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CHRISTIE'S

The mystery of Caravaggio and the Turtle Fountain

Were some of Caravaggio's most famous paintings directly influenced by the four sculpted figures on Rome's Fontana delle Tartarughe? The photographer Toby Glanville thinks so, and presents the evidence to
Jonathan Bastable



The Fontana delle Tartarughe (Turtle Fountain) in Rome is one of the city's many strange gems. As a work of art it is hard to parse: four lean youths are depicted in the act of climbing down from the backs of dolphins, as if they had been riding them like surfboards. Each boy is simultaneously nudging a turtle into the broad marble bowl above their heads: one arm raised, the opposing leg crooked at an acute angle, like a kind of synchronised 16th-century t'ai chi.

Who are they, these bronze boys? Some authorities believe they represent sons of the sea god Poseidon. Others say that they are the four winds personified. Or they might be exactly what they appear to be: lively portraits of idle, idealised young men on the cusp of manhood — ephebi, in classical parlance.

As for the turtles, they are known to be a later addition to the ensemble, which may help explain why the fountain is slightly disorienting and mysterious: it is possible that the sculptor of the figures, Taddeo Landini, did not intend the finished piece to look quite like this.



The Fontana delle Tartarughe in Piazza Mattei, Rome, photographed in 1938. Photo: © 2006 Alinari / Topfoto

So there's a puzzle here for any observer. But for portrait photographer Toby Glanville, the fountain is something more than an art-historical curiosity. He has come to believe that it tells a story about one of the most contradictory and controversial painters of the late Renaissance — Caravaggio.

'I first happened upon the fountain more than 30 years ago,' says Glanville. 'It was an early spring day, beautiful sunshine, and when I saw the Fontana delle Tartarughe, I had a feeling that I was stepping into the presence of living creatures, real people.'

'I think that impression came partly from the light and the movement of the water, but it also had something to do with the sculptures themselves. What struck me initially was the boys' faces. These figures are not quite of our world; they are visitations. Every time I have been to Rome since, I have gone back and taken pictures of the fountain, and on each occasion I see something new in it.'

That long-held affection might have been the end of it — most of us have works of art that we visit like old friends — but, last year, Glanville decided to do some research into the fountain. 'I was in the British Library when the penny dropped,' he says.

'The fountain stands outside the Palazzo Mattei, close to the Tiber. The Matteis were an aristocratic family, hugely wealthy, erudite and influential. Caravaggio went to live in their palace — on loan, so to speak, from the great connoisseur, Cardinal del Monte. His new patron, Ciriaco Mattei, was the nephew of Muzio Mattei, who had commissioned the fountain just a few years before. Caravaggio must have seen it every day while he worked for Ciriaco — maybe it was the view out of his window.'

‘There must be a connection, because no one was making the human figure like this before Caravaggio. No one but Landini’ —
Toby Glanville

‘Then it occurred to me: if you look at the paintings that Caravaggio did while he lived in the palace — *Cupid as Victor*, *John the Baptist* — you see an uncanny resemblance between the boys on the fountain and the model for those painted works. There must be a connection, because no one was making the human figure like this before Caravaggio. No one but Landini.’

The flesh-and-blood model for both *Cupid as Victor* and *John the Baptist* was a youth known to art history as Cecco. He seems to have posed as the winged Cupid first, the New Testament prophet a year or two later. But Caravaggio’s Baptist is still a stripling, a naked adolescent with a mischievous grin and a contrapposto pose that seems to echo the odd, contorted stance of the fountain boys. The creasing of John’s stomach is exactly what we see in the Landini sculptures.



From left: Caravaggio (Michelangelo da Merisi), *Cupid as Victor* (*Amor vincit omnia*), circa 1602. Oil on canvas. 156.5 x 113.3 cm. Gemaeldegalerie — Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Photo: Scala, Florence / bpk, Bildagentur für

Kunst, Kultur und Geschichte, Berlin. © 2019. Photographer: Joerg P. Anders. One of Toby Glanville's photographs of Fontana delle Tartarughe in Piazza Mattei, which Caravaggio would have seen every day when living at the Palazzo Mattei

Cecco is fleshier than his bronze cousins; he does not have the same physique as the lithe quadruplets on the fountain. But he shares their demeanour, an air of something Dionysian. There is a sense that he is capable of dangerous fun. 'And what is striking,' says Glanville, 'quite apart from their kinetic energy, is the closeness in physiognomy between the figures in the paintings and fountain. Their faun-like faces express joy and life and sexuality and seem unequivocally linked.'

It is known, of course, that Caravaggio lived at the Palazzo Mattei. Glanville's theory is not a biographical novelty, but a leap of imagination. No one has previously wondered about the effect that the Turtle Fountain might have had on the artist's imagination.

'I am not an academic or an art historian,' says Glanville, 'and this could all be preposterous. But bear in mind that the fountain was brand new at the time, and would have been gleaming, not covered in calcium deposits. It would have been unignorable.'



Toby Glanville at the National Gallery in London in front of *The Supper at Emmaus*, 1601, with Caravaggio's *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*, circa 1594-95, on the left. Photograph by Harry Mitchell

Perhaps it takes the mindset of a portraitist to know how a face leaves its imprint on the artistic consciousness, or to grasp that an artist such as Caravaggio would instinctively take note of the way limbs and bodies combine to make a composition. Conversely, one can see the appeal of Caravaggio to a present-day photographer.

Many of his paintings — *The Supper at Emmaus*, *The Conversion of St Paul*, *Christ Taken in the Garden* — function like dramatic snapshots, depicting the very instant of revelation or reversal. These biblical scenes are decisive moments in the full Cartier-Bresson sense of the term, only rendered in oils on canvas rather than captured on 35mm film.