

## THE ART NEWSPAPER

# Exhibition puts debate over Caravaggio's work to the fore

*A show travelling to the MFA Boston this week asks the public to weigh in on the controversy over copies*

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An exhibition of three pictures attributed to the Baroque master Caravaggio on view at the Muscarelle Museum of Art in Williamsburg, Virginia, has brought an old controversy into a new light. The three paintings—The Fortune Teller, 1594-95 and two versions of Saint Francis in Meditation, believed to be from between 1595 and 1603—are part of the exhibition “Caravaggio and Connoisseurship” (until 6 April), which is set to travel to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), later this month.

The Saint Francis paintings, which come from the church Santa Maria della Concezione dei Cappuccini (Our Lady of the Conception of the Capuchins), Rome, and the Museo Civico, Carpineto Romano, have proven particularly problematic for historians.



Saint Francis in Meditation, from the Capuchins church in Rome, left, and the Museo Civico, Carpineto Romano, right

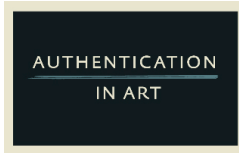
“It’s among the most complicated cases” of Caravaggio attribution, says the Baroque scholar Richard Spear, since two nearly identical pictures are involved.

### Decades of debate

Experts have been aware of the Capuchins version of the painting since at least 1908, when the then-director of the Borghese Gallery in Rome, Giulio Cantalamessa, attributed the piece to Caravaggio. The version now in the Museo Civico surfaced in the Church of San Pietro Apostolo in Carpineto Romano in 1968. The scholar Maria Vittoria Brugnoli attributed it to Caravaggio two years later, arguing that it was the original and that the Capuchins work was a copy made by an anonymous follower at a later date.

In 2000, an x-ray analysis of the Carpineto work revealed that Saint Francis’s hood had been altered at some point. Such a change, called a pentimento, is “usually considered to be evidence of originality,” writes John Spike, the current show’s curator, in the catalogue for the exhibition. But he adds that the alteration is “difficult to explain... since it appears to have been made when the painting was already completed and dry”.

The technical study also revealed that beneath the Carpineto painting there is a sketch of Saint Francis half the size of the clearly visible one. Spear argues that the smaller sketch of Saint Francis is “utterly atypical of the way Caravaggio would have proceeded”.



In the 1985 Caravaggio retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Capuchins version was described as the authentic work. Spear, who wrote an essay for that exhibition's catalogue, still believes this to be true and says that "the only thing the [technical studies] have shown is that the paintings are very different".

### **Spot the difference**

If experts cannot decide which picture is authentic, maybe the public can. The Muscarelle show invites viewers to vote on which work they believe to be real or if Carravagio painted them both. So far, Spike says, the Carpineto picture has been the favorite, with around 40% of the vote. "Those who like the Capuchin only are a distinct minority," he says. At the MFA, viewers are invited to tweet their preference with the hashtag "#truecaravaggio".

But both Spike and Spear agree that connoisseurship and a trained professional eye are the keys to answering these questions. The terrain for Caravaggio scholarship has often shifted, says Spike, which explains the importance of including *The Fortune Teller*, on loan from the Musei Capitolini, Rome, in the Muscarelle show. That work "was doubted until 1985" to be an authentic Caravaggio painting, he says. "Now it is universally accepted."

Another factor that should be considered is the artist's personality. "Would a painter always described as restless and mercurial have the patience to make copies of his own work?" asks Frederick Ilchman, the curator of European paintings at the MFA, where the show soon travels (12 April-15 June). "This show is a chance to test this out."