Caravaggio's Chiaroscuro : Shining Light on a New Kind of Painting

Background Notes

Sarah Ciacci — 11 November 2026



Caravaggio, *Boy Bitten by a Lizard,* c.1594–95
(National Gallery, London)

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Michelangelo Merisi, known as Caravaggio (1571–1610) after the Lombard town where he grew up, is famous for his dramatic chiaroscuro, a style known as tenebrism, or strong contrasts of light and shadow. He moved to Rome in 1592, where he became one of the city's most sought-after painters, working for cardinals, churches and collectors. In 1606 he killed a man in a brawl and fled Rome under a death sentence. He spent his last four years in Naples, Malta and Sicily, and died in July 1610 on his way back to Rome to seek a pardon. Following his use of light through this career shows how it changed, from the naturalistic, to the dramatic, to the mysterious, for a mix of reasons: artistic traditions, the religious and cultural context, the subject matter and wishes of his patrons, and perhaps also his own troubled life. It is worth remembering that he left no writings about what his art meant, so we can only infer his intentions.

His early Roman works use light naturalistically. In *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* (c.1594–95) **(cover image),** a boy recoils as a lizard bites his finger, beside a still life of cherries and a vase of flowers. The light enters from the left like ordinary daylight, picking out detail such as the furrowed brow, the sheen of the cherries and the transparency of the glass in which we can even see the reflection of a window. Painted from life, probably for the open market, it shows his debt to the realism of his native Lombardy, to painters such as Moroni and Vincenzo Campi, while the fairly dark shadows on the boy owe something to Leonardo, who used chiaroscuro (contrasts of light and shade) to model form. The plain background, which focuses attention on the boy's expression, is a device

Caravaggio would use throughout his career to frame the figures, to create atmosphere, but also perhaps because it was quicker and cheaper to paint.

His breakthrough came with paintings made for the Contarelli Chapel in San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome (1599–1600), his first large public religious commission. For it, he had to reinvent composition and light for large scale paintings in a dim church and with a public audience. In *The Calling of Saint Matthew* **(2)**, the tax collector Matthew is called to follow Christ in an ordinary, contemporary Roman setting. A shaft of light enters from the upper right and lands on Matthew's face at the very moment Christ points to him, so the light becomes a vehicle to construct the narrative. The men at the table are left in shadow, while Christ himself, half hidden behind Peter, is barely lit, so that we, like Matthew, only gradually notice him. The light also seems to follow the real window of the chapel, so that the divine light in the painting merges with the daylight in the church, linking the divine light of the painting to perhaps God's presence in our world.



(2) Caravaggio, *The Calling of Saint Matthew,* 1599–1600 (Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome)

This dramatic, theatrical style fits the Baroque style, the stylistic label given to Caravaggio's work, and a style which grew partly out of the drama and skill of the previous movement, Mannerism, and partly out of the Council of Trent (1545–63), the Catholic Church's response to the Reformation. The Council of Trent said little about art, but it did say that images should teach and move the faithful. It also reaffirmed Christ's real presence in the Eucharist, which gave art a reason to make the sacred feel physically present, and it used light as a metaphor for truth, all of which can be linked to Caravaggio's use of light and setting in his work. Later commentators added stricter rules on decorum, and Caravaggio's realism sometimes clashed with their ideas.



(4) Caravaggio, *The Conversion of Saint Paul on the Road to Damascus*, 1601 (Cerasi Chapel, Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome)

The Conversion of Saint Paul **(4)** was painted for the Cerasi Chapel just after his Contarelli Chapel commission, when Caravaggio was at the height of his Roman success. In *The Conversion* we see two light effects, a divine light coming in from the right, and a natural light coming in from the left. While Paul lies with his eyes closed and arms open bathed in the light of God, the huge horse and its groom are bathed in more earthly light, seemingly unaware that anything has happened. This opens up what the light might represent for Caravaggio and his contemporaries. Answers might be found in contemporary discussions on the nature of the universe, God, and light and shadow, which Caravaggio may not have actively engaged with, but they were ideas he could well have been aware of. At this time, the old and traditional Earth-centred cosmos with a space for heaven beyond its stars was challenged, with natural philosophers suggesting new models, like an infinite universe with no separate sphere for heaven. This led to questions over where heaven could be, some suggested it could be all around us and therefore in our world, perhaps explaining Caravaggio's earthly settings, while others, such as Francesco Patrizi made light the link between God and the world, which can also be read into Caravaggio's tenebrism.

In exile Caravaggio's light changes again. *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* **(5)**, painted in Malta, is his largest painting and the only one he signed, in the blood spilling from John's neck. Set in front of a prison, with two prisoners watching from a barred window, it uses a quiet, uneven light rather than a dramatic spotlight, and the figures are small against a vast, somewhat oppressive wall. Drama now comes

from scale and emptiness more than from a beam of light. It is tempting to link this to his state of mind as a fugitive at risk of execution, but there may also have been practical reasons, such as cost, speed and access to materials.



(5) Caravaggio, *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*, 1608 (Oratory of St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta)

His last known painting, *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula (*1610) **(6)** was made in Naples. Ursula, shot by the Hun king she refused to marry, looks down at the arrow in her chest, her face a deathly grey-white against her red cloak, while a face behind her, apparently Caravaggio's own, looks on helplessly. The figures crowd close to the viewer against a dark

background, and the painting is a drama of hands: the king's, Ursula's, and a bystander's, thrust forward to try and stop the arrow just a moment too late. The light here seems to lack the dramatic sense of the divine of the earlier paintings, so this might be about murder and death as a human act in an earthbound world, one the divine perhaps cannot reach.



(6) Caravaggio, *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula,* 1610 (Gallerie d'Italia, Naples)

Throughout his career, Caravaggio used light to do many different things. To help tell the story, to show off his skill, to create drama, to create atmosphere, and to explore both divine and human experience and in our lecture we will explore the many different ways he explored these ideas.

Selected Reading

Brad Finger, *Caravaggio*, (Prestel, 2025)
Andrew Graham-Dixon, *Caravaggio: A Life Sacred and Profane, (*Penguin, London, 2011)
Troy Thomas, *Caravaggio and the Creation of Modernity,* (Reaktion Books, London, 2016)
Livia Velani, *Rome: Where to Find Caravaggio,* (Scala, 2005)
Francesca Whitlum-Cooper, *The Last Caravaggio,*(National Gallery, 2024)

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