (Florence: Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, 1982), 116.



Detail: *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (cf. fig. 1).



Detail: *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (cf. fig. 1).

The figs depicted, on the other hand, present an interesting problem. A close look at them seems to indicate the presence of two different varieties even though their color scheme is very similar. In fact one variety has a characteristic long neck that is yellow in color, while the other variety has no such neck and has a uniform reddish-brown color. Furthermore, one is pear shaped, while the other is more or less spherical. Also worth pointing out is the fact that the interior of both varieties is visible, one because it is split and the other because it seems to have been damaged by a bird. The color of these interiors is different: one is a darker and more intense red than the other. The identification of these figs is not easy, but it seems likely that both are actually *Brogiotti*, a variety documented in Bartolomeo Bimbi's well-known painting of figs dated 1696 and now in the *Appartamenti Monumentali* of Palazzo Pitti. If this is the case, then the long-necked fig is the early ripening variety (referred to as a *fiorone*), while the other is a fig that ripens in September (referred to as a *fornito*).

As the grapes are concerned, the detail is not sufficient to be able to positively identify the varieties represented. It can only be said that there are two varieties of white grapes, one a golden, almost amber-colored, grape and

the other a greenish, as well as a red variety that is very dark. The fact that the shape of the bunch is not visible means making any identification is a nearly impossible task. On the other hand a curious detail should be pointed out; the vine leaves depicted in the painting are quite atypical and even somewhat of a rarity in that they do not have the rather typical indentations of most European vines, which typically have three, five, or, more rarely, seven lobes.² This peculiarity perhaps owes either to the leaf's being an extremely accurate rendition of one the artist had in front of him or, conversely, to its being a schematically represented leaf, although the latter possibility stands somewhat in contradiction with the precision observed in rendering fruit in this still life.

The apple, peaches, plums and pomegranates do not allow for a precise identification, but it would seem that the plums grown in the seventeenth century had a relatively short season, since all varieties ripened in the period from the last week of July to the first week of September.³

The cucurbits depicted in the right-hand side of the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* are easier to identify. The two long and narrow fruits are bottle gourds (*Lagernaria siceraria*), a plant that has been cultivated for millennia and is represented with a good degree of realism in the *Tacuinum sanitatis* kept in Vienna and attributed to Giovannino de' Grassi and dated to the end of the fourteenth century. On the bottom right of the canvas are three watermelons (*Citrullus lanatus*), one of which is cut open, thus revealing its typically red interior. The other two types of cucurbits are varieties that are still grown in Italy at present, but not for human consumption. This kind of squash is ready to be picked in September and can be stored for several months like any winter squash.

The fruit and cucurbits depicted in this still life could all be found at the end of August and the beginning of September, but the presence of the figs poses

² See Giovanni Dalmasso, *Viticultura moderna*, 5th ed. (Milan: Hoepli 1968), 74.

³ See Elvio Vellini and Pieroluigi Pisani, "Susine," in *Agrumi, frutta e uve*, 133.



Detail: *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (cf. fig. 1).

a problem for the idea that the picture was painted from life. In fact, in most cases, when fig trees produce an early crop and a later one these two crops tend to be separated in time. Likewise, the somewhat schematic rendition of the interior of the pomegranate, coupled with the fact that this fruit usually ripens a little later in the year, might suggest that it was painted from memory.

Comparison of *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* with *Supper at Emmaus* and *Basket of Fruit*

The fruit varieties depicted in these three paintings are not the same except in two specific cases. The pear appearing in the *Supper at Emmaus* (fig. 38) and in the *Basket of Fruit* (fig. 6) is almost certainly the same variety (notice the characteristic attachment of the stem) but quite obviously different from that in the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge*. On the other hand, the apple seen in the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* is almost certainly the same variety as the one appearing in the *Basket of Fruit*, as can be discerned from the distinctive coloring of the two apples. It should also be pointed out that the vine leaves in the paintings in London and Milan are more “usual”; the artist depicted the characteristic lobes of these leaves, even though it is not easy to tell exactly how many they have.

Notes on the Cultural and Historical Context

Fruit, as I have pointed out in a series of articles, was considered a distinctly upper-class foodstuff as of the Middle Ages.⁴ This



Detail: Caravaggio | *Basket of Fruit* (cf. fig. 6).



Detail: *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (cf. fig. 1).



Detail: Caravaggio | *Supper at Emmaus* (cf. fig. 38).

⁴ See Allen J. Grieco, “Les utilisations sociales des fruits et légumes dans l’Italie médiévale,” in *Le grand livre des fruits et légumes: Histoire, culture et usage*, ed. D. Meiller and P. Vannier (Paris: La Manufacture, 1991); Allen J. Grieco, “The Social Politics of Pre-Linnean Botanical Classification,” *I Tatti Studies* 4 (1991): 131-49.

might have been one of the reasons why fruit became the subject of poetry that was recited to the priors of Florence at the end of the fourteenth century and in the first few decades of the fifteenth century.⁵ In the sixteenth century, above all in the first half, fruit of all kind became the vehicle of a much more amusing and lighthearted genre of poetry that was based on erotic innuendo. This poetry might have developed from carnival time poetry, although it also seems to have been practiced by more serious, albeit jocular, poets.⁶

A recent study of erotic imagery and fruit shows in a convincing way that this kind of imagery was very much known and used in Rome and all of central Italy during the whole of the sixteenth century.⁷ The pun of the bottle gourds, on the one hand, and the open melons and squash, on the other, should probably be seen as visual equivalents of the literary puns that were still quite fashionable at the end of the century.

⁵ Allen J. Grieco, "Savoir de poète ou savoir de botaniste? Les fruits dans la poésie italienne du 15^e siècle," *Médiévales* 16-17 (1989): 131-46.

⁶ The bibliography on carnival poetry is vast, but one might mention above all *Canti carnascialeschi del Rinascimento*, ed. Charles Singleton (Bari: Laterza, 1936); *Nuovi canti carnascialeschi del Rinascimento*, ed. Charles Singleton (Modena: Società Tipografica Modenses, 1940); Jean Toscan, *Le carnaval du langage: Le lexique érotique des poètes de équivoque de Burchiello á Marino (XV^e-XVII^e siècle)*, 4 vols. (Lille: Atelier Reproduction des Thèses Université de Lille, 1981); *Trionfi e canti carnascialeschi*, ed. Riccardo Brusagli (Rome: Salerno, 1986).

⁷ David O. Frantz, *Festum Voluptatis: A Study of Renaissance Erotica* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989), esp. chap. 1, "In praise of Apples, Figs, and Keys: The Learned Tradition."



CARAVAGGIO AND THE *MOTTETTI DEL FRUTTO*
OF ANTONIO GARDANO

JOHN T. SPIKE

From time to time the woodcut frontispiece of the *Mottetti del frutto* (Venice, 1538-1539) has been mentioned in the literature as one of the earliest Italian still lifes (fig. 27).¹ The *Mottetti del frutto* was a celebrated anthology of sacred motets by contemporary composers published in three volumes by Antonio Gardano in Venice.² The first volume, the *Primus liber cum quinque vocibus, mottetti del frutto*, was printed in 1538 and contains motets by Jacquet of Mantua (seven), Dominique Phinot (seven), Nicolas Gombert (seven), Johannes Lupi (six), Antonio Gardano (two).³ The anonymous *Frutto* woodcut appears on the title page of each of the part books for the five voices: *cantus*, *bassus*, *tenor*, *altus*, and *quintus*. It has not previously been noticed that Caravaggio used the woodcut as a compositional source for his *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* of circa 1603 (fig. 1).⁴

This essay is dedicated to Sir Denis Mahon on his ninety-seventh birthday (November 8, 2008). I wish to thank Kathryn Bosi, music librarian at I Tatti, and Mary S. Lewis, for their assistance.

1 See Eugenio Battisti, “Dal comico al genere,” in his *L’Antirinascimento, con una appendice di manoscritti inediti* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1962), 304; Lionello Puppi, review of *Il Dosso e Battista Ferraresi* by Amalia Mezzetti, *Burlington Magazine* 110 (1968): 360; Eugenio Battisti, “Meditando sull’inutile,” in *La natura morta in Italia*, ed. Federico Zeri, 2 vols. (Milan: Mondadori Electa, 1989), 1, fig. 12; Bert W. Meijer, “Sull’origine e mutamenti dei generi,” in *La pittura in Italia: Il Seicento*, ed. Mina Gregori and Erich Schleier, 2 vols. (Milan: Mondadori Electa, 1989), 2:593, 603n67, fig. 889; Franca Trinchieri Camiz, “Per prima cosa guarda la lira, per vedere se è dipinta correttamente: Quadri a soggetto musicale all’epoca di Caravaggio,” in *La natura morta al tempo di Caravaggio*, ed. Alberto Cottino (Naples: Napoli Electa, 1995), 75. The literature has consistently dated the *Mottetti del frutto* to 1539, overlooking the first volume of 1538.

2 For complete descriptions of these and other Gardano editions from 1538 to 1569, see Mary S. Lewis, *Antonio Gardano, Venetian Music Printer, 1538-1569*, 3 vols. (vols. 1 and 2: New York: Garland, 1988, 1997; vol. 3: New York: Routledge, 2005), 1:173-77, 225-30, 242-46.

3 There is an original copy in British Museum, London (K.3.d.2). It is indexed in RISM B/I, 1538-4.

4 The painting corresponds to the one described as “*diversi frutti porti sopra un tavolino di pietra in una canestra mano di Michel Angelo da Caravagio*” that was in the collection of Cardinal Antonio Barberini, Palazzo ai Giubbonari, Rome, in 1671. See John T. Spike, *Caravaggio* (New York: Abbeville, 2001), CD-ROM catalogue no. 35, for inventory and bibliography. The attribution is accepted by Denis Mahon; see also Mina Gregori, *Caravaggio* (Milan: Mondadori Electa, 1994), 16, who dates it to ca. 1601; Edmund Capon, ed., *Caravaggio & His World: Darkness & Light* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales/Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2003-4), 12-13, 20, 92-93, 227; John Varriano, *Caravaggio: The Art of Realism* (University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 69-70, fig. 57.



Gardano | woodcut frontispiece of the *Mottetti del frutto* (fig. 27).

Recent scholarship has underscored the significance of Gardano's *Mottetti del frutto* from the standpoint of music history.⁵ The anthology was one of Gardano's earliest publications, appearing in the same year as his first book of madrigals by Jacques Arcadelt, the famous *Primo libro*.⁶ The two productions became the pillars of Gardano's catalogues of sacred and secular songs, respectively. Gardano was also a serious composer: the motets featured in *Mottetti del frutto* were selected in accordance with his desire to promote a new style of "pervading or syntactic composition" that, together with an improved technique of printing music using a single impression per page, he had brought to Venice from France.⁷

The *Mottetti del frutto* attracted considerable attention, including the unwanted kind, as it happens. In a matter of months, Johannes Buglhat and a consortium of music printers in Ferrara responded with their own anthology under the astonishingly impious name, *Moteti de la simia*.⁸ The joke was

⁵ See, for example, Mary S. Lewis, introduction, in *The Gardane Motet Anthologies: The Sixteenth-Century Motet 13*, ed. Richard Sherr (New York: Garland, 1993); Andrew Johnstone, "High' Clefs in Composition and Performance," *Early Music* 34 (2006): 29-53; Mary S. Lewis, "Gardano's *Mottetti del Frutto* of 1538-39 and the Promotion of a New Style," in "Recevez ce mien Petit Labeur": *Studies in Renaissance Music in Honour of Ignace Bossuyt*, ed. Mark Delaere and Pieter Bergé (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2008), 131-48.

⁶ Gardano published his first book of Arcadelt's madrigals in 1538. That edition is now lost. See Thomas W. Bridges, "The Publishing of Arcadelt's First Book of Madrigals" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1982), 71-72.

⁷ Antonio Gardano (1509-1569), composer and publisher, was born into an Italian family living in the south of France. After an apprenticeship, possibly with Jacques Moderne in Lyons, he moved to Venice, where he began to publish music books using improved criteria and technology. Born Antoine Gardane, he italianized his name in 1557.

⁸ *Mottetti de la simia (Liber primus vocum quinque)* (Ferrara, 1539), indexed in RISM 15397. Motets were almost invariably liturgical texts set to music; they were often performed during the mass. See Anthony M. Cummings, "Toward an Interpretation of the Sixteenth-Century Motet," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 34 (1981): 43-59. Although Renaissance music books were mainly titled for their contents, a special tradition for motets was initiated at the beginning of the sixteenth century, when Ottaviano Petrucci published some anthologies with a Christian allegorical title, *Mottetti de la corona*. Jacques Moderne of Lyons, a major influence on Gardano, named two anthologies, the first and second books of the *Mottetti del fiore*, both for four voices, in 1532. It was into this tradition that Gardano submitted his *Mottetti del frutto*, so rudely mocked by Buglhat. The common thread of these motet anthology titles is the use of a common noun ("crown," "flower," "fruit") which in the singular is a Christian or Marian symbol. Still lifes were then called "paintings" of "*fiori*" and "*frutti*," that is, identified by nouns in the plural. In the spring of 1506 Isabella d'Este read that she would soon be sent a "quadro pieno de fructi" made by Antonio da Crevalcore, an artist "quite unique in this skill but who, so we think here [in Bologna], takes much longer than nature does." See Ernst Gombrich, "Tradition and Expression in Western Still Life," *The Burlington Magazine* 103 (1961): 176.

explicitly at Gardano's expense, as his premises were located in the *Calle de la Simia* (i.e., *scimmia*, "monkey"). The *Simia* frontispiece, hastily commissioned for the occasion, crudely depicts a monkey feasting on fruit.⁹ It is not clear whether Gardano's rivals were accusing him of poaching from their repertory or satirizing his lack of originality as a composer. As an ambitious new face in a lucrative business, Gardano was bound to excite resentment. In a sense, the excessively jocose tone of his dedication (to Marchese Francesco Pallavicino) left him vulnerable to mockery.¹⁰ He would have the last word, however. In the second volume of the *Mottetti del frutto a 6* (Venice, 1539), he inserted a new woodcut on the titles of three of the six part books.¹¹ In this rare print, a monkey, standing amid some half-eaten fruits, is attacked by Gardano's symbols of a lion and a bear.¹² Instead of embarrassing Gardano, the invidious Ferrarese enhanced his reputation.

The *Frutto* woodblock remained in the Gardano workshop, evidently highly prized. It was only pressed into service when the three books of the *Mottetti del frutto*, for four, five, and six voices, were reprinted in 1549.¹³ At Antonio Gardano's death in 1569, his firm had grown to be, alongside the older press of Girolamo Scotto, one of the most productive music publishers in Venice—and therefore Europe. The house continued under his sons Alessandro and Angelo, who likewise refrained from inserting the *Frutto* woodcut in any other of the family's hundreds of publications. The single, prestigious, exception was the *Novus thesaurus musicus* of 1568, a specially commissioned anthology of sacred and imperial motets, in five volumes, dedicated to Ferdinand II, Archduke of Austria.¹⁴

⁹ See Jane A. Bernstein, *Print Culture and Music in Sixteenth-Century Venice* (New York: 2001), 50-51, fig. 2.13, for illustrations of these woodcuts.

¹⁰ The opening words evoke the deceptions of poetry, which seems an inapposite theme for a volume of sacred song: "*La Poesia con le sue bugie, potrebbe farmi credere per vero, fino al volar degli homini.*" See note 2 above.

¹¹ See note 2 above.

¹² See note 9 above.

¹³ I am grateful to Kathryn Bosi for the information that the Gardano woodblocks passed in the seventeenth century to Bartolomeo Magni, who printed them as decorative fillers in a book of "ariose vaghezze" by Carlo Milanuzzi that was published in Venice in 1622.

¹⁴ Mary S. Lewis, "The Printed Music Book in Context: Observations on Some Sixteenth-Century Editions," *Notes*, 2nd ser., 46 (1990): 907-8; Lewis, *Antonio Gardano*, 3:5, cat. 411.

Thus it was that a masterful fruit piece was widely circulated in church and palace contexts—wherever the sacred music of Jacques Arcadelt and Nicolas Gombet was admired—fully fifty years before still lifes became a genre of painting. The *Frutto* frontispiece exemplifies the robust naturalism of Venetian prints of the early sixteenth century, when Titian and other important painters made drawings for woodcuts.¹⁵ The subject is a simple ledge of stone filled to overflowing with peaches, grapes, a melon, a ripe pomegranate, and other fruits. Some branches, including a palm, bend over the inviting treats.¹⁶ The arrangement is “*estremamente libera*”—extremely free—as was pointed out by the print’s first commentator, Eugenio Battisti, in 1962, and, as he added, the picture is “certainly more modern than the Flemish and Dutch still lifes of the late sixteenth century.”¹⁷ It is “modern” in that its vitality, sensuality, and naturalness are the very qualities Caravaggio and Annibale Carracci would take from the Venetian painters to serve as the foundations of seventeenth-century style.

The earliest Italian still life paintings were comparatively restrained as compositions. During the 1590s, Ambrogio Figino and Fede Galizia began to paint isolated plates of fruit, centered against a neutral background. Neither of these Milanese artists was a reformer. Their primary influence was the ingenious Giuseppe Arcimboldo, by far the most famous artist in Milan. At some point during the 1580s, Arcimboldo painted an independent still life: a bowl of garden vegetables, which, when inverted, becomes a caricature portrait of a gardener.¹⁸ Figino’s and Galizia’s still lifes also show the influence

15 The sole attempt to identify the woodcut’s inventor has been made by Puppi (review of *Il Dosso e Battista Ferraresi*, 360). Puppi expanded on Battisti’s comment and compared illustrations of the woodcut (fig. 51) with a detail of fruits in the foreground of Dosso Dossi’s *Costabili Polyptych*, painted with Garofalo in Ferrara in 1514 (fig. 50). He further noted that Dosso is credited with paintings, now lost, of “fiori et fructi.”

16 I would like to thank Jules Janick and Harry Paris for independently confirming that the large lobed fruit is a melon, *Cucumis melo L.*

17 Battisti, “Dal comico al genere,” 304 (“*estremamente libera e certo più moderna di quelle del tardo Cinquecento fiammingo e olandese*”). Musicologists have always noted the exceptional interest of this woodcut. The following comment by Anton Schmid (*Ottaviano dei Petrucci da Fossombrone* [Vienna, 1845], 141-42) is typical: “1538 . . . *Primus liber cum quinque vocibus. Diesem Titel folgt eine niedliche Holzschnitt-Vignette, welche eine Gruppe von mancherlei Früchten vorstellt.*”

18 On Arcimboldo’s *The Gardner* in the Museo Civico Alo Ponzone in Cremona, see Elena Fumagalli, in *La natura morta al tempo di Caravaggio*, 92-93.



Detail: Caravaggio | *Lute Player* (cf. fig. 43).



Detail: Caravaggio | *Lute Player* (cf. fig. 44).



Detail: Caravaggio | *The Musicians* (cf. fig. 45).

of that sixteenth-century speciality, the emblem book. Caravaggio arrived in Rome in 1592, following his apprenticeship in Milan during the 1580s, so he was well aware of these developments. On the other hand, the *Basket of Fruit* (fig. 6), which he painted for Cardinal Federico Borromeo while resident in Cardinal del Monte's palace, was distinctly different from his contemporaries' early efforts—for its sharper observation of nature, to be sure, but no less for its classical antecedents, as we might expect of a painting exchanged between two prelates of antiquarian tastes.¹⁹ Caravaggio conceived the *Basket of Fruit* as a kind of competition with the *xenia*, or fruit-basket still lifes, frequently found in ancient Roman wall paintings and mosaics and praised by the classical writers Vitruvius and Philostratus.²⁰ A nearer precedent, as Charles Sterling first observed more than fifty years ago, was the superb basket of luscious fruits composed in wood intarsia in the *studiolo* of Federico del Montefeltro in Urbino.²¹ In all probability, Caravaggio

never saw it in person, as there is no evidence he was ever in that ducal city—but his protector, Cardinal del Monte, was raised at that humanist court.

Caravaggio's first commission from Cardinal del Monte was for a concert—a painting known today as *The Musicians* (fig. 45). He had not previously painted any musical subjects: under del Monte's tutelage he came to specialize

¹⁹ Spike, *Caravaggio*.

²⁰ Vitruvius, *De architectura*, 6.7.4; cf. Philostratus, *Imagines* (London: Heinemann, 1931), 1:123.

²¹ Charles Sterling, *Still Life Painting from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century*, trans. James Emmons, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 60.

in them. During his six years' residence in the Palazzo Madama, from 1595 to 1601, Caravaggio made five paintings featuring musical instruments and printed scores, presumably from del Monte's collection.²² Two of these paintings remained in del Monte's palace until his death in 1627: *The Musicians* and a *Lute Player* (fig. 43).²³ Two others belonged to his friend and neighbor, the Marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani: *Victorious Love* (fig. 40) and another *Lute Player* (fig. 44). Both lute players sing madrigals from part books that are easily legible; several of these can be found in Gardano's edition of Arcadelt's *Primo libro a quattro voci*.²⁴ *The Musicians'* canvas has suffered extensive losses across its surface, so it is impossible to know if the open page was originally recognizable, although it seems likely. *Victorious Love* displays some fragmentary notes that may one day be recognized by cognoscenti of Renaissance music.²⁵ Only one of Caravaggio's musical pictures, *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* for Olimpia Aldobrandini, the pope's niece, includes a motet, as befits its sacred subject.²⁶ The music Caravaggio paints is not by his contemporaries but invariably dates back to the first half of the early sixteenth century.

Caravaggio's music is familiar terrain, thanks to the explorations of many scholars.²⁷ It has been revisited here to demonstrate some of the routes that

²² See Franca Trinchieri Camiz, "Music and Painting in Cardinal del Monte's Household," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 26 (1991): 213-26. For del Monte, see Zygmunt Ważbiński, *Il Cardinale Francesco Maria del Monte, 1549-1626* (Florence: Olschki, 1994).

²³ Keith Christiansen, *A Caravaggio Rediscovered: "The Lute Player"* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1990).

²⁴ See H. Colin Slim, "Musical Inscriptions in Paintings by Caravaggio and His Followers," in *Music and Context: Essays in Honor of John Milton Ward*, ed. Anne Dhu Shapiro (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Dept. of Music, 1985), 242-43; Franca Trinchieri Camiz and Agostino Ziino, "Aspetti musicali e committenza," *Studi Musicali* 12 (1983): 67-90; Franca Trinchieri Camiz, "La 'Musica' nei quadri di Caravaggio," *Quaderni di Palazzo Venezia* 6 (1989): 198-221; Christiansen, *A Caravaggio Rediscovered*, 42-43, 90-91. Despite its title, the *Primo libro di Archadelt* (Venice, 1539) includes madrigals by other early composers. Of the six madrigals represented in Caravaggio's paintings of lute players, Lewis, attributes only "Chi potrà dir" to Arcadelt himself (*Antonio Gardano*, 2).

²⁵ Slim, "Musical Inscriptions in Paintings by Caravaggio and His Followers," 242-43.

²⁶ Doria-Pamphili collection, Rome. See Slim, "Musical Inscriptions in Paintings by Caravaggio and His Followers," 244-46. The motet "Quam pulchra es" by Noel Bauldeweyn was first printed in Ottaviano Petrucci's *Mottetti de la corona*, bk. 4 (Fossambrone, 1519).

²⁷ See note 24 above.

might have led him to the *Frutto* woodcut. As a still life specialist, it is unlikely he forgot it, once he had seen it. In all events, the woodcut was manifestly on Caravaggio's mind, if not open on his table, when, in about 1603, he conceived his second-known still life, the ex-Barberini *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge*.²⁸

He evidently used the *Frutto* woodcut as a kind of template for his own, much larger and entirely redrawn, still life. The first step was simple: he corrected the print's reversal of its design so that the space and shadows in his painting would unfold from left to right. He elected to retain the good-looking melon on a bed of leaves, the arcing branches, and the chiseled ledge without legs. He then proceeded to insert his own motifs into the Venetian's original criss-cross scheme. In both the woodcut and canvas, the compositional keystone is a melon angled toward a corner of the ledge. Its foreshortened perspective leads our eye into depth. Caravaggio connected its line to a tubular squash that snakes up the opposite side of the picture—in the *Frutto* woodcut a flowery sprig serves the same purpose. This decisive line is crossed in its middle by an opposing diagonal that descends along the branches (grape for Caravaggio, palm for the *Frutto*) from the same side as the ledge's corner. For clarity's sake, Caravaggio suppressed one of the branches in the woodcut, giving more space to the light that rakes across the background.

The correspondences are so striking, especially when we consider the rarity of still lifes at this time, that we may assume that Caravaggio expected them to be noticed—in fact, he must have counted on it.²⁹ All of Caravaggio's Roman patrons were members of Cardinal del Monte's cultivated circle, and would have known the *Mottetti del frutto*. The exercise was the same as in the *Basket of Fruit* for Cardinal Borromeo: Caravaggio took an esteemed old model, and then surpassed it.

²⁸ See note 4 above.

²⁹ See Varriano, Caravaggio, and Capon, *Caravaggio & His World*, for the iconography of Caravaggio's still life, which abounds with forbidden fruits and visual puns. Caravaggio would have appreciated the incongruity of introducing a volume of sacred lyrics with an image of sensual delights. See notes 4 and 10 above.



CARAVAGGIO'S FRUIT
A MIRROR ON BAROQUE HORTICULTURE

JULES JANICK

The star of Caravaggio as a master painter has never been higher. His innovative artistry is recognized as the bridge between the mannerist school typified by Michelangelo Buonarroti and Titian of the high Renaissance and the baroque splendor of Rubens and Rembrandt. His paintings and persona have entered popular culture; his portrait and two of his works were featured on the 100,000 *lire* banknote of Italy, and several movies have been made of his life. Interest in Caravaggio has been enhanced by numerous books: biographies by John T. Spike, Peter Robb, and Catherine Puglisi and a work by David Hockney proposing Caravaggio's use of optical aids.¹



Leoni | Portrait of Michelangelo Merisi, known as Caravaggio (fig. 28).

The life of Michelangelo Merisi (fig. 28), known to us as Caravaggio, was short and intense, punctuated by bouts of brawling, jail, expulsion, and homicide. His paintings are typified by tenebrism (dramatic manipulation of light); reliance on human models (many of whom make multiple appearances in his paintings); a blatant and provocative homoerotic content; a strategy of direct painting without preliminary drawings; a nonsentimental approach to religious art; and an eerie photorealism that extends to portraiture and various objects, including musical instruments, scores, and plant material.² Caravaggio has left few records by his own hand, but the interpretations of his paintings by generations of art historians combined with recent unearthed archival information provide a rich history of the man and his time. As I am not an art historian, in this essay I will draw

¹ John T. Spike, *Caravaggio* (New York: Abbeville, 2001); Peter Robb, *M: The Man Who Became Caravaggio* (Sydney: Duffy and Snellgrove, 1998); Catherine Puglisi, *Caravaggio* (London: Phaidon, 1998); David Hockney, *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters* (New York: Viking Studio, 2001).

² On the homoerotic content, see Robb, M, and Donald Posner, "Caravaggio's Homo-erotic Early Works," *Art Quarterly* 34 (1971), 301-55.

upon my own field of study to offer a specialized approach. The dazzling realism of Caravaggio and the concentration of fruit portraits (equivalent to finding a cache of contemporary photographs!) are here used to analyze the horticultural information of the period.

The Paintings with Fruit

Various fruits appear in at least twelve different paintings made by Caravaggio in Rome between 1592 and 1603. These fruits include apple, cherry, citrus (flowers), cucumber, fig, gourd, grape, medlar, melon, pumpkin, peach, pear, plum, pomegranate, quince, squash, and watermelon. Just as the figures in Caravaggio's paintings were painted from life, so too were the fruits. Photographic in detail they include exact representations of disease symptoms, insect damage, and various abiotic defects. Fruits are scattered more or less incidentally in five early genre paintings: *Boy Peeling Fruit* (apple, fig, pear, peach plum) (fig. 41); *Young Sick Bacchus* (peach, grape) (fig. 24); *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* (cherry, apple) (fig. 42); *The Musicians* (grape) (fig. 45); and *Lute Player* (cucumber, pear, fig) (fig. 43). In five other paintings, an assemblage of fruits is a prominent part of the composition, four in baskets and one on a plate. I discuss these in sequence based on the dates of origin according to Spike and Puglisi and then review each of the fruits. In the final section, I consider the fruit represented in two paintings of Caravaggio's time, but probably not by him.

Boy with a Basket of Fruit, ca. 1593

This early genre painting of Caravaggio (fig. 25) is of a young boy holding a huge basket filled with fruit. The model has been identified as Mario Minniti, who appears in many of the early works and who became a painter in his own right. The basket, the main focus of the painting, contains a great many fruits, all in nearly perfect condition, including a bicolored peach with a bright red blush; four clusters of grapes (two black, one of which shows fruit mummies, one red, and one "white"); a ripe pomegranate split open, disgorging its red seed; four figs (two dead-ripe black ones, both split and two light-colored ones); two medlars; three apples (two red, one blushed and the other striped, and one greenish with a russet basin and an insect scar); two branches with small pears (one with five yellow ones with a bright red cheek and the other, half-hidden, with small yellow, blushed fruits). There are also leaves showing various disorders: a prominent

virescent grape leaf with fungal spots and another with a white insect egg mass resembling obliquebanded leafroller (*Choristoneura rosaceana*) and peach leaves with various spots. Incongruously, there are two reddish sprigs with reddish leaves that resemble mint. While the display of fruits is beautiful, their representations are generalized in comparison to the paintings that would soon follow.

Bacchus, ca. 1597

The arresting painting of a young, flushed Bacchus (fig. 29) is one of the most famous of the artist. It displays a porcelain dish of



Caravaggio | *Bacchus* (fig. 29).

ripe and rotting fruit, but the face and torso of the model, again presumed to be Mario Minniti, is the focal point. This work is characterized by a higher degree of realism that is perhaps the result of the use of a mirror or other optical aids, as Hockney and also Robb have argued.³ The fruits include black, red, and white clusters of grape; a bursting pomegranate; figs; a large green pear; three apples (one greenish, one red with a codling moth [*Carpocapsa pomonella*] entrance hole, and a small golden russet crab apple with two areas of rot, likely a form of *Botrytisphaeria*); and a half-rotten quince. The basket reveals two fig leaves, both from a dorsal (abaxial) view, and a grape leaf yellowing at the edge, suggestive of potassium deficiency. The head of Bacchus is crowned with black and white grape clusters and senescing leaves, one of which is turning red, probably indicating crown gall.

Supper at Emmaus, 1601

Supper at Emmaus is an extraordinary work, painted when Caravaggio was thirty (fig. 38). The scene describes a miraculous post-Crucifixion event (Luke 24:30) involving the disciple Cleophas, the apostle Simon, an innkeeper, and a beardless stranger (who has just been recognized as the risen Christ). The beardless stranger

³ Robb, M, 59; Hockney, *Secret Knowledge*, 294; Spike, *Caravaggio*, 70.

is blessing a repast consisting of bread, a chicken, white wine, water, and a marvelous basket of fruits that seemingly hovers precariously off the edge of the table. The picture has some striking passages, for example, the use of perspective and foreshortening is startling: the seated Cleophas seems to move his chair into the frame of the observer, his elbow jutting out into the viewer's space. There is, moreover, a disturbing perspective error; the distal right hand of Peter is larger than the proximal left one. This visual incongruity suggests that Caravaggio used an optical aid to project and study the hands, which would be consistent with the photorealism of the painting.⁴ Combining separate views may have caused the perspective problem. The figures are clearly portraits of particular people, and the fruit is not generic but represents unique samples purchased from the market and faithfully preserved in paint. The fruits display an enormous amount of horticultural information. The beautifully painted wicker basket contains fall fruit, somewhat inappropriate for an Easter event, but perhaps a clue as to the season in which the picture was made. The fruits are fully ripe and drawn precisely from life with the imperfections one would find in an "organic" production system—no insecticides, no fungicides, though they are sorely needed.

There are three clusters of unblemished grapes, two red and one white (golden), as well as grape leaves with fungal spots; three apples, two bicolored and one russet, a plum, and a quince with leaves attached to the spur; a ripe, splitting pomegranate with spots on the skin; and two small medlars. All of the apples show defects: one has a precise representation of a series of scab lesions caused by the fungal pathogen *Venturia inaequalis*, one has a wormhole (probably codling moth), and the russet apple shows a rotten spot, perhaps black rot. The pomegranate has spots on the skin, and the plum is overripe and splitting. The golden cluster of grapes is fully ripe, and there is at least one split berry, while the black cluster is rather loose, suggesting poor pollination; the leaves show fungal spots. The large quince and the small medlars are blemish free. The prominent position of the fruit bowl is arresting and contrasts with the upended chicken behind it with upright legs suggesting rigor mortis. Art historians have discussed the possible symbolism of the fruit and the chicken, which in any event allowed Caravaggio to show off his powers of acute observation.

⁴ Hockney, *Secret Knowledge*, 258.

Basket of Fruit, ca. 1601

This stunning still life (fig. 6) with its *trompe l'oeil* realism is devoted entirely to a basket of fruit. Spike dates it to 1596 while Puglisi assigns it to 1601, the same year as the *Supper at Emmaus*.⁵ The 1601 date seems more likely to me for a number of reasons, and I have assigned this date here. The fruit baskets in both *Supper at Emmaus* and *Basket of Fruit* are the same, both perched precariously on the edge of a table, but each has a different collection of fruit, with the possible exception of the quince, which appears almost identical in both paintings. (Could it be the same specimen?)



Detail: Caravaggio | *Basket of Fruit* (cf. fig. 6).

The Ambrosiana basket contains a peach, which is a summer fruit, perhaps suggesting that it was painted before the *Supper at Emmaus* in London. Six different fruits are visible. The uppermost fruit is a well-sized, light-red peach attached to a stem. There are wormholes in the leaf resembling the type of damage caused by the oriental fruit moth (*Orthosia hibisci*). Beneath the peach is a single bicolored apple, shown from a stem perspective with two insect entry holes, probably codling moth, one of which shows secondary rot at the edge; one blushed yellow pear with insect predations resembling damage inflicted by the leafroller (*Archips argyospita*); four figs, two white and two purple, the last of which are dead ripe and splitting along the sides, plus a large fig leaf with a prominent fungal scorch lesion resembling *anthracnose* (*Glomerella cingulata*); and a single unblemished quince with a leafy spur showing fungal spots. There are four clusters of grapes, black, red, golden, and white; the red cluster on the right shows several mummied fruit, the two clusters on the left each show an overripe berry. There are two grape leaves; one is severely desiccated and shriveled, while the other contains spots and evidence of an egg mass. In the right of the basket are two green figs, and a ripe black one is nestled in the rear on the left. On the

⁵ Spike, *Caravaggio*; Puglisi, *Caravaggio*, 112.

sides of the basket are two disembodied shoots: to the right is a grape shoot with two leaves, both showing severe insect predations resembling grasshopper feeding; to the left is a floating spur of quince or pear.

What are we to make of these two works of 1601 based on a collection of summer and fall fruits and painted in Rome? Clearly, the markets were full of fruits, each represented by several cultivars. A painting dating from 1580 by Vincenzo Campi (1536-91) of an idealized fruit seller (fig. 35) illustrates a similar abundance. Here, the well-dressed woman vendor has large, yellow, blushed peaches in her lap and holds a large cluster of black grapes above a wooden container filled with black and white clusters. She is surrounded by plates, bowls and baskets containing black and white figs (the purple ones are also split), small red pears, cherries, apricots, as well as warty melons, zucchini squash, peas, beans, and roses. In addition, blanched asparagus, artichokes, and cabbage are lying on the ground. Two idealized fruit pickers harvest fruit from an enormous tree. The unblemished fruit in the Campi painting are generic in contrast to the portraitlike fruit of Caravaggio, replete with signs of insect predation and disease symptoms.

Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge, 1603

This gorgeous painting (fig. 1), a recent attribution, consists of a collection of tree fruits and cucurbits on a slab that resembles one in Caravaggio's *Entombment of Christ* (fig. 18), usually dated around 1602 or 1603. There is a basket of fruits containing apple, grape, peach, pear, plum. The basket resembles the ones already seen in the paintings of 1601; Caravaggio uses his studio props over and over. The apple has wormholes; clearly blemish-free apples were rare. Eight figs (three light and five purple), two showing wounds of red flesh, are on a fig leaf outside of the basket adjacent to two pomegranates. Most prominent are eleven large fruits in the right of the painting, which represent four different genera of the gourd family (*Cucurbitaceae*).⁶ There are three round, striped melons (*Cucumis melo*) with yellowish flesh in the foreground, one of which is burst open and from which a slice has been cut. Two of these melons show thick unfurrowed peduncles, and one shows the beginning of abscission or separation (slipping) from the fruit. To the right are three smooth dark fruit, one of which has been sliced, revealing

⁶ Harry Paris, pers. comm.

the red flesh of a watermelon (*Citrullus lanatus*). In the background is a large green- and yellow-striped fruit with a very thick furrowed stem that is clearly a pumpkin (*Cucurbita pepo*). Most unusual are two very large, serpentine bottle gourds (*Lagenaria siceraria*).

A Glossary of the Fruits Represented in Caravaggio's Paintings

A total of at least seventeen different fruits are depicted in the standard paintings attributed to Caravaggio. Many are clearly different cultivars, and a number show various biotic and abiotic defects. Viewed together they provide a unique perspective on baroque horticulture between 1592 and 1603.



Caravaggio details from left to right: *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (cf. fig. 1). | *Basket of Fruit* (cf. fig. 6). | *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* (cf. fig. 25).

Fig (*Ficus indica*)

Caravaggio is attracted to figs and displays them in five paintings. At least four different types are shown: green, light tan, reddish, and black. Black figs are often shown split at the suture. Most figs are shown unblemished, but there is evidence of leaf damage by various insects. There were many cultivars of figs in Italy in the seventeenth century, and Bartolomeo Bimbi (1648-1720) names and paints thirty-three of them in one painting.⁷ The figs painted by Caravaggio are similar to three figs—“*Cosagnolo Lungo*” (black), “*Lardaiolo vero*” (white) and “*Corboliere Lunghi*” (red)—illustrated in an undated manuscript by Pietro Antonio Micheli (1679-1713), the first director of the Botanical Garden of Florence. The fig is native to the Mediterranean area. It is mentioned in an Egyptian stele from about 2700 BCE, commonly referred to in the Hebrew Bible, and widely cited by Greek and Roman agricultural writers.

⁷ Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, *Agrumi, frutta e uve nella Firenze di Bartolomeo Bimbi pittore Mediceo* (Florence: Parretti Grafiche, 1982).



Caravaggio details from left to right: *Bacchus* (cf. fig. 29). | *Supper at Emmaus* (cf. fig. 38). | *Basket of Fruit* (cf. fig. 6). | *The Lute Player* (cf. fig. 43). | *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (cf. fig. 1).



Garzoni | *Small Pears in a Dish, with Medlars and Cherries* (fig. 30).

Pear (*Pyrus communis*)

Pears are found in six of Caravaggio's paintings. A great number of types, including yellow, green, and red, of varying size from small to very large are displayed. The small bright red ones in *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* resemble "Moscadella" (Moscatelle) types described by Bimbi as well as by Micheli and also resemble one of the pears in the Campi painting. The same pears are illustrated in paintings by

Giovanna Garzoni (see fig. 30 for an example).⁸ There is evidence of leafroller damage on one yellow pear. The soft-fleshed European pear (*Pyrus communis*), native to Europe, North Africa, and Asia Minor, is considered part of the cultural heritage of Europe. The pear has been consumed since prehistoric times, and dried slices have been unearthed in Swiss cave dwellings of the Ice Age. The first mention of the pear is found in Homer's epic poem the *Odyssey* where it is described as one of the "gifts of the gods" that grew in the gardens of Alcinous (7.120-33). They are mentioned by Theophrastus and the Roman agricultural writers. Pliny the Elder writes extensively of pear, mentioning many types. The pear is found in a number of religious paintings of the Renaissance; the most famous is the *Madonna of the Pear* by the Venetian master, Giovanni Bellini. Pears still find a large place in Italian horticulture, although the most popular pear grown in Italy is now a French cultivar called "Abbé Fétel."

⁸ Silvia Trkulja Meloni and Elena Fumagalli, *Still Lifes: Giovanna Garzoni* (Paris: Bibliotheque de l'Image, 2000), 62-63.



Caravaggio details from left to right: *Bacchus* (cf. fig. 29). | *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* (cf. fig. 25). | *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (cf. fig. 1). | *Basket of Fruit* (cf. fig. 6). | *Supper at Emmaus* (cf. fig. 38).

Apple (*Malus domestica*)

There is great diversity in terms of size, color, and presence of russet in the apples painted by Caravaggio. Some of the apples resemble modern cultivars; they are attractive with red striping and yellow ground color. Damage from insects and diseases are clearly evident. Codling moth seems to have been a severe problem in the seventeenth-century, as entry holes are evident in many of the fruits. Apple scab is shown in one fruit; the disease is still the bane of apple growers. Apples are present in Italian paintings from Roman times on and clearly were and continue to be a favorite Italian fruit. Although there are a number of small-fruited, bitter species native to Europe, the domestic apple was imported to Europe from central Asia in antiquity and was well known in ancient Rome.

Quince (*Cydonia oblonga*)

Quince was clearly a common fruit to Caravaggio, as he paints it at least three times, and each time as a relatively large fruit as it is known today. In two paintings the fruits are unblemished, although in one the leaves show spots, and in another the fruits are half rotten. The quince, native to western Asia, is an ancient fruit that was known in Mesopotamian cultures. The name *Cydonia* is derived from Cydonea, now Canea, a city in Crete that, according to Pliny the Elder, was the origin of quince. Although once widely admired, quince have lost popularity, probably because they are acidic and astringent, restricting their use to preserves, but there are types grown in Turkey that are nonacidic and can be consumed fresh.



Detail: Caravaggio | *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* (cf. fig. 25).

Medlar (*Mespilus germanica*)

Medlars are included in two paintings of Caravaggio's and all are small and appear similar. Cultivated by the Assyrians, the fruit was introduced to Greece and was referred to by Theophrastus. The fruit is disappearing from most European markets but can still be found in Italy, Germany, and France. The medlar must be fermented (bled) to be enjoyed. Shakespeare ridiculed the fruit in a famous quote:

I'll graff it with you, and then I shall graff it with a medlar. Then it will be the earliest fruit i' th' country; for you'll be rotten ere you be half ripe, and that's the right virtue of the medlar.⁹



Caravaggio details from left to right: *Basket of Fruit* (cf. fig. 6). | *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (cf. fig. 1). | *Young Sick Bacchus* (cf. fig. 24). | *Boy Peeling Fruit* (cf. fig. 41).

Peach (*Prunus persica*)

Caravaggio illustrates peaches in at least four paintings with a remarkable diversity in color. Insect damage as well as brown rot incited by *Monilinia laxa* was clearly a problem then as it is today. This fruit had been popular in Italy since antiquity and was introduced from China via central Asia. The binomial *Prunus persica* suggests that it was introduced from Persia, obviously a way station. A painting from Pompeii shows large, green fruit with yellowing flesh and a freestone pit.¹⁰ The peaches in Campi's painting (fig. 35), although quite large, are predominantly yellow with a red blush.

⁹ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. Agnes Latham (London: Arden, 2002), 3.2.115-19.

¹⁰ Wilhelmina F. Jashemski, *The Gardens of Pompeii: Herculaneum and the Villas Destroyed by Vesuvius* (New Rochelle, NY: Carfatzas Brothers, 1979).

Pomegranate (*Punica granatum*)

A prominent crown-like calyx characterizes the pomegranate, sometimes known as the Chinese apple. This ancient fruit is a favorite subject of Caravaggio, who includes it in four paintings. All but one fruit are shown split open to highlight the seeds enclosed by brilliant red pulp. There are two skin colors, red and light brown. Pomegranate appears to have originated in Iran; archeological remains have been found in Nimrod. It spread throughout the Mideast, including to Egypt, where it was known four thousand years ago. It is referred to in the Hebrew Bible and was used for juice and wine. It is presumed to have been introduced into Europe by the Carthaginians, and this is the basis of its Latin name, *Punicus*. It is described by Theophrastus; Pliny the Elder considered it one of the most valuable of fruits both for its beauty and medicinal properties.



Detail: *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (cf. fig. 1).

Plum (*Prunus domestica*)

European plums are found in two paintings by Caravaggio. A greengage plum (“Reine-Claude”) is one of the fruits in *Boy Peeling Fruit*, and purple plums resembling “Damson” are found in *Still Life with Fruit on a Ledge*. European plums are thought to be a hybrid between *Prunus cerasifera* and *Prunus spinosa*, which originated in Iran and Asia Minor and spread across Europe.



Detail: *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (cf. fig. 1).

They have been known in Europe since antiquity. Pliny the Elder described twelve different plum cultivars in the first century. Greengage plums are still grown.

Cherry (*Prunus avium*)

The painting *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* includes both black and light-red cherries. There is archeological evidence of cherry in Europe seven thousand years ago. Theophrastus was the first to describe cherry and refers to it as *kerasus*, after the town of Kerasun in ancient Pontus on the Black Sea. By Roman times, cherry is a common fruit described by Virgil (first century BCE) and Pliny the Elder, but it was generally harvested from wild trees rather than cultivated.



Caravaggio details from left to right: *Boy with Basket of Fruit* (cf. fig. 25). | *Young Sick Bacchus* (cf. fig. 24). | *Boy with Basket of Fruit* (cf. fig. 25). | *Basket of Fruit* (cf. fig. 6). | *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (cf. fig. 1).

Grape (*Vitis vinifera*)

Grapes are found in six of Caravaggio's paintings in the form of fruit, leaves, and wine. Many cultivars are displayed, often in the same picture, with colors ranging from black, various shades of red, green, and amber. Most of the clusters are in excellent condition; defects include an overripe berry and mummies. Both red and white wine clusters are displayed. The changing color of senescing leaves are featured along with insect damage; one leaf contains an insect egg mass. Some leaves show evidence of deficiency symptoms. Grapes have been cultivated in Italy since antiquity and are one of the most ancient of fruit crops.



Detail: *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (cf. fig. 1).

Melon (*Cucumis melo*)

The three melons (*melone* in Italian) shown in *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* resemble heirloom cultivars of the *Cantalupensis* group (the rock melon, or the true cantaloupe). These are rounded in shape and often have prominent ribs. *Noir des Carmes*, named for the Carmelite

monks who cultivated it in France, is similar in appearance, although the flesh is a deeper orange than the melon painted by Caravaggio. A photograph of fruits of *Noir des Carmes* in Amy Goldman's *Melons for the Passionate Grower* shows this melon bursting when ripe, as does Caravaggio in his painting, which also shows the remains of an abscission zone in the peduncle.¹¹ The *Cantalupensis* group appears to have originated in central Asia and, according to Amy Goldman, was taken by missionaries to the gardens at Cantalupo, the papal country home near Rome, from which it derives its name.¹² It was known to be exported to France in 1495, and from there found its way to the rest of Europe.

¹¹ Amy Goldman, *Melons for the Passionate Grower* (New York: Artisan), 29-30.

¹² Goldman, *Melons for the Passionate Grower*, 36.

Robb identifies this fruit as marrow, which is a form of pumpkin (*Cucurbita pepo*), but this is unlikely because marrow has a club rather than round shape and the peduncles lack the furrowing that is definitive for this species.¹³ Caravaggio's melon is round and not five-ribbed as is the *Cucurbita moschata* or *Cucurbita pepo*. Its wrinkled peduncle is interesting for its unusual thickness, but this feature is not unknown in melons. Campi's *Fruit Seller* (fig. 35) includes a basket of orange-fleshed warty melons similar in shape and appearance to *Prescott Fond Blanc* but with a dark green rind. Evidence from the two paintings suggests substantial genetic diversity in melons. In the Campi painting the basket of melons is very uniform, but in Caravaggio's *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge*, of the three melons, two are dark green and one is yellow, suggesting segregation.

Pumpkin (*Cucurbita pepo*)

Caravaggio paints a single-striped ribbed pumpkin very similar to some kinds grown in Europe and Asia. This fruit is known in United States, depending on shape, as pumpkin (if fruits are round) or squash (nonround), as *citrouille* and *courgero* in French, and *zucca* in Italian. Shakespeare, in about 1590, derogatorily compares the rotund Falstaff to this fruit: "We'll use this unwholesome humidity, this gross watery pumpion."¹⁴ *Cucurbita pepo* is very polymorphic, and various cultivated types have been selected including Halloween, pie, and oil-seed pumpkins and scallop, acorn, vegetable marrow, crookneck, cocozelle, straightneck, and zucchini squash.¹⁵ Native to southern North America the species was introduced into Europe in the early 1500s and was rapidly commercialized. The German botanist Leonhart Fuchs first drew pumpkin in 1542 (*De historia stirpium*), and by 1566 ribbed fruits appear in a market scene painting by Joachim Beuckelaer.

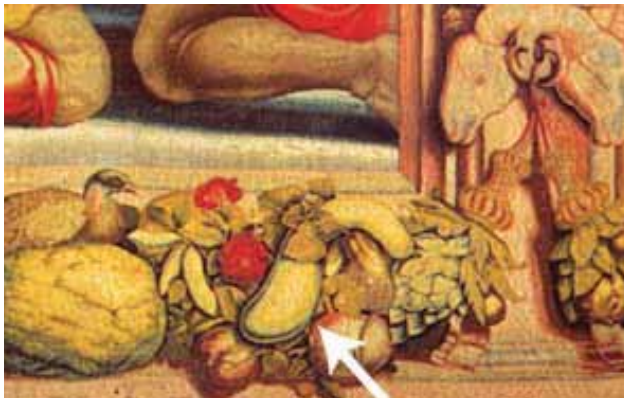


Detail: *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (cf. fig. 1).

¹³ Robb, M, 60.

¹⁴ William Shakespeare, *Merry Wives of Windsor*, ed. Giorgio Melchiori (London: Arden, 1999), 3.3.35-36.

¹⁵ Harry S. Paris, "Characterization of the *Cucurbita pepo* collection at the Newe Ya'ar Research Center, Israel," *Plant Genetic Resources Newsletter* 126 (2001): 41-45.



Detail: *Benjamin Received by Joseph*, 1549-53. (Tapestry)



Detail: *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (cf. fig. 1).

(1503-73). Interestingly, forms of *Cucurbita pepo* with a similar elongated shape are known as *cocuzzelle*, the diminutive of *cocuzza*, and were first illustrated by Fuchs in 1542.

Gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*)

The two enormous serpentine fruit in the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* are bottle gourds that were native to Africa but that were also found in Asia and the Americas. *Lagenaria* was known to the ancient Egyptians and probably reached Europe from Africa at a very early date. The Italians may have selected these long-fruited types, bulbous at the styler end and known today as *cocuzza*. When very young they are consumed as summer squash. This fruit was recorded in Europe as early as 1475, but Caravaggio's representations are among the first examples shown in paintings. A bottle gourd is clearly shown in the border of a famous tapestry made between 1549 and 1553 entitled *Benjamin Received by Joseph* based on a cartoon by Agnolo Bronzino



Detail: *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (cf. fig. 1).

Watermelon (*Citrullus lanatus*)

Three luscious watermelons (*cocomero* in Italian) are illustrated in *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge*. Of African origin, watermelon has been known since antiquity and is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible (Numbers 11:5). It was introduced to India about 800 CE and to China about 1100 CE. The Arabs brought it to Spain, from where it reached Italy; it is mentioned in European herbals of the 1500s. Watermelons became popular subjects in seventeenth-century still lifes.

Cucumber (*Cucumis melo*)

A single cucumber peeks out of *Lute Player*, very similar in aspect to one found in an early still life attributed to Caravaggio. The cucumber is native to the Indian subcontinent and spread to Europe in medieval times, probably introduced by Arabs from Persia. The reports of cucumber in antiquity are a mistranslation (Janick et al., 2006). Illustrations of cucumber in medieval and Renaissance herbals and paintings are similar to those painted by Caravaggio.

Citrus (*Citrus species*)

Citrus is only tangentially represented in Caravaggio's works, perhaps purely as a symbol. In two paintings, the destroyed *Portrait of Fillide* (1598) (fig. 31) and *Conversion of Mary Magdalen* (1599) (fig. 4), one of Caravaggio's popular models, a courtesan name Fillide Melandroni born in 1581, is holding citrus blossoms, a symbol of bridal fidelity, close to her bosom. The beautiful, exquisitely dressed Mary Magdalen, who is wearing a wedding ring and holding a bridal bouquet, has been interpreted as alluding to her being a bride of Christ; could this be an ironic comment of the painter. The flower, based on pigmentation of the unopened buds, appears to be lemon.¹⁶



Caravaggio | *Portrait of Fillide* (fig. 31).

In *Boy Peeling Fruit*, the first picture conceded by all to be by the hand of Caravaggio, the fruit being peeled has been described as either a pear, apple, or bergamot (*bergamotto* in Italian, *beramote* in French), a citrus hybrid between sour orange and perhaps acid lime whose rind oil is used as the base of cologne (eau de cologne) and in other perfumery products.¹⁷ However, this fruit is unlikely to be a bergamot, which

¹⁶ Fred Gmitter, pers. comm.

¹⁷ Mina Gregori, "Caravaggio Today," in *The Age of Caravaggio* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), 200-202; Walter Reuther, Leon D. Batchelor, and Herbert J. Webber, eds. *The Citrus Industry*, vol. 1. rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Division of Agricultural Sciences, 1967).

is described as lemon yellow; furthermore, peeling it does not seem like a reasonable activity, since the bergamot's extreme acidity makes it inedible. The fruit is perhaps a pear, as suggested by Giulio Mancini, a contemporary and friend of Caravaggio who wrote about the painting in 1617-21.¹⁸ Bergamot is often pear shaped.

Still Life with Flowers, Fruits, and Vegetables in the Galleria Borghese in Rome a Caravaggio attribution of the 1970s, now abandoned, contains a large citron (*Citron medica*) that looks very similar to citron painted by Bartolomeo Bimbi in the eighteenth century.¹⁹ The citron, the first citrus introduced to the West, was frequently used in Roman mosaics to represent the winter season.²⁰ The citron is considered a sacred tree to Jews, who know the fruit as the ethrog, which is still used for the celebration of Succoth, the Feast of the Tabernacles.

Caravaggio's paintings are invaluable documentation of Roman horticulture. The most startling is that the fruits of 1600 surely looked as luscious as the fruits four hundred years later, giving the lie to the often quoted suggestion that modern breeders have improved the appearance of fruits to the detriment of their quality. Admittedly, the quality of fruit is hard to determine on the basis of a picture. They underscore the rich diversity of fruits available, especially of apples and pears. They demonstrate that diseases and pests were a problem then as they are now.

¹⁸ See Spike, *Caravaggio*, 2nd, rev. ed, 2010, CD-ROM cat. 1.

¹⁹ Consiglieri Nazionale Delle Ricerche, *Agrumi, frutta e uve nella Firenze di Bartolomeo Bimbi pittore Mediceo*.

²⁰ David Parrish, pers. comm.



THE COMMEMORATIVE, POLEMICAL, AND SATIRICAL
CONTEXTS OF *STILL LIFE WITH FRUIT ON A STONE LEDGE*

ADRIENNE VON LATES

On the 7th of February 1600, Paolo Mancini, a Roman nobleman, married Vittoria Capocci. Because the date coincided with Carnival, the traditional season of uninhibited behavior, a group of young gentlemen, relatives of the bride and groom, gave themselves up to the composition of impromptu comedies, sonnets, and speeches on light, entertaining subjects—to the delight of the celebrants. So successful were these young wits that they were dubbed the “*Belli Humori*,” which roughly translates as the “Good Humor Boys.” They continued to meet and organize entertainments during the holidays. During the Carnival season of 1603, these friends decided to make a formal announcement that they were founding a literary academy, which they marked by changing their group name to the *Accademia degli Umoristi*, or Academy of the Humorists. The title had a dual significance, suggesting on the one hand an imbalance of the Galenic humors and implying on the other that the young scholars were capricious and bizarre in their behavior. But this was also about the time in cultural history that the word “humor” became less associated with unbalanced madness and was beginning to be defined as light-hearted mirth.¹

When the group decided to create a formal academy in 1603, they set up a meeting room in Paolo Mancini’s palazzo on the Corso. Filippo Colonna, the Prince-Duke of Paliano, and the head of one of the most ancient families in Rome, wrote the bylaws and was the founding *principe* of the academy. Many members of the *Umoristi* had a direct connection with Caravaggio or his circle of patrons. Caravaggio’s close friend and partner in crime, Onorio Longhi, and his brother Decio, were among the first members. Professional poets also joined the academy, including Giovanni Battista Marino, who would later also become president of the *Umoristi*. Marino had his portrait painted by Caravaggio, and perhaps it went on display in the *Umoristi* meeting hall, as was the custom. In his biography of Caravaggio, Bellori writes that after Marino’s portrait was finished, both the poet’s and Caravaggio’s praises were sung in the academies.² Marino wrote

¹ Adrienne Laskier Martín, *Cervantes and the Burlesque Sonnet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 71; Harry Levin, introduction, *Veins of Humor*, ed. Harry Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 8; Giovan Battista Alberti, *Discorso dell’origine delle accademie pubbliche e private, e spora l’impresa de gli affidati di Pavia* (Genoa, 1639).

² Giovanni Pietro Bellori, *Le vite de’ pittori, scultori e architetti moderni* (Turin: Einaudi, 1976), 218; Helen Langdon, *Caravaggio: A Life* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1998), 193-98; on Caravaggio’s lost portrait of Marino, see Spike, *Caravaggio* (New York: Abbeville, 2001), CD-ROM cat. no. L.11.

a number of poems promoting Caravaggio's works. Caravaggio's first biographer, Giulio Mancini, also joined the academy.³ Other prominent participants in the *Umoristi* included Caravaggio's former employer, Giuseppe Cesari, the Cavalier d'Arpino, whose workshop housed several of Caravaggio's provocative "banquet pictures" at the time of their confiscation by Cardinal Borghese in 1607, namely the *Self-Portrait as Bacchus*, the *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* (fig. 25), and a version of the *Boy Peeling Fruit* (fig. 41).⁴ The Cavalier d'Arpino was an active member who painted the *impresa* (emblem) of the *Umoristi* in their meeting room at the Mancini palace and designed allegorical paintings for the funeral service of Marino organized by the academy.⁵ Guarino Guarini, the author of the *Pastor fido*, was also a famous member, who would later serve as the group's *principe*. Guarino was an old friend of Cardinal Francesco Del Monte.⁶

Among the founding members of the *Umoristi* was Cardinal Maffeo Barberini's personal secretary Francesco Bracciolini who, along with fellow academician Alessandro Tassoni, invented the satirical genre of the mock-heroic poem. Maffeo Barberini also joined the academy. An accomplished poet, Maffeo had already been a participant in the activities of the *Insensati*, and in September 1602 he attended a banquet hosted by the music-loving *Accademia Alterati* in Florence, where he met with Cardinal Francesco Del Monte. Zygmunt Wązbiński suggests that at this meeting Cardinal Del Monte took the opportunity to promote the talents of his protégé Caravaggio to Barberini.⁷ Between May 1603 and January 1604 Maffeo made four payments to Caravaggio, totaling one hundred *scudi* (gold or silver coins used in Italy). It is presumed that most of the payments were for a *Sacrifice of Isaac* (fig. 33), but the last payment on January 8, 1604, is noted as "fifty scudi paid to Michelagnolo da Caravaggio as the remaining payment for paintings had from him up to the present day." The subjects of these other paintings are not identified in the record. John Spike argues that the reference to

³ Michele Maylender, *Storia delle accademie d'Italia*, 5 vols. (1926-30; rpt., Bologna: Arnaldo Farni, 1970), 5:374; Langdon, *Caravaggio*, 195-96.

⁴ Spike, *Caravaggio*, CD-ROM, cat. nos. 1-3.

⁵ See Marco Gallo, "Orazio Borgianni: Accademia di S. Luca e l'Accademia degli Humoristi: Documenti e nuove datazioni," *Storia dell'Arte* 76 (1992): 296-345.

⁶ Zygmunt Wązbiński, *Il cardinale Francesco Maria Del Monte, 1549- 1626*, 2 vols. (Florence: Olschki, 1994), 85.

⁷ Wązbiński, *Il cardinale Francesco Maria Del Monte*, 99.

more than one painting indicates that Caravaggio was being paid not only for the Old Testament scene but for other work, which may have included a portrait of Maffeo and/or the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (fig. 1).⁸

It is not out of the question that Caravaggio sought to impress his new patron by making a “demonstration piece,” a work that could be displayed during a banquet meeting of the *Umoristi* to stimulate discussion, perhaps during the Carnival season of 1604. Because Caravaggio’s erotic still life conveys the same kind of fertility symbolism associated with the garlands of fruit and flowers that were hung up during wedding celebrations, the painting may reference the original role of the *Umoristi* as wedding entertainers. In the 1620s, Maffeo encouraged his two nephews, Cardinal Antonio Barberini and Cardinal Francesco Barberini, to join the *Umoristi*. Francesco became the official cardinal-protector of the academy. Subsequently the academy became a vehicle for Barberini propaganda. John Spike has identified a painting attributed to Caravaggio in the 1671 inventory of Antonio Barberini’s estate as the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge*.⁹ When Antonio died, the painting was bequeathed to his brother Francesco. If Caravaggio’s still life can be connected with the *Umoristi*, then the work can be understood as providing clues as to the nature of the fun and games that this secretive club indulged in, such as reciting bawdy poems and challenging each other to recall which fruit or squash in the painting went with which burlesque poet or how many words there were to describe cucurbits in Italian dialects and in other languages.

The *Umoristi* connection may explain why the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* went underground in the records of Caravaggio’s career and is not described

⁸ Spike, *Caravaggio*, CD-ROM, cat. no. 34; see also Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, “Caravaggio Documents from the Barberini Archive,” *Burlington Magazine* 109 (1967): 86-102.

⁹ Spike, *Caravaggio*, CD-ROM cat. no 35, doc. 1 dated August 4, 1671, posthumous inventory of Cardinal Antonio Barberini, Palazzo ai Giubbonari, Rome, n. 354, “a painting of 4 palmi by 3 representing diverse fruits on a stone table in a basket by Michel Angelo da Caravaggio with a black gilt frame no. 1, 50 scudi,” as transcribed by Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, *Seventeenth-Century Barberini Documents and Inventories of Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 309; doc. 2, dated August 16-17, 1672, inventory at the division between the two heirs of Cardinal Antonio Barberini’s estate, n. 141, “a painting of similar size representing various fruits placed on a stone table in a basket by Michel’ Angelo da Caravaggio with a black gilt frame,” as transcribed by Aronberg Lavin, *Seventeenth-Century Barberini Documents and Inventories of Art*, 342.

by his early biographers. The people who could recall the original context for the work preferred to draw a “veil” over the meaning of the imagery. In Caravaggio’s era, humanists had to publicly disavow any connection to obscenity to avoid prosecution and punishment. An example of this attitude of dissimulation can be discerned in a letter that Giovanni Battista Marino wrote around 1609. In it, he defends himself from a charge by his rival and bitter enemy Gaspare Murtola that he is a pornographer: “I can never deny having read many times and recited foul or dirty poems that came into my hand on several occasions and I laughed over them with my friends and gave them copies. But no one can ever say in truth that I was the author of them, even if out of vanity at the time I said I was.”¹⁰

Roberto Ciardi observes that Italian academies cultivated the esoteric dimension in their studies “in the conviction that intellectual exercise was what defined the new and true nobility, limited to a few members: a privileged caste, bearing fruits which ripened slowly and secretly within select social relationships.”¹¹ A code of confidentiality was inscribed on the walls of the entrance to the banquet hall of the Sieneese *Accademia dei Filomati*: “Let nothing discussed here go beyond the walls.”¹² Therefore, because Caravaggio’s first biographer, the Sieneese doctor Mancini, was an inducted member of the *Umoristi*, he was pledged by loyalty to his brotherhood to remain silent regarding any work of art that would reflect badly on the academy.

It is plausible that Maffeo Barberini did at some point possess this painting. But over time the work might have come to be regarded as an embarrassing reminder of the “immature” phase of the *Accademia degli Umorsiti*. By 1611 the group no longer defined itself as a merry band of jokesters. Instead they adamantly declared themselves to be purveyors of High Culture and drew up new statutes

¹⁰ As translated by Gerald Ackerman, “Gian Battista Marino’s Contribution to Seicento Art Theory,” *Art Bulletin* 43 (1961): 328; see Giovanni Battista Marino, *Epistolario*, 2 vols. (Rome, 1948), 1:91 (letter to the fellow poet and alleged author of obscene poetry, Stigliani).

¹¹ Roberto Ciardi, “‘A Knot of Words and Things’: Some Clues for Interpreting the *Imprese* of Academies and Academicians,” in *Italian Academies of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. David S. Chambers and François Quiviger (London: Warburg Institute, 1995), 52.

¹² Quoted in François Quiviger, “A Spartan Banquet in Siena,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 54 (1991): 210. The motto was borrowed from Spartan public meals, as described by Plutarch in his *Questiones conviviales in Moralia* 697e.

that banned the production of lascivious poetry.¹³ Given that Maffeo Barberini was more interested in promoting the moral and sacred vein in poetics, it is possible that Caravaggio's painting came into the hands of a more appreciative connoisseur, namely Cardinal Francesco Del Monte.¹⁴ Upon his death, the work could have been acquired by Antonio Barberini along with four other paintings by Caravaggio that he purchased from the Del Monte estate.¹⁵ I argue this point below, but we must first return to the analysis of fruitful metaphors in Caravaggio's ingenious still life.

Quoting Philostratus: A Recurring Strategy Is Revealed

In Caravaggio's *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge*, apparent reference to the classical canon is evident in the arrangement of figs on a bed of grape leaves in the left foreground, which recalls a well-known passage from Philostratus's *Imagines*, a much studied collection of interpretive commentaries on an imagined collection of paintings. Philostratus describes a picture full of food and fruit, which is identified as a *xenia*, or a painting of hospitality gifts that were given to guests. It begins: "It is a good thing to gather figs and also not to pass over in silence the figs in this picture. Purple figs dripping with juice are heaped on the vine-leaves; and they are depicted with breaks in the skin, some just cracking apart to disgorge their honey, some split apart, they are so ripe."¹⁶ This kind of classical quotation is not unprecedented in Caravaggio's work. Charles Sterling suggested that the *Basket of Fruit* in Milan (ca. 1595-1600) (fig. 6), which was owned by Cardinal Francesco Borromeo, was conceived as a visualization of the *xenia*, as described by Vitruvius and referenced in Philostratus. Borromeo was the first cardinal-protector of the Roman artists' academy, the *Accademia di San Luca*, and was the founder of the "Ambrosian" Academy in Milan. He was also amassing his own "museum," a collection of works of art that would aid in

¹³ Piera Russo, "L'accademia degli Umoristi, fondazione, strutture e leggi: Il primo decennio di attività," *Esperienze letterarie* 4 (1979): 59.

¹⁴ For a survey of Maffeo Barberini's career as a poet, see Peter Rietbergen, *Power and Religion in Baroque Rome: Barberini Cultural Policies* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 95-142. For a discussion of how the Barberini used the *Umoristi* to promote their own interests, see Rietbergen, *Power and Religion in Baroque Rome*, 394ff.

¹⁵ See 14 above.

¹⁶ Philostratus, *Imagines*, trans. Arthur Fairbanks (London: Heinemann, 1931), 123.

the education of young academicians.¹⁷ Sterling and Norman Bryson, among others, have argued that the highly theatrical illusionism of Caravaggio's *Basket of Fruit* also references Pliny's stories about the competition between Zeuxis and Parrhasius.¹⁸ The life-sized basket of fruit appears to have been installed on the wall without a frame and placed at a point of view that would startle a viewer into thinking that he or she was encountering a physically "present" object and not a painting. Precisely the same kind of theatricality is at work in the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge*. The fruit and vegetables are all life-sized, but they appear larger and thus have a commanding presence, aided by the aggressive angle of the stone ledge, the dramatic tenebrism, and the swooping spotlight that illuminates the background.

The Colonna Connection: The Columnar Carving of the Watermelon

We recall that Filippo Colonna was the founding *principe* of the *Accademi degli Umoristi*. He was the nephew of Carlo Borromeo and the Marchesa di Caravaggio. He probably knew Caravaggio as early as 1592, because one of the first places that Caravaggio lived when he came to make a career in Rome was in the vast Palazzo Colonna, in the wing occupied by Camilla Peretti, in Monsignor Pucci's quarters.¹⁹ There he would have been exposed to the Colonna family lore. The grounds of their compound were believed (erroneously) to have been where the ancient Roman patron Maecenas held court and fostered a garden where poets posted bawdy poems in honor of Priapus. The Colonna had their own garden built into the base of the hillside, which was decorated with the fragment of the entablature of the huge temple that they excavated on the property.²⁰ This had also been the home of the poetess Victoria Colonna (d. 1547), who was the close confidant of Michelangelo Buonarroti. Given Filippo Colonna's documented love

¹⁷ See Pamela M. Jones, *Federico Borromeo and the Ambrosiana: Art Patronage and Reform in Seventeenth-Century Milan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

¹⁸ Charles Sterling, *Still Life Painting from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 60; Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 18ff.

¹⁹ Pucci worked as the steward for Camilla. Caravaggio's stay with Pucci is described by Giulio Mancini, *Considerazioni sulla pittura (1619-21): Pubblicato per la prima volta da A. Marucchi con il commento di L. Salerno* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1956), 1:224; see also Langdon, *Caravaggio*, 56.

²⁰ Cammy Brothers, "Reconstruction as Design: Guiliano da Sangallo and the 'Palazzo di Mecenate' on the Quirinal Hill," *Annali di architettura* 14 (2002): 55.

of poetry and Carnival entertainments, it could be that Caravaggio was inspired to make his *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* as a result of witnessing how the Colonna clan celebrated Carnival.²¹ He wanted to attract clients as sophisticated in their taste as the Colonna and their circle, and ultimately found the support of Cardinal Del Monte. Caravaggio became dependant on the Colonna family for asylum after he killed Ranuccio Tomassoni 1606.²² One of Caravaggio's motivations for producing the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* could have been to express his gratitude for the support of Filippo Colonna and the other academy members before, during, and after his momentous trial for libel in September of 1603.

There appears to be a direct reference to Filippo Colonna in the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge*. The unusual carving of the *cocomero*, or watermelon, on the right side of the painting resembles a section of a fluted column. The column was the emblem of the Colonna family. I have not been able to find another watermelon carved in this way in any other still life of the period. In most cases, slices of watermelon are shown as in a painting attributed to Giovanni Battista Crescenzi that was included in the 2006 exhibition associated with the Caravaggio symposium at the Muscarelle Museum of Art; here a semi-circular slice rests on top of the fruit.²³ When Caravaggio was in Naples he made an altarpiece known as the *Madonna of the Rosary* that has been connected to the Colonna family because of the prominent fluted column on the left side of the composition behind the figure of the donor. The positioning of the watermelon is also significant, for it “flanks” the grouping of melons and gourds and is a counterpart to the basket of the fruit on the extreme left side of the painting, which is a virtual emblem of Caravaggio and signals his “presence” in the background of the group. By this time, Caravaggio had already painted similar baskets in three paintings—the *Basket of Fruit* in Milan, the *London Supper at Emmaus* (fig. 38), and the *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* in the Galleria Borghese—in which this motif, a virtual signature, recurs.²⁴ The “*cocomero di Colonna*” and the “*cesto di*

²¹ On Filippo Colonna's interests, see Maurizio Calvesi, *La realtà del Caravaggio* (Turin: Einaudi, 1990), 170.

²² Spike, *Caravaggio*, 174. Filippo and his family hid Caravaggio in Paliano and arranged for the painter to move on to Palestrina, where Filippo's uncle Ascanio Colonna was the bishop.

²³ Marco Chiarini, *Natura Morta: Still Life Painting and the Medici Collections* (Florence: Litografia Artigraf, 2006), dating from before 1635, cat. no. 2; see also the watermelons depicted in still life paintings attributed to Pensionate del Saraceni (ca. 1615), and Pietro Paolo Bonzi (ca. 1620) in *The Genius of Rome: 1592-1623*, exh. cat. (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2001) 75, 78.

²⁴ Spike, *Caravaggio*, CD-ROM, cat. nos. 11, 2, 25.

Caravaggio” therefore frame the central drama of the encounter between the figs and the cucurbits.²⁵

In the context of a painting that was made to appeal to humanists, however, it is likely that basket of fruit has more than one function, as it also visualizes another classical quotation. Like the depiction of the figs resting on grape leaves that recalls a passage from Philostratus, the fruit basket could bring to mind epigrams describing the offerings made to Priapus in the *Greek Anthology*, such as “A pomegranate just splitting, a peach just furry,/ a fig with wrinkled flesh and juicy bottom,/ a purple cluster (thick-berried well of wine),/ nuts just skinned from their green peelings—these/ the guardian of the fruit lays here for Priapus/ for this single shaft in the wilds, the seed of trees.”²⁶

Enter the Naturalists: Federico Cesi and Fabio Colonna

Caravaggio’s *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* would also be of interest to the men who formed the other academy in Rome in 1603, the *Accademia dei Lincei*, or Academy of the Sharp-Eyed Lynxes. What leads me to this notion is the way that Caravaggio has grouped the produce in the painting into categories—cucurbits and figs—the most fertile of plants. Of course the most prominent feature of the work is the pair of lively bottle gourds. This idea of anthropomorphic vegetation is pursued by the Neapolitan polymath Giovanni Battista della Porta in his book *Phytognomica* (1588), in which he explains his method of identifying therapeutic plants by looking for their resemblance to the

²⁵ On the *Madonna of the Rosary*, see Spike, *Caravaggio*, CD-ROM, cat. no. 51. Calvesi (*La realtà del Caravaggio*), discusses extensively the connection between Caravaggio and the Colonna family. Antonio Ernesto Denunzio, “New Data and Some Hypotheses on Caravaggio’s Stays in Naples,” in *Caravaggio: The Final Years*, ed. Silvia Cassani and Maria Sapio (Naples: Electa Napoli, 2005), 48-60 describes the complex web of kinship connections surrounding the Colonna family, many of whose members worked to protect Caravaggio, including the Carafa-Colonna, the Dorias, the Sforza-Colonnas, and the marquises of Caravaggio.

²⁶ As translated by Alistair Elliott, in *The Greek Anthology and Other Ancient Greek Epigrams*, ed. Peter Jay (London: Allen Lane, 1973), 167. For other offerings of fruit to Priapus in both the *Greek Anthology* and the *Priapea*, see W. H. Parker, *Priapea: Poems for a Phallic God* (London: Croom Helm, 1988), 2. Anthony Colantuono suggests that Giovanni Battista Marino advised Caravaggio on how to use the *Greek Anthology* to make a series of epigrammatic paintings, such as the *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*, the *Sleeping Cupid*, and the lost *Divine Love Defeating Profane Love*; see “Caravaggio’s Literary Culture,” in *Caravaggio: Realism, Rebellion, Reception*, ed. Genevieve Warwick (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2006), 63.

human body parts they might heal. His book illustrates sprouting bulbs that look like little penises with testicles; this plant, the author concludes, will be beneficial for men with sexual ailments.²⁷ The “father” of the *Lincei*, eighteen-year-old Federico Cesi, was so enamored with della Porta’s ideas about plant life that he gave a talk that was described as a “phytosophical lecture” in Rome in October 1603, during which he identified plants as “vegetative animals.”²⁸ This would coincide with the time period during which Caravaggio was planning and executing the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge*. Cardinal Del Monte, who was acquainted with Federico Cesi and may have served as a mentor to him, surely either attended or heard about this lecture, and Rome’s intellectual elite probably gossiped about it.²⁹ In August 1603 young Cesi had decided to form an academy with his three best friends, Anastasio de Filliis, Johannes Heckius, and Francesco Stelluti. They met at the Palazzo Cesi in Rome, but when Cesi’s father expressed his violent opposition to his son’s new enterprise, the little brotherhood of naturalists retreated to the family castle at Acquasparta, where they roamed the countryside in search of interesting biological specimens.³⁰

The skins of Caravaggio’s pomegranates, melons, and figs are aggressively torn, twisted, and cut open to expose their seedy cores, which reminds me of what Francesco Stelluti wrote to explain why Cesi’s academy chose the lynx as their emblem: “After all, did not the lynx symbolize not so much corporal sight, but intellectual insight?” This, Stelluti continued, was “necessary for the contemplation of natural things, in order to understand their causes and the operations of nature, and how it works from within—just as it is well said of the lynx that it sees not only that which is on the outside, but that which is hidden inside.”³¹ Caravaggio’s penetrating eye would surely have impressed a naturalist. According to David

²⁷ Phytognomy was popularized by Paracelsus, who adapted a form of plant divination invented by the ancient Greeks. This method followed the so called doctrine of signatures, which asserted that plants offered clues to their usefulness via their resemblance to the body. On della Porta, see David Freedberg, *The Eye of the Lynx: Galileo, His Friends, and the Beginnings of Modern Natural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 353-55, and fig. 12.3.

²⁸ Freedberg, *The Eye of the Lynx*, 425n21, who cites Giuseppe Gabrieli, *Contributi alla storia della Accademia del Lincei*, 2 vols. (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1989), 510. For the later, critical, use of the term “phytosophical” in Cesi’s work, see Freedberg, *The Eye of the Lynx*, chap. 13.

²⁹ Wazbiński, *Il cardinale Francesco Maria Del Monte*, 216, 224, 332, 411, 444.

³⁰ Freedberg, *The Eye of the Lynx*, 65.

³¹ Quoted in Freedberg, *The Eye of the Lynx*, 187.

Freedberg, Federico Cesi was obsessed with exploring the mysteries of plant reproduction, as evidenced by the drawings attributed to Cesi in the so-called *Paris Codices*. These sketches illustrate astonishing genital anthropomorphism. Freedberg observes: “Given the overall reproductive concerns of these volumes, it comes as no surprise to find that the sexual organs of plants and a strong parallelism with human genitalia should be one of their chief themes.” Freedberg illustrates Cesi’s drawings of the *Phallus impudicus*, the common stinkhorn mushroom.³²

While moving in the circle of the Colonna family and of Cardinal Del Monte, Caravaggio would have heard about the incredible discoveries in the field of natural science made by Fabio Colonna (1567-1640), who lived in Naples and, like Filippo Colonna, was a member of the Paliano branch of the family. Federico Cesi sought him out during a trip to Naples in 1604 and persuaded him to join the *Lincei*. Fabio Colonna became a member in 1612, joining Galileo and Giovanni Battista della Porta, who had been inducted into the group in 1611. In 1606, Francesco Del Monte wrote a letter of recommendation for Fabio Colonna to Ferdinando de’ Medici, who was developing a botanical garden. I address Del Monte’s personal interest in botany below.³³ David Freedberg outlines Fabio Colonna’s close relationship with Federico Cesi.

Fabio Colonna aided Cesi in attempting to publish the “Mexican Treasury” of plant and animal specimens from Central America, amassed by a Spanish physician in the service of the king of Spain. The project of publishing the work required commissioning artists to copy the original drawings, which proved vexing, as the copyists often got the details wrong. Cesi and Colonna were frustrated by their inability to find an artist with the ability to draw the plant specimens objectively and accurately. Resigned to defeat, in a letter Colonna quotes Pliny by declaring that visual depictions are deceptive and poor copies of nature.³⁴ This challenge

³² Freedberg, *The Eye of the Lynx*, 236, fig. 8.32.

³³ On Cesi and Colonna, see Freedberg, *The Eye of the Lynx*, 71, and passim; for Del Monte’s letter, see Wązbiński, *Il cardinale Francesco Maria Del Monte*, 444; ASF, *Mediceo del Principato* 3762a, c. 48v.

³⁴ On Cesi’s and Colonna’s work on the Mexican Treasury, see Freedberg, *The Eye of the Lynx*, 248-300. For the letter in which Colonna quotes Pliny, see Freedberg, *The Eye of the Lynx*, 357.

was taken up by Caravaggio, who between 1593 and 1603 proved time and again that he really could be nature's mirror. The *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* is by no means a "poor copy of nature" but is rather full of a zest for life. As his admirer Marzio Milesi wrote "Let someone else imitate things/ You make them live and true."³⁵ The painter appears to have been just as eager as the naturalists to uncover the mysteries of nature by means of intense scrutiny. I am certain that if Cesi and Colonna ever examined this painting they would have been thrilled by the painter's achievement.

The Case for Cardinal Del Monte as an Owner of Caravaggio's Monumental Still Life

Despite the fact that I have argued that the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* references the Colonna coat-of-arms, a study of the provenance of Caravaggio's paintings reveals that most of the Colonna clan showed little interest in collecting or commissioning work from the artist. The monumental still life should be regarded as a demonstration piece that had a temporary function; by that I mean to suggest that it was made to be displayed and feted during a banquet meeting, after which it was sold or given as a gift to a loyal benefactor. Without a doubt, its witty content would have been understood by Maffeo Barberini, who at the time was paying Caravaggio to complete his *Sacrifice of Isaac*. As I have already indicated, John Spike has presented evidence suggesting both that Maffeo may have owned the painting and that it was also at some point in the possession of Antonio and Francesco Barberini. But it is possible that there was an intermediate owner, who obtained the painting from Maffeo, namely Cardinal Del Monte. In the end, Del Monte is really the "ideal audience" for the work, not only because of his intimate acquaintance with Caravaggio but because his broad interests coincided with the interests of the two new Roman academies that I have described.

In the 1627 inventory of Cardinal Del Monte's estate there is a reference to "*un quadro di frutti diversi senza cornice palmi sei*," which Zygmunt Ważbiński reckons is equivalent to 134 cm.³⁶ This is almost precisely the same measurement as the

³⁵ Giorgio Fulco, "Ammirate l'altissimo pittore': Caravaggio in alcuni documenti inediti di Marzio Milesi," *Ricerche di storia dell' arte* 10 (1980): 87.

³⁶ See the transcription of the inventory in Ważbiński, *Il cardinale Francesco Maria Del Monte*, 447, 582.

Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge, which is 87.2 x 135.4 cm. The painting was not attributed to an artist in the inventory, and it was found, together with a smaller painting of flowers, in the so-called map room of the Palazzo Avogadro, which was the property adjoining the Vigna in the Via da Ripetta, where the cardinal entertained members of the *Accademia di San Luca*. Wązbiński interprets the decoration of this residence as a kind of “museum” for the edification of connoisseurs and students. This was also where Del Monte hosted theatrical performances in his garden during Carnival and presided over banquets in his casino, which featured a ceiling painting of a *bacchanal* by Andrea Sacchi. He had acquired both properties in 1615. Therefore, Caravaggio’s painting could have been purchased by Cardinal Antonio Barberini from the Del Monte estate in 1627 along with other paintings by the painter in the cardinal’s collection. Once back in Barberini hands, its attribution to Caravaggio was doubtless confirmed by Maffeo Barberini and later marked as such in the inventories of Antonio Barberini.³⁷ Even if this chronology of ownership is ruled out, it is plausible that Cardinal Del Monte came around the painter’s studio in the fall and winter of 1603 to discuss the content of the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* with him.

As Zygmunt Wązbiński has demonstrated, throughout his lifetime Francesco Del Monte was an avid participant in humanist academies, including the *Eterei* of Padua, the *Alterati* of Florence, and the *Intronati* of Siena.³⁸ Del Monte was also the cardinal-protector of the *Accademia di San Luca*, the artists’ academy founded in 1593 by Federico Zuccaro.³⁹ The Palazzo Madama, Del Monte’s main residence, where Caravaggio lived off and on from 1595 to 1600, was the locus of an informal academy, where the cardinal gathered intelligence about the latest political and cultural developments and hosted gatherings of fellow prelates, poets, naturalists, musicians, and painters.⁴⁰ Del Monte never joined the *Umoristi*, but

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37 The paintings include the *Lute Player* (New York, private collection), *Cardsharps* (Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth), *Saint Catherine of Alexandra* (Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Villa Hermosa, Madrid), and possibly *The Musicians* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). See Spike, *Caravaggio*, CD-ROM, cat. nos. 10.2, 4, 20, and 6. On the theatrical performances and Sacchi’s painting, see Wązbiński, *Il cardinale Francesco Maria Del Monte*, 117-18.

38 On the *Eterei*, the *Alterati*, 82, and the *Intronati*, 140, see Wązbiński, *Il cardinale Francesco Maria Del Monte*, 27, 82, and 140 respectively.

39 Wązbiński, *Il cardinale Francesco Maria Del Monte*, 219-46.

40 Wązbiński, *Il cardinale Francesco Maria Del Monte*, 115.

he was certainly invited to its public ceremonies, and he was intimate with many of its members. He was the one who was ultimately responsible for protecting Caravaggio during the period the painting was produced. Many scholars have argued that Del Monte was probably the catalyst to getting forces in motion to free Caravaggio from jail in 1603. Del Monte and members of the Colonna family worked in tandem to get the painter safely out of Rome in 1606 after Caravaggio killed Ranuccio Tomassoni.⁴¹ It should be noted that Francesco Del Monte had kinship ties to the Colonna family. He was of Sforza descent, and his nephew Carlo Del Monte was married to Giovanna Colonna, sister of Costanza Colonna Sforza and Cardinal Ascanio Colonna. Cardinal Del Monte was very close to Marzio Colonna, the duke of Zagarola, and described Marzio's son as "my relative and very special friend."⁴²

Del Monte was a practitioner of pharmacological alchemy and therefore knew a great deal about the medicinal uses of plant life.⁴³ He may have been a father figure to young Federico Cesi, because Cesi's real father, fearing that his son was dabbling in heretical ideas, attempted to disband the *Lincei* by arranging for Federico's closest friend, Heckius (who had murdered a pharmacist), to be banned from Rome. In 1614 Cesi married the daughter of Del Monte's close friend Francesco Colonna. Del Monte corresponded with Ferdinand de' Medici on his botanical collection. Ważbiński notes that Cardinal Del Monte was in possession of a picture by Jacopo Ligozzi of a red bird that the Grand Duke Ferdinand de' Medici had given him, and he seems to have owned other botanical and zoological illustrations made by Ligozzi. The artist was employed by Ferdinand to record the prize specimens of his grand ducal gardens. Del Monte also writes about receiving cucurbit seeds from Florence.⁴⁴ The cardinal was a good friend in later years to Cassiano dal Pozzo, who became a member of both the *Umoristi* and the *Lincei* and who may have, as Ważbiński suggests, come into possession of Del Monte's collection of botanical drawings and books at his death, just as he would acquire thousands of drawings of plants, animals, and minerals from the estate of Federico Cesi.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Peter Robb, *M: The Man Who Became Caravaggio* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998), 345; Calvesi, *La realtà del Caravaggio*, 118.

⁴² Robb, *M*, 345, who cites Roberto Fuda, "Note caravaggesche," *Paragone* 43 (1992): 509-11.

⁴³ Calvesi, *La realtà del Caravaggio*, 173-96; Ważbiński, *Il cardinale Francesco Maria Del Monte*, 433-43.

⁴⁴ Ważbiński, *Il cardinale Francesco Maria Del Monte*, 445.

⁴⁵ Ważbiński, *Il cardinale Francesco Maria Del Monte*, 205. For dal Pozzo and Cesi see Freedberg, *The Eye of the Lynx*, 15-38.

Polemics and Satire:

The Painter of the Monster Gourds Mocks Baglione and Zuccaro

Why would Caravaggio devote so much energy to painting a large *natura morta* when the genre was generally considered to be inferior to history painting? I would argue that the repeated insertion of baskets of fruit in his work was a polemical move; by making a self-reflexive display of the direct observation of nature, Caravaggio declared his opposition to the prevailing mannerist method of painting in Rome. In her seminal study of the pervasive use of paradox as a metaphor in Renaissance culture, Rosalie Colie includes a perceptive consideration of the emergence of still life as a genre:

The still life seeks to transcend its medium in a curious way. By drawing attention to its craft, it flaunts its illusionism, its technical trickery. In this action, still life is an overt commentary on the art of painting, a kind of self-reference. To be involved in both trickery and self-reference is a paradox, to which the various names of the genre of still life draw attention to.⁴⁶

That still lifes are analogous to the subjects of rhetorical paradox, “things without honor,” is evident; furthermore, these paradoxical verbal and visual genres had a contemporaneous vogue in late antiquity, as noted by Pliny and Philostratus. It is certainly no coincidence that Caravaggio produced his still life as a technical sleight of hand during a period when the paradoxical encomium reigned as the Renaissance humanist’s favorite form of rhetorical play. Caravaggio not only flaunts his uncanny ability to imitate nature, but he uses an impressive list of sources to amplify his point. This is a dissimulating practice. It only appears that he just sat in front of an arrangement of fruit and vegetables and painted spontaneously, without reflection. His contemporaneous critics either willfully ignored or failed to recognize the amount of study and preparation that preceded his supposed direct method of painting. Caravaggio had no interest in writing a manuscript on art theory, but his audacious works show us that he was passionately engaged in the cultural debates of his time.

According to a witness at the 1603 libel trial, the enmity between Caravaggio and Baglione had begun in 1602 when Baglione had painted a picture of divine love “in competition with the *Earthly Love* (fig. 40), also known as *Omnia vincit amor*,

⁴⁶ Rosalie Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), 276.

by Caravaggio.”⁴⁷ Baglione’s *Divine Love* (fig. 39), which displayed an idealized androgynous protagonist, was painted for Cardinal Benedetto Guistiniani, who gave him a gold chain as a reward for his effort. Caravaggio’s painting earned pride of place in the Marchese Vincenzo Guistiniani’s art gallery, where it was kept under wraps by a green curtain. Once revealed, the painting astonished its audience. According to observers of the era, viewers could not help but feel that they were confronted by a real boy, the model Cecco in the flesh.

The underlying cause of the bad blood between Baglione and Caravaggio, and what motivated Caravaggio’s colleagues to circulate those insulting poems, was that they were outraged that professional “politics “ caused institutional patrons like the Jesuits to support Baglione’s conservative *Maniera* over Caravaggio’s Lombard/neo-Venetian realism. Caravaggio in turn was dismissed by the rival faction for “lacking decorum” and having a dark moral character. The fodder for the debate came from Federico Zuccaro and ultimately members of the Roman artists’ academy, the *Accademia di San Luca*, of which Zuccaro and later Baglione were presidents. It was not mere paranoia that moved Baglione to declare to the police in 1606 that the exiled Caravaggio was plotting to have him murdered after a disaffected young artist attacked him, egged on, he believed, by Caravaggio’s friends and followers.⁴⁸

It is ironic that Zuccaro and Baglione should have directed such hostility toward Caravaggio given that all three artists were interested in academic activities. If my interpretation of the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* is correct, then it appears that Caravaggio made a bid for his acceptance in an academic setting by producing an ingenious painting that showed that poets and natural scientists were his peers. Caravaggio was enrolled in the *Accademia di San Luca*, and at some point his portrait was installed at its headquarters, but there is no record of when he was admitted into its ranks or if he was engaged in any of its debates.⁴⁹ Federico Zuccaro was largely unsuccessful in his efforts to shape the proceedings

⁴⁷ Such was the testimony of Orazio Gentileschi on September 14; see Gian Alberto Dell’Acqua and Mina Cinotti, in *Il Caravaggio e le sue grandi opere da San Luigi dei Francesi* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1971), 155.

⁴⁸ Gallo, “Orazio Borgianni,” 296-345.

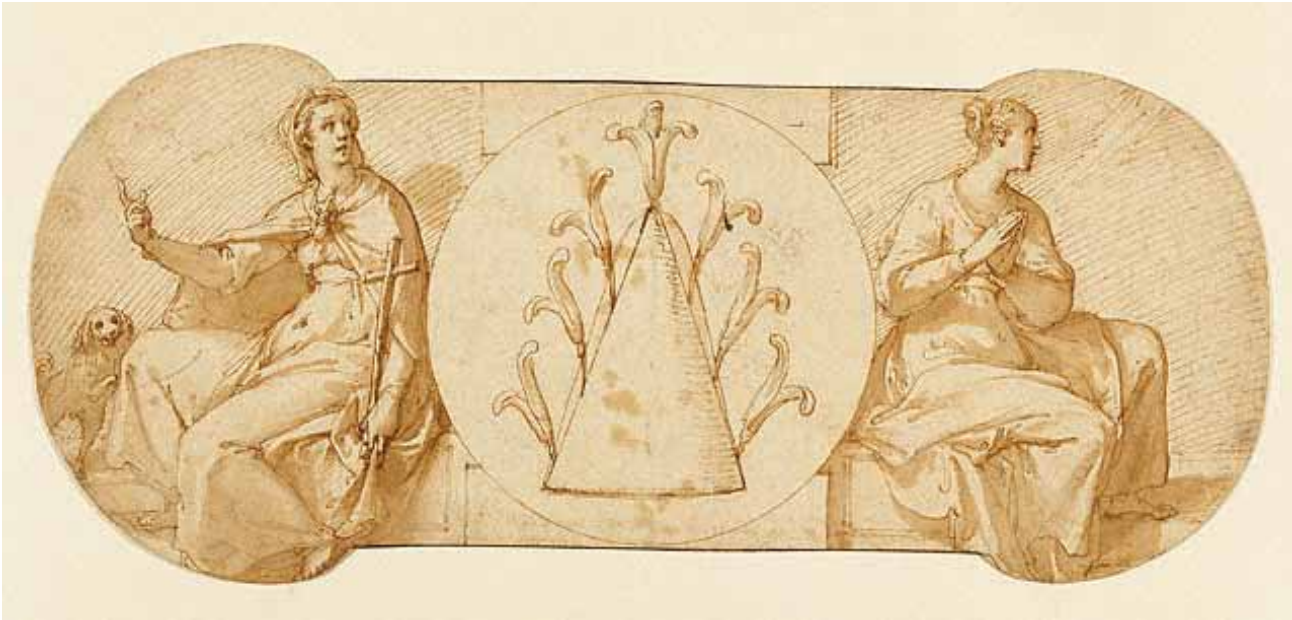
⁴⁹ See Isabella Salvagni, “Gli ‘aderenti al Caravaggio’ e la fondazione dell’Accademia di San Luca: Conflitti e potere (1593-1627),” in *Intorno a Caravaggio: Dalla formazione alla fortuna*, ed. Margherita Fratarcangeli (Rome: Campisano, 2008), 41-74.

of the *Accademia di San Luca* along the lines of the literary academies. Like the Cavalier d'Arpino, Federico Zuccaro was a member of the Perugian *Accademia degli Insensati* and was a well-trained orator. From 1593 to 1594, the year that he was founding *principe* of the academy, Zuccaro had invited artists to present lectures at their meetings on the theories behind their craft. Members were directed to spend one hour discussing theory with an audience that included upper-class dilettantes and members of the *litterati*.⁵⁰ But most Roman artists were reluctant to follow Zuccaro's dictum, because the rhetorical arts had not been a traditional feature of their training, and so words literally failed them. Zuccaro's goal in forming an artists' academy was to establish that the visual arts were as intellectually advanced as any literary activity. He declared that the emulation of academic forms of discourse was beneficial "*poiche l'ademie assottigliano gli ingegni, e li fanno più accorti e vivaci*" ("because academies sharpen the wit and makes it more shrewd and lively"). According to Zuccaro, just as musicians make harmony and bees make honey, so artists combine their *ingegni*, thereby permitting everyone to collectively develop their *virtù*.⁵¹ He therefore endeavored to find ways that would enable visual artists to develop the verbal eloquence that was equal to their manual skill and ingenious invention. Caravaggio, on the other hand, let his work speak for him by creating a painting that would inspire rhetorical eloquence in the connoisseurs, poets, and naturalists who studied it.

It is interesting to note that around the time that Caravaggio was making his monumental still life, Zuccaro's henchman, Romano Alberti, was working on a biased history of the *Accademia di San Luca*, which emphasized Zuccaro's lofty vision of the academy while minimizing the role played by the other founding father of the group, Girolamo Muziano. Alberti's history, *Origine, et progresso dell'Accademia del Disegno de pittori, scultori, e architetti di Roma*, was published

⁵⁰ See Peter M. Lukehart, "Visions and Divisions in the Early History of the *Accademia di San Luca*," in *The Accademia Seminars: The Accademia di San Luca in Rome, ca. 1590-1635*, ed. Peter M. Lukehart (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2009), 174. On Zuccaro's membership in the literary academy and the presence of members of humanist academies in the drawing studios and meeting rooms of the *Accademi di San Luca*, see, Frances Gage, "Giulio Mancini and Artist-Amateur Relations in Seventeenth-Century Roman Academies," in *The Accademia Seminars*, 247-88.

⁵¹ Quiviger, "The Presence of Artists in Literary Academies," 111, citing Federico Zuccaro, *Lettera a' principi signori amatori della pittura*, in *Scritti d'arte*, ed. Detlef Heikamp (Florence: Olschki, 1961), 114.



Zuccaro | *Allegories of Faith and Hope, Flanking Federico's Device, the Sugar Loaf* (fig. 32).

in Pavia in 1604, under the sponsorship of Cardinal Francesco Borromini.⁵² Ten years after his botched attempt to advance theoretical discourse in the artists' academy, Zuccaro and his minions were seeking to reassert his reputation as the man who sought to enoble the profession by adopting the academic ideal.

In concluding my miscellaneous approach to interpreting Caravaggio's painting, which assumes that his audience was capable of reading the work on more than one level, I want to make one last suggestion regarding the verbal and visual puns in the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge*, and it concerns the priapic bottle gourds. Given Federico Zuccaro's lofty ambitions for the *Accademia di San Luca*, Caravaggio may be taking his revenge on the "Zuccari," meaning Federico and his associate Baglione, by depicting them in a satirical fashion as a pair of pompous pricks preening in Plato's patch, otherwise known as the academic garden.⁵³ In Caravaggio's day and today, Italians use the word *zuccone* to designate a blockhead, and it is likely that Caravaggio knew that Zuccaro himself had employed wordplay in devising his family emblem, which depicted a *zucchero* (conical sugarloaf), festooned with squash blossoms, known as *fiori di zucca*, as

⁵² Lukehart, "Visions and Divisions in the Early History of the Accademia di San Luca," 184.

⁵³ John Varriano has suggested that the detail of the melon's stem penetrating the crack of a fig in Caravaggio's painting is a sign that he is taking visual revenge on Baglione by giving him the "fig" (*Caravaggio: The Art of Realism* [University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006], 70).

seen in an allegorical drawing for a propagandistic program of decoration that was being installed in Zuccaro's Roman palace in the early 1600s (fig. 32).⁵⁴

Caravaggio created his *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* because he knew it would be appreciated by humanists who valued the ongoing contest between painting and poetry and who shunned the idea of simply rehashing old theories, seeking instead to make fresh description and the study of the natural world their goal. Caravaggio reveals the secrets of nature with his ability to examine organic life and creates living theater with his depiction of "vegetative animals." The artist is teaching his audience how to look at natural things and reiterates what he said at his libel trial. What makes a good artist? To put it simply, "a good man knows how to paint well and imitate natural things well."⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Zuccaro designed a narrative cycle of paintings that depicted the struggles of his late brother Taddeo, who, much like the young Caravaggio, came to in Rome as a penniless foreigner, suffering privation before gaining fame for his prodigious talent.

⁵⁵ Dell'Acqua and Cinotti, *Il Caravaggio e le sue grandi opere da San Luigi dei Francesi*, 155.

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- Fig. 42. Caravaggio, *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*, ca. 1600. Oil on canvas, 66 x 49.5 cm. National Gallery, London.
- Fig. 43. Caravaggio, *Lute Player*, ca. 1596. Oil on canvas, 94 x 119 cm. Hermitage, St. Petersburg.
- Fig. 44. Caravaggio, *Lute Player*, ca. 1596. Oil on canvas, 102.2 x 129.9 cm. On Loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
- Fig. 45. Caravaggio, *The Musicians*, ca. 1595. Oil on canvas, 87.9 x 115.9 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Caravaggio | *Sacrifice of Isaac* (fig. 33).



Caravaggio | *Crowning with Thorns* (fig. 34).

Overleaf, pp. 150-151: Campi | *The Fruit Seller* (fig. 35).







Master of Hartford | *A Table Laden with Flowers and Fruits* (fig. 36).



Master of Hartford | *Flowers, Fruits, Vegetables and Two Lizards* (fig. 37).



Caravaggio | *Supper at Emmaus* (fig. 38).



Baglione | *Divine Love* (fig. 39).



Caravaggio | *Victorious Love* (fig. 40).



Caravaggio | *Boy Peeling Fruit* (fig. 41).



Caravaggio | *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* (fig. 42).



Caravaggio | *Lute Player* (fig. 43).



Caravaggio | *Lute Player* (fig. 44).



Caravaggio | *The Musicians* (fig. 45).

