On the Trail of Caravaggio

Caravaggio painted David with the Head of Goliath (above) in 1609 during his final stay in Naples. It was likely meant for one of the influential Romans lobbying the pope to pardon the artist, who is said to have depicted his own features on Goliath's face.

By Francine Prose; Photographs by Andrea Pistolesi, Smithsonian, March 2007

The works of the criminally gifted 16th-century painter are attracting passionate, even cultish, admirers. A noted novelist makes her own pilgrimage through Italy in search of the master turned murderer.

AMONG THE MYSTERIES surrounding the turbulent life and the dramatic career of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio is how this brilliant Baroque painter of powerfully moving religious scenes and sensual visions of earthly delight could have fallen into disfavor and obscurity for more than three centuries after his death in 1610. How could the most casual tourists or the most pious supplicants have seen his work in Rome's Contarelli or Cerasi chapels and not noticed that they were in the presence of genius? But in fact Caravaggio, though celebrated and financially successful in his own time, was despised by later artists such as Nicolas Poussin, scorned by critics (among them eminent British writer John Ruskin) and nearly unknown to the general public until 1951, when a landmark exhibition in Milan, curated by the respected Italian art historian Roberto Longhi, restored him to his rightful place in art history.

Longhi's rescue effort has proved to be an enduring one. Today in every season and regardless of how early or late in the day one goes, those same chapels are crowded not only with travelers encountering Caravaggio for the first time but, just as often, with ardent devotees who have come to Rome specifically to look at his work. Indeed, over the past decade or so, this notoriously mercurial and troubled artist has gained such a passionate following that if you spend long enough in front of one of his paintings, you're bound to meet someone who has
journeyed a considerable distance to see it.

So, several years ago as the winter morning light filtered into Rome's Church of Sant' Agostino, where I had gone directly from the plane to look at The Madonna of Loreto (opposite), I met a passenger from the same flight, an American accountant, who had also headed straight for the Caravaggio. Not long after, at a dinner in Manhattan, I sat beside a distinguished research scientist who keeps a list of all the known Caravaggio’s beside his phone; whenever he is invited to attend a conference, he checks the list, and his acceptance often hinges on the meeting’s proximity to a work he has not yet seen. More recently, after giving a museum talk about Caravaggio, I met dozens of art lovers who had adopted the tormented Baroque master as their unlikely tour guide. They'd followed a sort of Caravaggio trail, visiting the places where he lived, and looking at his paintings, which themselves have been traveling widely, as a series of Caravaggio exhibitions--including the Van Gogh Museum's magnificent "Rembrandt-Caravaggio" show last year--have at once responded to, and furthered, the artist's popularity and his international reputation.

CARAVAGGIO AND ROME

STRICTLY SPEAKING, the proper Caravaggio tour should begin in Caravaggio, the small town outside Milan where Michelangelo Merisi was born, most likely in 1571, the son of a builder, Fermo di Bernardino Merisi, employed by the illustrious Sforza and Colonna families. After the death of her husband in 1577, Caravaggio's mother, Lucia Aratori, raised Michelangelo and his three siblings with the help of her father. Caravaggio is thought to have received the basics of a formal education, but he appears to have had no interest in writing---unlike, say, Leonardo da Vinci, who composed learned treatises, or Michelangelo Buonarroti, who left a body of written work that ranges from poems to grocery lists. Not a single letter, drawing or preparatory sketch by Caravaggio has ever been found. He wrote nothing about himself, certainly nothing about his childhood, and his adult life seems to have included no one who knew him as a boy.

Indeed, so little is known about the artist's early years and education (in 1584, at age 13, he was taken on as an apprentice in the Milan
One of the artist's first religious works, *The Rest on the Flight Into Egypt* (left) was painted in the 1590s and possibly commissioned by Cardinal Francesco Maria Del Monte, Caravaggio's most important patron. In the fall of 1595, the painter had moved into the cardinal's mansion, the Palazzo Madama (right), now home to the Italian Senate. Caravaggio painted *The Lute Player* (top) in 1596.

In Rome, without venturing far from the historical center, you can (especially if you are willing to dodge the murderous traffic on the Corso Vittorio Emanuele and even more lethal motorini darting through the so-called pedestrian zone) trace the arc of Caravaggio's glorious and tragically
A curtailed career in the capital, a meteoric trajectory that led from poverty to fame and riches and then to crime, murder and exile. You might begin at the edge of the Piazza del Popolo, at the Porta del Popolo, which was, in Caravaggio's day, the principal gateway into the city from the north and, in all probability, the route that the young painter took into Rome. From there you can proceed to the Palazzo Colonna, where Caravaggio stayed briefly with a Monsignor Pandolfo Pucci, a steward to the sister of Pope Sixtus V, who forced the proud young artist to make knockoffs of devotional paintings and fed him so poorly that Caravaggio would refer to Pucci as Monsignor Insalata.

After his unsatisfactory sojourn with Monsignor Insalata, Caravaggio briefly supported himself by making pictures to sell on the street. He soon found employment painting flowers and fruit in the bustling studio of Giuseppe Cesari, later known as the Cavaliere d'Arpino. While working for Cesari, Caravaggio became involved in the rough-and-tumble street life of the now-stylish Campo Marzio, which—with its elegant restaurants and handsome government buildings patrolled by carabinieri who always seem a few years too young for the machine guns they're holding—shows little sign of the seedy brothels, taverns and alleys through which Caravaggio swaggered, caroused and encountered the prostitutes, gamblers, ordinary laborers and beggars that he would cast (so shockingly, to his contemporaries) as saints and witnesses in his most spiritual paintings. Nor, for that matter, do the boutiques and gourmet groceries of the Via della Scrofa suggest that this is the place where in May 1606 Caravaggio became embroiled in the ultimately disastrous dispute that allegedly began over a wager on a tennis match. Today, the Piazza di San Lorenzo in Lucina—where, on the night of May 28, the feud that had begun near the tennis courts erupted into a street fight during which Caravaggio stabbed and killed a man named Ranuccio Tomassoni—is most often filled with children and their nannies taking the sun and enjoying the gelato (some of the best in Rome) at Ciampini.

Much of what is known about Caravaggio's life comes to us through police records and legal depositions. During his time in Rome, he insulted his fellow painters, quarreled, fought, broke the law, defied the police and was subsequently imprisoned. He was sued for libel, arrested for carrying a weapon without a license, prosecuted for tossing a plate of artichokes in a waiter's face. He was accused of throwing stones at the police, attacking the house of two women, harassing a former landlady and wounding a prison guard.

But evidently his eruptive anger was never directed at the influential aristocrats and ecclesiastical authorities who furthered his career. Heading toward the Tiber from the Campo Marzio, you can pass the Palazzo Madama, now the home of the Italian Senate, where Caravaggio lived for several years in the household of his first, most loyal and important patron, the Cardinal Francesco Maria Del Monte. An avid art collector, music lover and adviser to Ferdinando de' Medici, Del Monte bought two of Caravaggio's canvases, *The Gypsy Fortune Teller* and *The Cardsharps* (right), then supported him while he painted the dewily sensual, lush-lipped and seductive young men who populate such early masterpieces as *The Musicians* and *The Lute Player*.

As the Caravaggio pilgrim traces the artist's erratic path through the city where he led a sort of double life spanning low and high society, it soon becomes clear that even the intense drama of the artist's biography rather pales beside the vibrancy and high-wire theatrics of his paintings. Because, finally, what continues to draw us to Caravaggio is not so much his near-mythic reputation as a street thug and criminal but rather his work, which of course is the real reason to embark on the Caravaggio tour.
If I had just two hours in Rome, I'd begin in the Contarelli Chapel of the Church of San Luigi dei Francesi, plugging coins in the meter that illuminates the dazzling St. Matthew cycle. *The Calling of St. Matthew* (far right), one of Caravaggio's best-known works, shows Matthew in the customhouse at the moment at which Jesus appears and, pointing his finger, changes Matthew's life forever. Across the chapel is the roiling scene of Matthew's murder at the hands of an assassin who, naked but for a loincloth, has risen from the crowd to grasp the falling saint's wrist and lock him in a gaze that darkly mirrors the fixity of the look that Matthew exchanges with Jesus in the earlier painting. Meanwhile, in the background a cloaked figure provides one of several self-portraits that Caravaggio included in his paintings, most often picturing himself as a witness at some violent or tragic event. Next I'd stop at the nearby Church of Sant' Agostino, as I have before, to see *The Madonna of Loreto*—the gorgeous depiction of the Virgin and her small child coming to the door to greet two pilgrims, whose bare, dirty feet attest to the length and hardship of their journey.

I'd pass my second Roman hour in the Cerasi Chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo, where the cacophony of the Piazza del Popolo fades the moment you enter the church doors. Like the Contarelli Chapel paintings, *The Crucifixion of St. Peter* and *The Conversion of St. Paul* focus on specific moments and recast events from the lives of the saints with "naturalistic and highly individualized figures posed against shadowy, theatrically lit backgrounds. In the former painting, Caravaggio portrays the moment that marks the beginning of the saint's agony. Already the old man's suffering—he strains to lift his head off the inverted cross—is heartbreaking, but what makes the painting so unusual and so typical of Caravaggio is his fascination with the burly bodies of the men who are struggling to lift the cross. On the opposite wall, Caravaggio has reimagined Saul's transformation into Paul as a night scene in which the saint writhes on the ground, his arms thrown open, blinded by a moment of illumination witnessed only by a muscular, exhausted-looking horse and a melancholy groom.

Of course, the traveler with more than two hours to spend in the Eternal City can follow the Caravaggio trail to some of Rome's leading and lesser-known (but no less rewarding) museums. In the permanent collection of the Galleria Borghese are *David with the Head of Goliath* (p. 1), a deeply affecting late work and another of the canvases in which the artist himself makes a cameo appearance, this time in the portrait of the dead, defeated giant. The Borghese also owns one of Caravaggio's frankly homoerotic portrayals of the young *St. John the Baptist* as well as *The Madonna of the Palafrenieri*, a representation of the Madonna and Child with St. Anne, in which Christ appears as a boy of around 7 stepping on a serpent that symbolizes evil. This canvas was
Caravaggio painted *The Flagellation of Christ* (left) in 1607 for the chapel in the courtyard of Naples' San Domenico monastery. His *Seven Acts of Mercy* was executed for the Church of Pio Monte della Misericordia, not far from the Via dei Tribunali (right). A few days after Caravaggio murdered Ranuccio Tomassoni (as soon as the wounds he'd sustained in the fight had healed), the painter left Rome. And the modern pilgrim following in his footsteps might travel much as he did for the last four years of his life: moving rapidly, covering long distances, arriving at a series of destinations, eventually moving on. Experiencing the strains (as well as the pleasures) of travel makes it seem all that much more remarkable that Caravaggio kept painting at the highest level the entire time he was in flight.

NAPLES

TO AVOID ARREST, the injured artist fled to the pleasant Alban Hills, not far from Rome, where he recuperated under the protection of the Colonna family. When autumn came he headed south to Naples, where he was courted by the Neapolitan aristocracy and welcomed by the local painters. Soon after his arrival, he executed an altarpiece for the Church of Pio Monte della Misericordia, a painting that would depict the Seven Acts of Mercy: clothing the naked, visiting the ill and imprisoned, giving food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, sheltering the traveler and burying the dead.

The Church of Pio Monte della Misericordia is in the midst of the frenetic (to say the least) and colorful historical center, on one of the most heavily trafficked blocks of the ancient road that has become the Via dei Tribunali (right). Looking up the dark, narrow, perpetually thrumming Via dei Tribunali, it's easier than it is in Rome to imagine yourself back in Caravaggio's time, in the city where Caravaggio found refuge, and which he managed to translate onto the canvas of *The Seven Acts of Mercy*. With its teeming composition set in a nocturnal streetscape, the altarpiece may make you feel as if the cyclonic street life of the city has somehow followed you inside the church. Indeed, the relationship between Caravaggio and the atmosphere of Naples (which can make Rome appear quiet and orderly) seems so complex and synergistic that looking at Caravaggio's paintings makes you see the city in a new way--and vice versa. The heavy blacks that appear so frequently in his late works make a different kind of sense after you've experienced the city's inky shadows, and the drapery that floats near the top of some of his canvases begins to remind you of the laundry strung across its narrow alleys.

Caravaggio thrived in Naples. It was there that he painted his extraordinary version of *The Flagellation of*
Caravaggio, who became a Knight of Malta in 1608, painted The Beheading of St. John the Baptist (above) for the Oratory of the Co-Cathedral of St. John in Valletta, Malta's capital. It was at the altar of this very same church that Caravaggio's knighthood was stripped from him after only four months.

MALTA

HOWEVER WELCOMING NAPLES WAS, however beneficial to his work, Caravaggio didn't stay long. In the summer of 1607, he left Naples for Malta. And thus began the pattern that would characterize his final three years. Wherever he went, his work earned him not only intense (both positive and negative) attention but increasingly high fees. As he traveled, presumably awaiting the pardon from the pope that might let him return to the capital without being arrested, he found a way of supporting himself and practicing his art away from the patrons and the intrigues of Rome. He believed he was being followed, possibly by representatives of the pope, and he slept with a dagger beneath his pillow. And inevitably, something would go wrong, compelling him to keep moving.

In Valletta, Malta's capital, he was hired to paint The Beheading of St. John the Baptist (above right) for the Oratory of the Co-Cathedral of St. John. The composition of this massive painting marks a new approach characteristic of his last religious works: depictions of miracles, or of their preludes or aftermaths, transpiring in what appears to be the depths of an abyss. In these works, the figures are crowded into the lower half of the painting, beneath a crushing expanse of space that makes the drama seem even darker and more tragic.

Around this time, Caravaggio managed to have himself appointed a Knight of Malta--not an easy task, since the honor was reserved mostly for sons of the aristocracy. His knighthood may have had something to do with the portrait he did of the Grand
Master of the Knights of Malta, Alof de Wignacourt, a mysterious and complex rendering of the sitter's personality. But again, despite his new status and his powerful patron, the artist's situation took a sudden turn for the worse. Caravaggio insulted a fellow knight, a serious offense, and he was subsequently imprisoned in the notoriously escape-proof Castel Sant'Angelo fortress.

**SICILY**

Caravaggio, however, was able to escape, apparently by scaling the walls of the fortress with a rope and sailing out of the harbor on a waiting boat, furnished perhaps by Wignacourt or another supporter. Pursued, he believed, not only by the pope's men but now also a posse of vengeful Maltese knights, he fled to Sicily—first to Syracuse, where the pilgrim can depart briefly from the Caravaggio trail to visit the city's spectacular Greek archaeological sites and to wander among the Baroque palazzi of the Old City on the island of Ortygia, at the eastern end of the city. In fact, there is evidence that Caravaggio himself was taken by the famous archaeologist Vincenzo Mirabella to view the quarries that border on the beautifully preserved Greek amphitheater at the western edge of the city. These stone caverns were said to have been used as prisons by the Greek tyrant Dionysius the Elder. One of them has unusual acoustical properties: if someone whispers in one corner, it can be heard clearly on the cavern's far side. Caravaggio, who had spent enough time in prison, and had plenty of experience with paranoia and with the fear of being overheard, christened it the Ear of Dionysius, a name that immediately spread, and by which the cave (right) is still known today.

In Syracuse, Caravaggio was reunited with Mario Minniti, a close friend and fellow artist with whom he had lived in Rome. Minniti is thought to have helped arrange Caravaggio's commission to paint a monumental canvas, *The Burial of St. Lucy* (left), for the Church of Santa Lucia, where the virgin martyr had originally been entombed. When not traveling, the painting is now in the Museo Regionale di Arte e Moderna, housed in the Palazzo Bellomo on Ortygia.

As in *The Beheading of St. John the Baptist*, the narrative is confined to the lower half of the canvas, where the burial is taking place. Long before you see the martyred saint, your eye is caught by two gravediggers, one of whom has his back turned toward you. And you must look past them to see the murdered virgin, who is surrounded by a small circle of mourners, a grouping that helps make the painting a resonant depiction of grief and loss.

In the winter of 1608–9, Caravaggio left Syracuse for Messina, where he received a commission to paint *The Resurrection of Lazarus*. According to one early biographer, he destroyed the
first version of the painting when he felt that it had been underappreciated by his provincial patrons. Later he repainted it, presumably using a corpse as the model for the dead Lazarus, just as he had for the first version. Little about the modern city, with its broad, straight avenues and new construction, evokes Caravaggio's Messina, most of which was leveled by an earthquake in 1908. And the two Caravaggios, including The Resurrection of Lazarus, in the city's art museum are not among his finest.

After a fight with a local schoolmaster who claimed that the artist stared too fixedly at young schoolboys, Caravaggio left Messina for Palermo. In contrast to Messina, there is plenty to see in Palermo, Sicily's astonishingly lively and culturally rich capital city--but not, as it happens, a Caravaggio; The Adoration of the Shepherds with Sts. Lawrence and Francis that he painted there was later lost. Even so, a week is hardly enough to visit Palermo's vibrant markets (most famously, the Vucciria), to stroll through its historic districts, to step inside its Baroque churches, to see its magnificent mosaics and to seek refuge from the city's hubbub in the cloistered garden of San Giovanni degli Eremiti.

From Palermo, Caravaggio returned to Naples, where, during a fight at a tavern, his face was so badly slashed that he was nearly unrecognizable. While he recovered he began a series of smaller paintings for the powerful Romans pleading his case. And eventually, in the summer of 1610, he received word that those wealthy patrons had at last succeeded in obtaining an official pardon from the pope for the 1606 murder.

Bringing along several paintings, he set sail for Rome. But en route, he met with bad luck, and then disaster. At the tiny Tuscan port of Palo, northwest of Rome, Caravaggio disembarked. Possibly mistaken for someone else, he was held for questioning. The tide turned, and the ship, with all of his possessions and paintings, sailed on without him to its destination of Port'Ercole.

Two days later, after buying his way out of prison, he was released. Left with little funds, furious and desperate to recover his paintings, he resolved to catch up with the ship. Traversing marshy mosquito-infested areas and walking more than 60 miles along the scalding beach, he finally reached Port'Ercole, where he collapsed and died, most likely of fever, in a small infirmary run by the brothers of San Sebastiano. He was 38.
PORT'ERCOLE

BY THIS POINT, the Caravaggio pilgrim may be forgiven for not dwelling on the fact that Port'Ercole was, for his or her hero, a place of suffering and death. Because almost 400 years later, it's become a lovely resort on the Tuscan coast, with a crescent-shaped harbor surrounded by hilltops with a fort and a tower. It's a town where Italians go to eat fresh seafood, and shop and stroll along the promenade fronting the ocean. And from Port'Ercole, you can drive through the saltwater marshes to the equally pleasant town of Porto Santo Stefano.

The once-lonely, rugged outpost where Caravaggio died seems a long way from its current incarnation as a haven of relaxation and pleasure. And yet when you mention Caravaggio's name to Port'Ercole's residents, a certain expression comes over their faces, a look of pride in their hometown's connection, however tragic, with this important artist. To discuss Caravaggio's sad fate with the citizens of Port'Ercole is to acknowledge that you came here for something more than the scampi, the sea and the sun. You feel as you might if you'd checked into Chaucer's Tabard Inn, or perhaps a hostel along the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela. That is, you can't help imagining that your hosts view you as part of a long procession, a line of pilgrims that have come before you, and that, thanks to the power of Caravaggio's art, will keep coming--for years, even centuries, after you have gone.

Desperate to recover his possessions and paintings still onboard the ship that had left him behind in the port of Palo, Caravaggio pursued the vessel to its final destination of Port'Ercole (previous page). St. John the Baptist Drinking at the Fountain (above) may have been one of the works he sought.