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### **The Artist Caravaggio's *St. John the Baptist***

on exhibit at the Nelson-Atkins Museum

a talk for the  
Knights of Malta

June 13, 2010

*Talk given to the Kansas City Section of the Federal Association  
of the Knights and Dames of Malta.*

This year the art world is celebrating the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Caravaggio, the Italian artist who, more and more in the eyes of critics and historians is being dubbed “the father of modern painting.” Whether or not he merits this adulation and whether or not this lofty recognition remains attached to his name will depend on future generations. His current popularity is relatively recent because for many decades after his death he was generally ignored.

His real name was Michelangelo Merisi and he was born in Milan on September 29, 1571. His birth on the feast of the archangel Michael explains why he was baptized “Michelangelo.”<sup>①</sup> The family's roots were in Caravaggio, a small town some miles east of Milan and as a painter, he became known by the name of his home place, a custom which was not uncommon during his time. You may recall that our 2009 Christmas Madonna postage stamp was based on a painting by Sassoferrato, the native place of the artist Giovanni Battista Salvi.

Caravaggio did not come from a poor family. Both his father and mother were well known in society; his father would today be classified as an architect and he was the estate manager for the Marchese of Caravaggio, one Francesco Sforza. The wife of the Marchese was a Colonna, a well-connected family, especially in church circles, and she took a special interest in the young Caravaggio who lost his father when he was only six and his mother when he was thirteen. Two years after his second parent died he was apprenticed for four years to the Lombard painter, Simone Peterzano. He apparently stayed in northern Italy for a few years before heading to Rome in 1592. He was then 21 years of age.

Caravaggio matured to become a painter of enormous talent and originality. His personal life, however, left a great deal to be desired. He was far from being an angel! He had a violent and uncontrollable temper, which sometimes resulted in the loss of commissions and troubled his patrons. In his book, “Caravaggio, a Passionate Life,” Desmond Seward (a Knight of Malta), summed it all up in one paragraph:

There could be no greater contrast than that between Caravaggio's painting and his private life. On canvas he was a spiritual genius whose profound religious statements touch the hearts of unbelievers as well as believers. Yet, in Bernard Berenson's words he was “quick-tempered and bad-tempered, intolerant, devious, jealous, spiteful, quarrelsome, a street-brawler, a homicide, and perhaps a homosexual. He was endowed with innumerable gifts, but with none for decent living.” Even during his lifetime, Caravaggio's long-suffering protector, Cardinal del Monte, credited him with “a wildly capricious brain.” Another patron thought that his brain was “twisted.” More than one prince of the Church was ready to overlook his sins for the sake of his genius, but they could not save him from himself.<sup>②</sup>

It is estimated that we are aware of sixty or so paintings which are attributed to Caravaggio; of this num-

ber a few may be somebody painting in his style or a few may be copies. If you want to study Caravaggio the place to go is Rome where fully one third of his works are exhibited in various galleries and churches. ③ Indeed, to mark his anniversary, Rome persuaded galleries all over the world to send them, on loan, their prized Caravaggios for a comprehensive exhibition of his works in the Scuderie del Quirinale. This exhibition attracted unprecedented attention and was visited by about 5000 people daily. Coincidentally it closes today.④

One of his masterworks currently in Rome is Caravaggio's "St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness," now one of the prized pieces of our own Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. I have brought along a poster of the painting for you to look at but, of course, no print or poster does justice to the original. And because of who you are, Knights and Dames of the Order of Malta, I want to give you one more good reason why you should be fully acquainted with this significant work of art which depicts the patron of the Order, St. John the Baptist.

Let me explain. I am going to tell you the story, the word most commonly used is "the provenance," of this painting which, I believe, most of you will find surprising. Accordingly, much as I would like to, I do not have the time to regale you with descriptions of his colorful life and his magnificent body of work all accomplished during his short life of 39 years. If you are interested in knowing more about this artist and his work, then I must refer you to the many books, including biographies, which have been written about him in recent times and, in addition, the anniversary of his death this year has occasioned a whole plethora of fascinating articles.⑤

Let me return to our "John the Baptist." After the Reformation and rallied by the Council of Trent, a deeply-wounded Catholic Church struggled to regain its stature in Europe. There were many changes and one of them was in the field of artistic expression and this trend was quite noticeable in the realm of religious art. The conventions of Mannerism were out and Caravaggio, more so than many others of his time, developed a naturalistic style which placed religious events in the contemporary world along with a hitherto unknown interplay of light and shadows. Religious paintings would never be the same again and Caravaggio, after being ignored for decades, is now credited with being one of the most creative and successful proponents of this revolutionary change.

In 1604 Ottavio Costa, the richest banker in Rome, commissioned Caravaggio to do a "John the Baptist" as an altarpiece for the tiny parish church in his home town of Coscente in northern Italy not far from the large port city of Genoa. The family was in the process of building a new and larger parish church and the older building was being relegated to the status of an oratory or chapel. The subject was chosen because the tiny chapel was the home of and was supported by a lay confraternity dedicated to St. John the Baptist. One of their charities was the provision of Christian funerals for the deceased poor whose families could not afford them, an apostolate which gave practical meaning to one of the corporal works of mercy. Some have maintained that the somber appearance of the painting was appropriate for funeral rites which, especially at that time when cholera was so prevalent, were far more somber in nature than may be the case today in our personal experience.

When Costa saw the painting, he decided to keep it himself.⑥ To fulfill his promise, however, he commissioned some unknown artist to make a copy and the latter went to Coscente. The original by Caravaggio was now family property and when Costa died in 1639 his will stipulated that the painting should remain in the family in perpetuity. This provision lasted for a number of generations until it came into the possession of a descendant who happened to be a member of the Order of Malta. At that time membership demanded that, upon death, all possessions became the property of the Order. Some family members sued and the court case dragged on for many years until finally in 1705, the Church's highest court, the Rota, ruled in favor of the Knights. The painting was shipped to the headquarters of the Order, then on the island of Malta.

Strangely enough, this was almost 100 years after Caravaggio himself spent some time in Malta. I would like to say that he was on vacation but that was not the case! Shortly after finishing his "John the Baptist," true to form and ever the rabble-rouser, Caravaggio got involved in a street brawl in which a

participant was killed. Fingers were pointed at Caravaggio and, whether guilty or not, he fled to Naples, a jurisdiction beyond the laws of the Papal States. He spent the last four years of his life “on the run” but not unemployed. After Naples he arrived in Malta in July, 1607 where he did two portraits of the Order’s Grand Master, Aloff de Wignacourt, and, in recompense, he was received into the Order in 1608. He also completed his largest and only signed painting, the “Beheading of John the Baptist,” still to be admired today in the Co-Cathedral of St. John in Valetta, the island’s capital. Caravaggio couldn’t keep out of trouble; another street brawl, jail time, an escape from custody, an alleged physical attack on a fellow knight all resulted in his expulsion from the Order and he upped and fled to Sicily, staying on the move from Syracuse to Messina and then Palermo. You may recall that some years ago it was reported in the press that his famous altarpiece entitled, “The Adoration of the Shepherds with St. Lawrence and St. Francis” was stolen from the Oratory of St. Lawrence in Palermo and, to the best of my knowledge, has never been recovered. After Sicily he returned to Naples, reportedly received a pardon from the Pope for his role in the alleged murder in Rome but he died in mysterious circumstances on his way back to the Eternal City. He died not knowing that his work, “St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness” would one day end up in Malta 95 years after his untimely death.

In the 1740s a young English Lord with a Scottish title, Baron Aston of Forfar, was on the Grand Tour and somehow he acquired the painting from the Order of Malta. He shipped it back to England where it remained in obscurity for about 200 years probably on the Constable estate in Yorkshire to which the Aston descendants had moved.<sup>⑦</sup> In 1951 an Art Dealer in London purchased the painting. It was placed on the international market and both the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the National Gallery in Washington had the opportunity to acquire it. Director Walker of the National Gallery later confessed, “I made a mistake which still haunts me.”

These missed opportunities constituted a stroke of fortune for Kansas City and specifically the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

In the spring of 1952 one of the Museum’s trustees was vacationing in London. Milton McGreevy, his wife Barbara and his daughter Jeanne visited the art dealers’ showroom and there was the “St. John in the Wilderness.” Mr. McGreevy immediately put a reserve on it and that’s how it came to Kansas City and that’s why Kansas City is one of the few cities in the United States which can boast that it provides the home for a Caravaggio. Earlier this year I started preparing this talk with the conviction that the local Knights and Dames of the Order of Malta should be aware that Caravaggio was very briefly a member of the Order and that his “St. John in the Wilderness” was once in the possession of the Order at a time when it owned and governed what is now the independent island nation of Malta.

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## REFERENCES

A feast in honor of St. Michael the Archangel has existed in the Church since the sixth century and for most of that time has been celebrated on September 29. In 1970 the Holy See stipulated that all three named archangels, Michael, Gabriel and Raphael should share the same feast day on September 29. In 1571 only Michael’s name was on the liturgical calendar.

Berenson’s description has been questioned by other biographers. Some maintain Caravaggio was present at the brawl in Rome in 1606 but he may not have been the murderer of Ranuccio Tommasoni. Even more question his homosexuality citing evidence that he had mistresses.

③ Caravaggios may be viewed in Rome at the following galleries and churches:

**Borghese Gallery,**  
Piazzale del Museo

Borghese, 5; (39-06) 8413979,  
Galleriaborghese.it. (Ticket reservations necessary: 39-06-32810)

**Barberini Gallery,**

Via delle Quattro  
Fontane , 13; (39-06) 4824184,  
Galleriaborghese.it.

**Corsini Gallery**

Via della Lungara, 10; (39-06) 68802323,  
galleriaborghese.it.

**Capitoline Museums**

Piazza del Campidoglio, 1  
(39-06) 060608  
en.museicapitolini.org

**Doria Pamphilj Gallery**

Via del Corso, 305  
(39-06) 6797323;  
dopart.it

**Vatican Museums**

Viale Vaticano  
(39-06) 69884676 or (39-06) 69883145  
[www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

**Contarelli Chapel**

San Luigi dei Francesi  
Piazza San Luigi dei Francesi  
(39-06) 688271

**Cerasi Chapel**

Santa Maria del Popolo  
Piazza del Popolo, 12  
(39-06) 3610836

**Sant'Agostino**

Piazza di Sant'Agostino, 80  
(39-06) 68801962  
(Taken from the New York Times, Travel Section, June 6, 2010)

- ④ See "The Painter of things happening as they happen,"  
Giuseppe Frangi, 30 Days, March 2, 2010, page 56.
  
- ⑤ See Bibliographies, listed later. Other articles include:
  - (a) 30 DAYS, March 2010
  - (b) INSIDE THE VATICAN, April, 2010
  - (c) NEW YORK TIMES, June 6, 2010
  - (d) "THE ARTIST AS STREET FIGHTER," Book Review of Peter Robb's biography of Caravaggio entitled "M," reviewed by Hilary Spurling, New York Times, March 5, 2000.
  
- ⑥ Costa acquired no less than five Caravaggios.

⑦ James, who acquired the painting, was the Fifth Lord Aston. His grandfather, Walter was appointed the English Ambassador to Spain by King James I. On a second visit to Spain between 1635 and 1638 he became a Catholic. The family lived at Tixall Hall in Staffordshire. James, the Fifth Lord, died in 1751, leaving two daughters. The title passed to other male relatives and eventually died out. The younger daughter, Barbara, coming of age in 1768, inherited Tixall Hall and its contents including the painting. She had married the Hon. Thomas Clifford but their son, Thomas Hugh Clifford, inherited the name and Burton Constable Estates in Yorkshire in 1821, to which his son moved the family in 1833. Presumably, the painting went with them. They probably did not know the value of the painting as it was unsigned and Caravaggio was virtually unknown at the time.

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## POST SCRIPTS

1. I want to express my thanks to the personnel of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art who were most helpful especially Emily Kenagy, the Department Assistant of the European Paintings and Sculpture Section. She shared some notes with me which are used to educate the Museum's docents.

2. When I was a university student in Dublin in the 1950s, I occasionally attended Mass at St. Francis Xavier Church on Upper Gardiner Street. Little did I know that Caravaggio's long lost painting "The Taking of Christ" was hanging in the dining room of the Jesuit residence next door. Long thought to be a copy of the lost original by Gerard van Honthorst, after cleaning in the early 1990s the painting was authenticated as a Caravaggio and the discovery was announced in 1993. It is now on permanent loan to the National Gallery of Ireland. The painting is one of a few Caravaggios which features a self portrait of the artist.