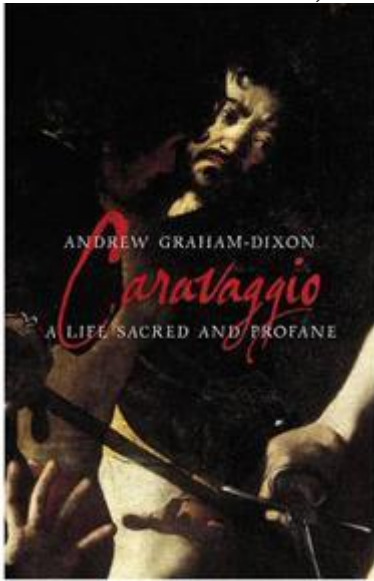


Caravaggio: a Life Sacred and Profane by Andrew Graham-Dixon: review

Charles Saumarez Smith praises Caravaggio by Andrew Graham-Dixon, awarts and all biography of the swaggering painter

Of all the great European artists of the past, there is probably none who more obviously appeals to a modern sensibility than Caravaggio. Born on September 29 1571 in Caravaggio outside Milan, he moved at an early age to Rome, where he was quickly taken up by Cardinal del Monte, who recognised his extraordinary talent. In the late 1590s, his paintings were direct, realistic and extremely intense, creating a style of biblical narrative as if the events had happened in the streets of Rome. His work was immediately seen to be totally different in character from the much more high-flown and classical inventions of the [Carracci](#), who were the leading artists of the day.



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But Caravaggio also suffered from tremendous defects of character. It is possible that he was homosexual, which may have been part of his attraction to Cardinal del Monte, and he was certainly capable of painting works which, to modern eyes, are extremely louche.

But he also spent a great deal of time, as Andrew Graham-Dixon brilliantly documents, frequenting the bordellos of Rome and making friends with prostitutes, whom he also used as models. He was extraordinarily aggressive, swaggering around the back streets of Rome in the middle of the night, armed with a sword and picking fights with fellow villains.

Graham-Dixon suggests he may have been a pimp. I am not convinced that the documentation supports this, but, in every other way, the fact that Caravaggio was endlessly in trouble with the courts means that Graham-Dixon is able to provide a detailed picture of what his life was like, based on court evidence.

Eventually (and inevitably), Caravaggio goes too far for his ecclesiastical supporters. On May 28 1606, he fought a duel with Ranuccio Tomassoni for reasons which are not entirely clear, but relate to his tendency to make friends with prostitutes. Tomassoni was stabbed in the groin. Caravaggio had to flee and found his way to Naples, where, rather remarkably, given that he was now known to be a murderer, he was given a commission to paint The Seven Acts of Mercy for the Pio Monte, a group of rich aristocrats who had dedicated themselves to the care of the poor and the sick.

It is a powerful work, painted in seven weeks, still in situ in the Chiesa del Pio Monte della Misericordia, which was soon afterwards reconstructed so the picture could be seen to best dramatic effect.

But Caravaggio was not content simply to pursue a new career as a painter in Naples. He wanted to be forgiven for the murder and determined that he should become a Knight of Malta, which was not an obviously very suitable career for someone who liked nothing better than low-life and who could not prevent himself from getting into ugly scrapes.

He managed to get himself to Malta, where, once again, he was immediately taken up by the church authorities and given a major commission to paint Alof de Wignacourt, the Grand Master of the Order. In exchange for the money owing to the Order to be invested as a Knight of Magistral Obedience, Caravaggio agreed to paint a large altarpiece for the Oratory of St John, built immediately next door to the cathedral in Valetta.

Although Graham-Dixon is extremely good at describing and explaining Caravaggio's work, he fails to convey the full impact of [The Beheading of St John](#), a huge, nearly cinematic, work filling the confined space where it is seen coming out of the darkness of the cathedral.

But Caravaggio could not stay out of trouble and, not long afterwards, there was an altercation with a Knight Justice which led to Caravaggio being slung into jail. He managed to escape from the Castel Sant'Angelo, a feat which would have been impossible without some form of inside help. Perhaps the Grand Master thought that it was better to be rid of him, rather than have to prosecute him and keep him on the island.

He fled to Sicily, where he was looked after by Mario Minniti, a fellow painter, and, once again, given major commissions for altarpieces. Caravaggio slept in his clothes, always armed, to defend himself in case the authorities came for him.

But he was still capable of painting great works of art, including *The Burial of St Lucy*, *The Resurrection of Lazarus* and *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, which were shown in London in the exhibition *Caravaggio: the Final Years* at the National Gallery in 2005.

Caravaggio left Sicily for Naples where, outside a male brothel, his enemies finally caught up with him and slashed his face. He died not long afterwards in Porto Ercole, trying to retrieve three pictures from the felucca that had taken him from Naples to seek his pardon in Rome. His was a short but incredibly influential career in which he transformed the character of European painting in such a way that for 50 years a host of artists in Italy, France and Holland concentrated on trying to imitate him, the high contrasts of dark and light and the immediacy of artistic expression.

Graham-Dixon conveys the force of Caravaggio's personality and the consequences of his art with a brilliant grasp of detail. After years in which art historians have concentrated on the minutiae of artistic style, it is refreshing to read a biography of Caravaggio that combines the blood and guts of Rome's backstreets with a real understanding of the quality and character of his paintings.

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