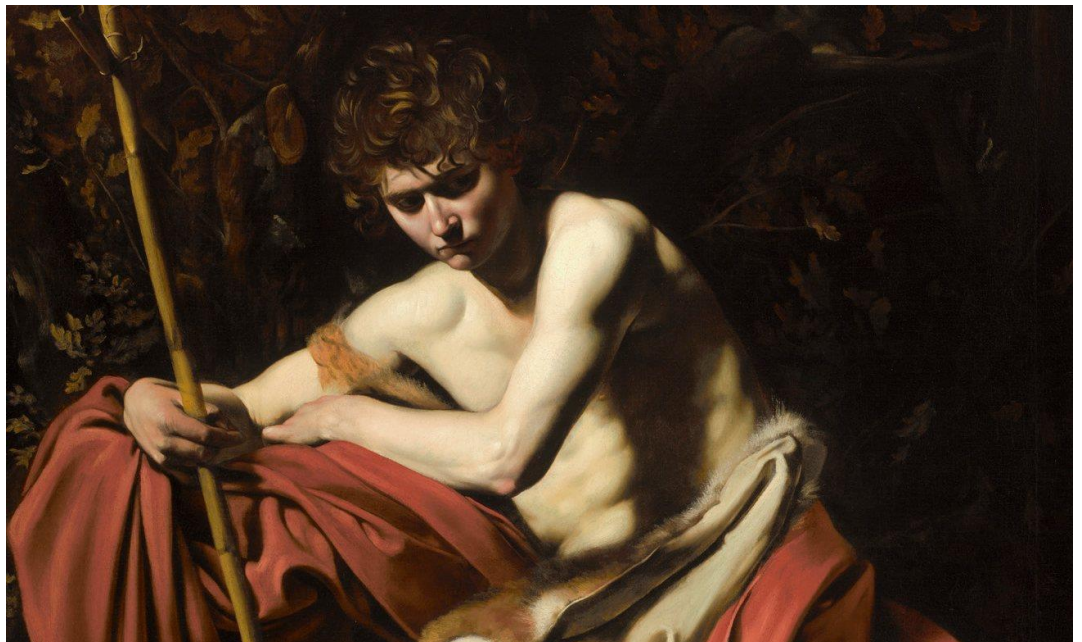


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Beyond Caravaggio review: a
masterpiece of surprise



Caravaggio's Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness. Photograph:
Jamison Miller/The Nelson - Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri

Jonathan Jones

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The shadowed eyes of Caravaggio's Saint John the Baptist (painted 1603–4) won't leave me alone. They stare at me in the night. Ever since I saw this lifesize, nearly nude painting of a brooding youth in the National Gallery's powerful and compulsive exhibition about Caravaggio and his followers – the "Caravaggisti" – it has been seeping into my unconscious like a bloodstain.

The black shadow of the cross – or is it a broadsword? – cuts across the bright white flesh of John. Another deep dark void slices through his neck, separating his head from his body, foreshadowing the way he will die when Salome demands his head on a plate.

It is easy to see from this deathly, sexy, unforgettable masterpiece, lent by the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, why Caravaggio inspired so [many followers](#). Like a savage Christ he accumulated wild disciples. This explosively brilliant and uniquely dangerous artist hit Rome like a thunderbolt at the end of the Renaissance, blowing away the saintly scenes of his sappy milquetoast contemporaries with hard-hitting visions of raw, dirty life. In the first two paintings in this exhibition we see him at the very start of his career, portraying male prostitutes with filthy fingernails tasting forbidden fruit and getting bitten.



Caravaggio's The Taking of Christ. Photograph: The National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin

Then in the very same room we encounter his imitators and friends. Caravaggio lived a short, violent life, yet this exhibition reveals something highly unexpected about him. He was a great teacher. Notoriously, he had to flee Rome in 1606 after killing a man in a fight, and even before that he was known to the courts for sudden acts of violence – like the time he threw a plate of hot food in a waiter’s face. Yet there must have been another side to him – generous, loving, patient. A man who could share his genius.

For there are two excellent paintings here by an artist nicknamed Cecco del Caravaggio. Both portray young men playing music, surrounded by the stuff of real life: bottles, fruit, musical instruments and food. Cecco was Caravaggio’s pupil and his favourite model (and his lover, according to a 17th-century English traveller who was shown Caravaggio’s painting Victorious Cupid in a Roman palace and told it showed the artist’s assistant Cecco “that laid with him”).

[Caravaggio](#) portrayed Cecco, slept with him – and lovingly taught him to paint. It’s a touching new perspective on this artist famous for his bad behaviour that he took such care to make an artist of Cecco.

Then again, even Caravaggio’s worst enemies couldn’t resist copying his radical technique. There is a painting here of the Ecstasy of Saint Francis by Giovanni Baglione: done in 1602 when Caravaggio was the latest art fashion to hit Rome, it imitates his homoerotic boldness with bare-fleshed good-looking angels attending a post-coital seeming saint. Baglione would soon fall out with Caravaggio and portray him as the devil, with Cupid as his catamite, in a painting that was a direct accusation of sodomy.



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susannah and the Elders*.
Photograph: Artemisia Gentileschi/© The Burghley House
Collection, Bob Laughton

Orazio Gentileschi was another artist who knew Caravaggio closely, appearing with him in a court case brought by Baglione, who accused them of slander. His scything painting of a tiny David beheading the massive prone figure of Goliath shows how Caravaggio's incisive realism liberated art. The realism of Caravaggio and his followers is nothing like 19th-century naturalism. It is neither logical nor scientific. It is an appetite for life. Bodies and material things are painted with mesmerising clarity. Yet the space they exist in is fantastic and dreamlike. From Caravaggio's own nightmare scene of the arrest of Christ to Jusepe de Ribera's painting of Saint Bartholomew naked, tied up, and about to be flayed alive, this rough marriage of reality and imagination makes for art that cuts deep into the psyche.

That is powerfully proved by Orazio's daughter Artemisia Gentileschi in her painting *Susannah and the Elders* (1622). Two older men creep up close to a young woman so they can get their kicks by watching her as she bathes. They don't even bother to conceal their voyeurism. The painting puts us in their position: we too can go up close to look at Susannah's nude body. Yet her face is full of pain and her eyes are welling up with tears.

Who is the Caravaggio we see here through his imitators' eyes?

He is a humane, compassionate artist. Dutch artists who went to Rome and became his fans went home to paint warm, glowing candlelit scenes that haunt you with their sense of human frailty. Caravaggio's French disciple Georges de la Tour – a genius in his own right – looks at games of cards and dice and sees wide-eyed young faces of innocence and experience. Can you see these peoples' inner nature from their eyes? De la Tour sees human beings as delicate mysteries in the enigmatic emptiness of the night.

Then, at the end of the exhibition, Caravaggio himself is resurrected. He returns to centre stage with his terrifying vision of *Saint John the Baptist*. All the artists here are fascinating. This is the National Gallery's best exhibition since *Late Rembrandt* and a lot more daring: you can't go wrong with Rembrandt but revealing the power of artists like Ribera and Gerrit van Honthorst is a masterpiece of surprise.

I will remember this exhibition a good while. Yet I will remember Caravaggio's *Saint John* on my death bed.

Beyond Caravaggio is at the [National Gallery](#) in London from 12 October 2016 – 15 January 2017