

Caravaggio's Capitoline *Saint John*: An Emblematic Image of Divine Love

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With an oeuvre filled with striking, even shocking works, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's *Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness*, still remains one of his most visually compelling works (Figure 1).¹ The painting, now in the Capitoline Museum in Rome, was completed around 1601-02 during the height of the artist's Roman career.² At first glance, the nude figure, splayed from corner to corner across the entire canvas, produces an uneasy response in the viewer. The boy's soft, curly hair, prepubescent body and coquettish turn of the head endow the image with an unexpected sensuality. It is precisely this quality that has spawned nearly four hundred years of debate about the identity of Caravaggio's nude youth, the supposed John the Baptist. Indeed, viewers from the seventeenth century to the present have often found it difficult to reconcile the image's apparent secularity with its ostensibly sacred subject.

Little is known about the circumstances surrounding the commission and execution of the painting except that, according to payment records, it was in Ciriaco Mattei's possession by 1602.³ Caravaggio had entered the Mattei household by

mid-1601 on the invitation of the Roman Marchese Ciriaco Mattei and his two brothers, Cardinal Girolamo Mattei and Asdrubale Mattei, and remained there for approximately two years.⁴ Thirteen years later, his painting was recorded in the 1616 inventory of Ciriaco's only son and heir, Giovanni Battista Mattei, at which time it was listed as "Saint John the Baptist with his lamb by the hand of Caravaggio."⁵ From this point forward, the painting is documented in numerous inventories, and these records reveal that uncertainty over the subject matter was present virtually from the beginning. In 1623, Giovanni Battista Mattei bequeathed the painting to Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte, in whose 1627 inventory it was described as a Saint John the Baptist. When the painting was sold the following year to Cardinal Emmanuel Pio, the sale documents described the subject as *il coridone*, a term commonly used in classical and Renaissance poetry to identify shepherds.⁶ The painting was then mentioned in various inventories as a sacred Saint John, a secular shepherd or nude youth.⁷ In 1749, the painting entered the Capitoline collection after its purchase from the Pio family by Pope Benedict

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¹ For general bibliographic information on Caravaggio, see: Walter Friedlander, *Caravaggio Studies* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1955, reprint 1974); Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1983); John T. Spike and Michèle K. Spike, *Caravaggio* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2001); Catherine Puglisi, *Caravaggio* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998, 2002); and Helen Langdon, *Caravaggio: A Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).

² Hibbard 151; Puglisi 205; Langdon 213.

³ Francesca Cappelletti and Laura Testa, *Il Trattenimento di Virtuosi: Le collezioni secentesche di quadri nei Palazzi Mattei di Roma* (Roma: Argos Edizioni, 1994) 105-6. The authors have suggested that the Capitoline painting is the one recorded in the Mattei account book of 1602, where two payments to Caravaggio are noted, one on June 26, 1602 for 60 *scudi* and one on December 25, 1602 for 25 *scudi*, for a total of eighty-five *scudi*. No title or description is given in the ledger regarding the nature of the two payments, although it is generally accepted that they refer to the Capitoline *Saint John*. The two other works by Caravaggio owned by the Mattei are also documented in the ledger, which lists the payment for the *Supper at Emmaus* at 150 *scudi* on January 7, 1602, and the *Taking of Christ* for which 125 *scudi* were paid on January 2, 1603.

⁴ Spike 126, 150. Between 1603 and 1606, Caravaggio was frequently imprisoned on various charges; while out of jail during this period, it is un-

clear where he resided. By 1605, he was residing in a house in the Vicolo dei Santi Cecilia e Biagio, but by 1605 was again without a permanent residence. In May of 1606, Caravaggio fled Rome after a fight between himself and Ranuccio Tomassoni left Tomassoni dead and Caravaggio accused of murder. Langdon 293, 303, 311-316.

⁵ Cappelletti and Testa 139-140.

⁶ Creighton E. Gilbert, *Caravaggio and His Two Cardinals* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1995) 43.

⁷ Conrad Rudolph and Steven F. Ostrow, "Isaac Laughing: Caravaggio, Non-Traditional Imagery and Traditional Identification," *Art History* 24, 5 (November 2001): 646-682; esp. 648-651. The authors provide a concise summary of the various identifications of the painting's subject matter beginning with Gaspare Celio's identification of it as a *pastor friso* by 1620, and perhaps as early as 1607 when Celio was employed as a painter by the Mattei. Celio's identification of the painting as a *pastor friso* was later published in his 1638 guidebook of works of art in Rome. (For more on Celio's role in identifying the subject matter of the Capitoline *Saint John*, see: Gilbert, ch. 3 "Gaspare Celio's Credentials"). However, the 1616 inventory of Giovanni Battista Mattei listed the painting as *Saint John the Baptist*. The same is true in 1623 when it was recorded in Giovanni Battista's will and in 1627 when it was documented in the inventory of Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte, to whom it was bequeathed by Giovanni Battista Mattei. In the 1628 sale of the painting, it was given the title "il Coridone," and in the 1641 inventory of Cardinal Emmanuel Pio, the secular identification of the painting remained, since it was called "nude youth with a ram." In 1724, the title remained more or less the same, but by the 1740 Pio inventory, it was again a Saint John the Baptist. However, in 1749 the

XIV, and from the late eighteenth century up through the early twentieth century, the work was variously listed in Capitoline guidebooks as a “nude youth embracing a ram,” “a nude youth embracing a lamb,” or just “a nude youth.”⁸

Modern viewers have had similar problems in attempting to determine whether the painting’s subject is sacred or secular in nature. In 1953, Denis Mahon “re-discovered” the painting in the office of Rome’s mayor, and subsequently identified it as *Saint John the Baptist* by Caravaggio.⁹ However, two years later, Mahon reconsidered his identification, referring to it as *Nude Youth with a Ram*.¹⁰ In subsequent scholarship, other interpretations have been proposed, including suggestions that the painting is a representation of the sanguine temperament or the ancient Roman shepherd Paris.¹¹ With regard to the latter, Creighton E. Gilbert argued that Caravaggio might have executed such an image of Paris in competition with Annibale Carracci’s newly completed Farnese Gallery ceiling.¹² While the idea of artistic competition between Caravaggio and Annibale has great merit, Gilbert’s reading of the nude youth as Paris has not been universally accepted. More recent attempts to identify the young boy in Caravaggio’s painting have associated him with Isaac from the Old Testament story of Abraham’s sacrifice.¹³ Instead of the traditional narrative commonly depicted, as seen in Caravaggio’s own *Sacrifice of Isaac* from 1603 (Uffizi Gallery, Florence), in which Abraham is poised to sacrifice his son but his hand is stayed at the last moment by an angel sent from heaven, the authors suggest the artist has represented the moment after Isaac’s release from sacrifice. This interpre-

tation would explain the conspicuous absence of the standard narrative elements such as Abraham, the angel, the knife, and the sacrificial altar.¹⁴ The authors also rely on the exegetical writings of Saints Jerome and Gregory the Great to further bolster their argument as these texts interpret the name “Isaac” as meaning “laughter or joy,” thus providing a justification for the young boy’s smile.¹⁵

Despite these erudite readings, there can be no doubt that the figure in the Capitoline painting is the young Saint John the Baptist as recorded in the 1616 Mattei inventory. In fact, the Capitoline *Saint John* was the first in a series of at least three other paintings of the Baptist executed by Caravaggio within a ten-year period.¹⁶ In each of the later paintings, the mood is markedly somber and meditative, with the saint presented frontally seated, clothed in a hairshirt and red mantle, and holding the most recognizable attribute of the Baptist, the reed cross.¹⁷ Although the unconventional nature of the Capitoline painting is in stark contrast to Caravaggio’s later depictions of the saint, it is nevertheless possible to securely identify the figure as the young Baptist.

As the issue of attributes, or lack thereof, has been the nail upon which scholars have hung their interpretations of this painting, it is important to review both the iconographic elements of the Baptist that are present and those that are not. In the Capitoline *Saint John*, the most obvious attributes of the Baptist such as the reed cross, banderole, and the baptismal bowl or font, are absent.¹⁸ Also gone is the young Lamb of God, traditionally depicted as a small, hornless animal, which Caravaggio has replaced with a ram.¹⁹ That these key elements

painting was given no title whatsoever upon its sale to Pope Benedict XIV. Benedict’s collection founded the Capitoline gallery, and the painting is noted in several guidebooks, with the 1765 edition being the last which recorded the painting as *Saint John the Baptist*. In the other guidebooks listed by the authors, including the years 1766, 1771 and 1794, the painting was given the secular title of ‘nude youth’ with a ‘lamb,’ ‘ram,’ or ‘goat.’ The painting was taken down from exhibition by 1925, as it was no longer listed in the Capitoline guidebook. For the painting’s “re-discovery” and authentication, cf. note 9.

⁸ Rudolph and Ostrow 650.

⁹ Denis Mahon, “Contrasts in Art-Historical Method: Two Recent Approaches to Caravaggio,” *Burlington Magazine* 95 (1953): 213, n.7. See also, Gilbert 11; Puglisi 205; and Rudolph and Ostrow 650-651. The variant of this painting in the Doria Pamphili had been considered the original work by Caravaggio prior to Mahon’s discovery. It is now universally accepted that the Capitoline painting is the autograph work and the Doria Pamphili copy was executed shortly after the original was completed.

¹⁰ Denis Mahon and Denys Sutton, *Artists in Seventeenth Century Rome*, exh. cat. (London: Wildenstein & Co, 1955) 20-4.

¹¹ Leonard Slatkes, “Caravaggio’s ‘Pastor Friso,’” *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 23 (1972): 67-72. For the Paris identification, see Gilbert 55-78.

¹² Gilbert 85.

¹³ Liliana Barroero, “‘L’Isaaco’ di Caravaggio nella Pinacoteca Capitolina,” *Bollettino dei Musei comunali di Roma* 9 (1997) 37-41; Rodolfo Papa, “Il Sorriso di Dio,” *Art e Dossier* 14.131 (1998) 28-32; Rudolph and

Ostrow 646.

¹⁴ Rudolph and Ostrow 658. For this last detail, the authors argue that the ledge on which the boy reclines, admittedly hard to see, is the makeshift altar.

¹⁵ Rudolph and Ostrow 667-668.

¹⁶ Hibbard 340; Puglisi 397. The *Saint John the Baptist* in the Cathedral Museum in Toledo, Spain has been attributed to Caravaggio, and dated to 1597-98, and if accepted, would therefore place it earlier in Caravaggio’s career than the Capitoline *Saint John*.

¹⁷ There are three securely attributed paintings of St. John the Baptist by Caravaggio located in: the Galleria Antica, Rome (1603-04); the Nelson Atkins Museum, Kansas (1603-05); and in the Galleria Borghese, Naples (1610).

¹⁸ Hibbard 340; Puglisi 409. A painting of *Saint John the Baptist at the Source* has been attributed to Caravaggio and dated to 1608-09, although the attribution is still under debate.

¹⁹ Rudolph and Ostrow 660-661. The authors explain the difference between a young lamb with horns (a spring lamb) and a ram, and suggest that a ram is the appropriate animal for the Sacrifice of Abraham while the spring lamb would be used for identifying Saint John the Baptist. The suggestion is made that Caravaggio intentionally differentiated between the two animals in his paintings, and the authors propose that the animal in the Borghese *Saint John* is a spring lamb, while the animal in the Capitoline *Saint John* is a ram, which thus supports their reading of the Capitoline painting as Isaac on the altar. However, the animal depicted in the Borghese *Saint John* is not noticeably different from the ram in Caravaggio’s *Sacrifice of Isaac*,

were excluded does not automatically imply that the painting is entirely devoid of iconographic references to the Baptist. To begin with, the young boy reclines on an animal pelt, which certainly suggests the Baptist's hairshirt. Underneath the pelt are two mantles, one red and the other white, evocative of the worldly clothes the Baptist casts off in accepting his calling in the wilderness. In addition, the horizontal tree stump on which the boy rests his left foot may possibly be seen as forming a natural cross, as two small branches are joined to the trunk perpendicularly. As for other attributes contained within the painting, the plant in the lower right foreground has been identified as a mullein plant and has been associated with the Tree of Jesse as its flowering stem shoots upward when it blooms.²⁰ And the leaves in the upper right corner have been read as grape vines, a familiar emblem of Christ's blood and sacrifice. Despite the above-mentioned iconographic symbols that can be associated with John the Baptist, the unabashed nudity of the youth has made it difficult for many viewers to accept the image as a depiction of the saint.²¹ Although there have been other images of Saint John which show him almost completely nude, such as Raphael's *Saint John the Baptist* of 1518 (Uffizi Gallery, Florence) and Bronzino's painting of the same subject from 1550-55 (Borghese Gallery, Rome), Caravaggio's fully nude Baptist assaults the viewer with his seductive smile and tantalizing sexuality in a manner that is unquestionably absent from almost all other depictions of the Baptist.²²

Despite these apparent precedents for a semi-nude Baptist in the wilderness, both the pose and the emphasis on the ram in Caravaggio's *Saint John* differs markedly from standard depictions of the saint. A careful analysis of the complex layering of imagery and ideas encompassed within the image is required in order to fully understand this painting. One of the most important of these aspects is Caravaggio's adaptation of figural precedents that speak not only to ideas related

to the Baptist, but also to more esoteric concepts. Two precedents that Caravaggio appears to have used for their implicit baptismal references can easily be identified.²³ The first is Giulio Mazzoni's 1585 fresco of the *Allegory of Water* in the Palazzo Spada in Rome.²⁴ Although Mazzoni's allegorical figure is much more muscular than Caravaggio's Baptist, the similarity in pose between the two is undeniable. The other apparent source for Caravaggio can be found in the water sprites on Taddeo Landini's *Tortoise Fountain* of 1588.²⁵ Conveniently located in the piazza in front of the Palazzo Mattei where Caravaggio had been living, the nude, lithe figures with remarkably activated poses, and sweet, smiling faces anticipate many of the most disconcerting aspects of Caravaggio's *Saint John*. Since both Mazzoni's and Landini's images relate to water—one allegorically and the other both physically and symbolically—their allusion to the rites of baptism, would not have been lost on the erudite seventeenth-century viewer familiar with either of these works. However, the precedent most often noted in comparison with Caravaggio's painting, and one that is not directly related to water, is Michelangelo Buonarroti's Sistine ceiling *ignudi*. Both the *ignudi* and Saint John are represented as ideal images of male beauty and youth and it is the dynamic pose of the *ignudo* at the top left corner of the *Sacrifice of Noah* that is most clearly reflected in Caravaggio's young Baptist. The implication of such a direct reference to Michelangelo's ceiling, and particularly the *ignudi*, is significant to Caravaggio's Capitoline *Saint John* painting and will be fully discussed below.

It is important to acknowledge that during this same time Caravaggio completed another painting that also made reference to Michelangelo, and that is the *Victorious Cupid* of 1601-02 (also known as the *Amor Vincit Omnia* [Figure 2]).²⁶ The painting was executed while Caravaggio was living in the Palazzo Mattei and was in the collection of the Vincenzo

which seems to undermine the argument that Caravaggio drew such distinctions and suggests therefore that the same type of animal could be used in different iconographic situations.

²⁰ Richard John Raymond, *Caravaggio's Saint John and the Ram: Its Sacred Symbolism and Iconographic Sources* (MA Thesis: Arizona State University, 1988) 42.

²¹ See note 7 above for a discussion of the sacred and secular interpretations of the painting throughout its history. See also, Puglisi 205.

²² The exception is Leonardo's *St. John the Baptist* (Louvre, Paris). See Paul Barolsky, "The Mysterious Meaning of Leonardo's *Saint John the Baptist*," *Source* 8.3 (Spring 1989): 11-15. The comparison between Caravaggio's Baptist and Bronzino's was famously made by S.J. Freedberg, *Circa 1600. A Revolution of Style in Italian Painting* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Cambridge UP, 1983) 52-53. For Raphael's depiction of the Baptist in the wilderness, see: *Raffaello a Firenze: Dipinti e disegni delle collezioni fiorentine*, exh. cat. Palazzo Pitti, Florence, January 11- April 29, 1984 (Milan: Electa, 1984), cat. entry 19, 222-228 where the painting is attributed to the "Bottega di Raffaello (Giulio Romano)."

²³ Giovanni Pietro Bellori, *Le Vite de' pittori, scultori et architetti moderni*, (1672) 211-33. English translation of Bellori provided in Puglisi 415. Bellori

recounts Caravaggio's assertions that he need only look to the streets of Rome, not to the past, for inspiration. It is now recognized that Caravaggio routinely drew from a variety of visual resources that he accumulated throughout his lifetime. For further information, see: Keith Christiansen, "Thoughts on the Lombard Training of Caravaggio," in *Come dipingeva il Caravaggio atti della giornata di studio*, ed. Mina Gregori (Milan: Electa, 1996) 7.

²⁴ For information on the Palazzo Spada and Giulio Mazzoni's work therein, see: Roberto Cannatà, "L'opera di Giulio Mazzoni da Piacenza, pittore e scultore nel palazzo Capodiferro," in ed. Roberto Cannatà, *Palazzo Spada: Arte e Storia* (Rome: Bonsignori Editore, 1992).

²⁵ For information on Landini's fountain, see: Carlo Benocci, "Taddeo Landini e la Fontana delle Tartarughe in Piazza Mattei a Roma," *Storia dell'Arte* 52 (1984): 187-215; and Thomas Eser, "Der Schildkrötenbrunnen des Taddeo Landini," *Römisches Jahrbuch der Bibliotheca Hertziana* 27-28 (1991-1992): 201-82.

²⁶ Hibbard 157; Puglisi 207; Christiansen 8. Hibbard and Puglisi suggest Michelangelo's *Victory* as the source of Cupid's pose while Christiansen compares it to the figure of St. Bartholomew in the Sistine Chapel *Last Judgement*.

Giustiniani by 1602.²⁷ The Marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani, along with his brother Cardinal Benedetto Giustiniani, were important patrons of Caravaggio and were friends of the Mattei family. Although the circumstances of the commission are unknown, it is possible that the *Victorious Cupid* may have come about through a verbal agreement between the artist and Giustiniani. Caravaggio thus appears to have executed almost simultaneously the Giustiniani *Cupid* and the Mattei *Saint John*. Significantly, these are the only two single figure, full-length nudes painted by the artist. The *Victorious Cupid*, regarded by Giustiniani as one of his most prized paintings, gained instant notoriety, driving other artists to challenge Caravaggio's place as the preeminent artist among Roman painters.²⁸ Caravaggio's chief rival, Giovanni Baglione, responded to this emblematic image of profane love with his own interpretation, *Divine Love Overcoming the World, the Flesh, and the Devil* (Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin). Baglione exhibited his painting in unofficial competition with Caravaggio's *Victorious Cupid* and Orazio Gentileschi's *St. Michael Archangel* (now lost) on August 29, 1602, at the annual exhibition at San Giovanni Decollato.²⁹ Berated by Gentileschi for not depicting a nude cupid, but rather one clothed in armor, Baglione painted a second version (Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome) which was unveiled on Easter Sunday, 1603, in which he eliminated most of cupid's armor and inserted what many believe to be a portrait of Caravaggio as the devil. Baglione dedicated both versions of his painting to Cardinal Benedetto Giustiniani, from whom he received a gold chain. This type of perceived competition among painters delighted patrons, and, in this case,

the Giustiniani brothers were the recipients of two contrasting images of love, one Profane and the other Sacred.

In a like manner, Caravaggio's *Victorious Cupid* and Capitoline *Saint John* may be understood as a conceptual pairing. Where the *Saint John* is expressive of the power of Divine Love, the *Victorious Cupid* represents the earthly pleasures of Profane Love. A similar correspondence can also be found between Annibale Carracci's Farnese Gallery ceiling and Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling. Unveiled in 1601, Annibale's fleshy celebration of the allegorical love of the pagan gods may be viewed as the metaphorically profane counterpart to Michelangelo's sacred Sistine.³⁰ It therefore may be possible to suggest that Caravaggio's pairing of sacred and profane themes in the *Saint John* and the *Victorious Cupid* were, perhaps at the behest of Giustiniani and Mattei, a competition of sorts between himself, Annibale and the ever-lasting presence of Michelangelo.³¹ As such, both paintings by Caravaggio speak to the artist's ability to express intellectually complex ideas similar to those of Michelangelo and Annibale, without compromising his own artistic identity.

As mentioned previously, Caravaggio had access to a wide variety of pictorial precedents from which to draw. While Mazzoni's and Landini's figures provided the requisite baptismal implications necessary for an image of *Saint John*, Michelangelo's *ignudi*, on the other hand, evoked entirely different symbolic associations for the artist. Understood as wingless angels, Michelangelo's nude youths were appropriately situated between the enthroned prophets and sibyls, and the heavenly realm of the story of creation.³² These angelic, yet corporeal beings define an intermediate zone, itself emblem-

²⁷ Puglisi 201.

²⁸ Both Giovanni Baglione and Joachim von Sandrart remark on Giustiniani's regard for Caravaggio and the *Victorious Cupid* in particular. For Baglione, see Puglisi 414; and Hibbard 353. For Sandrart, see Hibbard 378-79.

²⁹ Langdon 258, 262. For a slightly different account of the event, see Maryvelma Smith O'Neil, *Giovanni Baglione. Artistic Reputation in Baroque Rome* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2002) 27. O'Neil cites Gentileschi's "carelessness with the facts" as he claimed the exhibition had been held in San Giovanni Fiorentini. It is interesting that in the second version the devil turns and looks out to the viewer while in the first version his face is turned away from the viewer.

³⁰ For a recent review of the theme of "love conquers all" in the Farnese Gallery, see Gail Feigenbaum, "Annibale in the Farnese Palace: A Classical Education," in *The Drawings of Annibale Carracci*, exh. cat. The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., September 26, 1999 - January 9, 2000 (1999) 109-21, esp. 115.

³¹ Langdon 211-13. Langdon cites three instances where Caravaggio and Annibale were commissioned simultaneously by the same patron for similar works. The first instance of this type of artistic commission came from Tiberio Cerasi and his chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo in 1600-01. Following this came Onorio Longhi's commission to both artists in 1601, when he ordered portraits of himself and his new bride, neither of which have been located. Another competition between the two artists was instigated in 1608 when Giulio Mancini arranged for two paintings of Saint John to be exhibited and judged in Siena. However, no report of the outcome exists. For more on the idea of artistic competition in Rome during the early sev-

enteenth century, see: Beverly Louise Brown, "The Black Wings of Envy, Competition, Rivalry and Paragone," in *The Genius of Rome: 1592-1623*, ed. Beverly Louise Brown (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2001) 250-273. One may also consider Annibale's 1609 *Saint John the Baptist* which is remarkably similar in conception to Caravaggio's Capitoline painting. For more on Annibale's *Saint John*, see: Dennis Mahon, "Il San Giovanni Battista di Annibale Carracci dipinto per Corradino Orsini," in *Il San Giovanni Battista ritrovato. La tradizione classica in Annibale Carracci e in Caravaggio* (Rome: Comune di Roma, 2001) 17-27. It should also be remembered that in Giustiniani's treatise on painting, he placed both Caravaggio and the Carracci in the twelfth category of painting, the one he considered to be "the most perfect since it is the rarest and most difficult." This most difficult of methods, according to Giustiniani, was the ability to "paint *di maniera* and also directly from life." For Giustiniani's treatise, see: *Italian and Spanish Art, 1600-1750. Sources and Documents*, eds. Robert Enggass and Jonathan Brown (Illinois: Northwestern UP, 1970) 16-20.

³² Charles de Tolnay, *Michelangelo. Volume II The Sistine Ceiling* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1945) 63-64. De Tolnay cites two preparatory drawings by Michelangelo, one in London (No. 36) and the other in Detroit (No. 37) which indicate that in the early stages of planning he originally had included small, winged angel-like figures. See also: Edgar Wind, "Michelangelo's Prophets and Sibyls," in *Art and Politics in Renaissance Italy, British Academy Lectures* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993; orig. pub. in *Proceedings of the British Academy* 51 [1966]) 263-300; esp. 294-297. Wind also proposes that the *ignudi* were intended by Michelangelo to represent angels, or as he suggests, perhaps seraphs, citing the same preparatory drawings as de Tolnay as evidence. In the late sixteenth century, it seems that the focus of interpretation of meaning had switched from

atic of God's divine plan for universal salvation.³³ Their sheer physical beauty embodies the notion of divine love since they were surely made, as was man, in God's image.³⁴ Thus, Caravaggio's appropriation of a figural type expressive of *amor divinus*, endowed his nude Baptist with metaphorical inferences beyond the sacrament of baptism. Because Saint John was the last prophet of the Old Testament and the forerunner of Christ in the New, he, too, can be seen as an intermediary figure: one who traverses the threshold between Mosaic Law and Christian Grace.³⁵ Furthermore, the *ignudo* most like Caravaggio's young saint is one who flanks the *Sacrifice of Noah*, where the animal being sacrificed is a ram. It is, thus, no mere coincidence that the Baptist has his arm around a similar ram; in fact, its presence suggests Caravaggio's understanding of the ram as both an Old and New Testament symbol of sacrifice.

Interestingly, Caravaggio depicted a ram in two of his four paintings of Saint John (the Capitoline work and the 1610 Naples version), which suggests that the inclusion of the ram had specific connotations for him and for his audience. Traditionally, the Lamb of God, usually depicted as a small, hornless animal, is used as an identifying attribute of the Baptist. If the animal was absent, then a banderole inscribed with *Ecce Agnus Dei* ("Behold the Lamb of God"), was either wrapped around the reed cross or otherwise present, indicating the spiritual presence of Christ. In an effort to explain Caravaggio's inclusion of a ram instead of the *Agnus Dei*, one tendency has been to see this supposed anomaly as a byproduct of his trademark "naturalism" and lack of concern for the traditional pictorial conventions of Christian subjects.³⁶ An alternate explanation considers the possibility that Caravaggio was alluding to the ram's association with the Cross of Redemption as a symbol of Christ's sacrifice.³⁷ Since the ram was an Old Testament sacrificial animal, known not only through the sacrifice of Noah, but also through the story of Abraham and Isaac, the allusion to Christ's sacrifice would have been understood to a seventeenth-century viewer. Moreover, the use of sacrifi-

cial rams as guilt offerings to God is detailed in Leviticus 6:6.³⁸ As Thomas Aquinas explicated in his gloss on Leviticus in the *Summa Theologica*: "Christ is offered in the calf to denote the strength of the cross; in the lamb to signify His innocence; in the ram, to foreshadow His headship; and in the goat, to signify the likeness of 'sinful flesh.'"³⁹

In this painting, the young Baptist embraces the ram, in a gesture of love that is reciprocated by the animal through a gentle nuzzle. Illuminated by a radiant light that descends upon them from above, their physical and emotional union suggests another type of Divine Love. The concept of Divine Love was one that resonated throughout the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.⁴⁰ In Benedetto Varchi's *Due Lezioni*, a copy of which was in the Mattei household by 1603,⁴¹ the theoretician explained Divine Love in neoplatonic terms: "...by means of love, not only can we, but must we elevate ourselves from this mortal veil, and slip from one form into another, to that otherworldly splendor, mounting to Heaven, and there contemplating visibly the prime mover face to face, becoming one with him."⁴² The face-to-face exchange between lover and the beloved that leads to spiritual connectedness in Varchi can be seen in Caravaggio's *Ecstasy of Saint Francis* (Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut) painted prior to the Capitoline *Saint John*. Scholars have often seen the sensual nature of the contact between Saint Francis and the angel who gently cradles him as a depiction of spiritual love charged with an erotic undertone.⁴³ Moreover, the physical beauty of the angel draped in diaphanous fabric, combined with the delicate grace of Francis, seem intended to invite the viewer to share in this visual spiritual ecstasy. The Capitoline *Saint John* is not far removed from this desire; but unlike the closed circle of Francis and the angel, the Baptist gazes not at the ram but at the viewer. Thus the viewer is transformed from observer of spiritual ecstasy, to active participant.⁴⁴ The stimulation of the senses through a vision of Saint John's divinely radiant beauty transcends the carnal appetite to awaken in the heart and soul of the beholder an intimate awareness of the

Michelangelo's work on the Sistine ceiling to his altar wall *Last Judgment*. For further information, see: Romeo de Maio, *Michelangelo e la Controriforma*, 1st ed. 1978, (Firenze: Sansoni Editore, 3rd ed., 1990) and Bernadine Barnes, *Michelangelo's 'Last Judgment': the Renaissance Response* (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1998).

³³ Staale Sinding-Larsen, "A Re-Reading of the Sistine Ceiling," *Institutum Romanum Norwegiae Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia* 4 (1969): 143-57, esp. 145 n. 5; Christiane L. Joost-Gaugier, "Michelangelo's *Ignudi*, and the Sistine Chapel as a Symbol of Law and Justice," *Artibus et Historiae* 17.34 (1996): 28-29.

³⁴ De Tolnay 64.

³⁵ John's intermediary role is also depicted in Michelangelo's *Doni Tondo* (Uffizi Gallery, Florence), where the Baptist literally and figuratively occupies a transitional space between the Old and the New Testaments.

³⁶ Rudolph and Ostrow 660; Puglisi 205.

³⁷ Puglisi 206; Raymond 35.

³⁸ Leviticus 6:6: "And he shall bring his trespass offering unto the Lord, a ram without blemish out of the flock, with thy estimation, for a trespass offering, unto the priest."

³⁹ Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* available online at <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/210203.htm>.

⁴⁰ Maurizio Calvesi, *La realtà del Caravaggio* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1990) 242.

⁴¹ Cappelletta and Testa 156.

⁴² Leatrice Mendelsohn, *Paragoni: Benedetto Varchi's Due Lezioni and Cinquecento Art Theory* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982) 99.

⁴³ Spike 56.

⁴⁴ Avigdor Poseq, "The Puzzling *St. John*," in *Caravaggio and the Antique* (London: Avon Books, 1998) 47-48. Poseq proposes that the sexually suggestive nature of the interaction between the boy and the ram was a visual pun on the allegedly shared homosexual proclivities of Cardinal del Monte and Giovanni Battista Mattei.

Divine Love of God. And who better to represent the love of God as made manifest through the beauty of man, than the one who bridged the gap between the Old and the New, the past and the present—the one to first acknowledge and to love Christ as the Savior?

The content and context of the Capitoline *Saint John* has puzzled art historians for many years. Undeniably, Caravaggio's *Saint John the Baptist* clearly diverges from other images of the saint as its meaning extends beyond the boundaries of visual hagiography. The precedents provided by Mazzoni, Landini and Michelangelo were more than compositional motifs for Caravaggio. The deliberate combination of

these diverse sources, themselves replete with symbolic significance, endows the Capitoline painting with a complex iconography that establishes the identity of the young boy and creates the fundamental meaning of the work, imbuing this multivalent Saint John the Baptist with all of the requisite spiritual weight. As Saint John reaches up to embrace the ram, and by association Christ, with his right arm, his right leg remains connected with the ground below, his body thus becoming the definitive link between the earthly realm of the profane and the sacred realm of the divine, where one may contemplate the love of God through the beauty of man.

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Figure 1: (Michelangelo Merisi da) Caravaggio, *St. John the Baptist*, c.1602, oil on canvas, 132 x 97 cm, Pinacoteca Capitolina, Rome, Italy. Photo Credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY.



Figure 2: (Michelangelo Merisi da) Caravaggio, *Victorious Cupid*, c.1601-02, oil on canvas, 156 x 113 cm, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Germany. Photo Credit: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/ Art Resource, NY.