

Caravaggio 2025

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Exhibition: Caravaggio 2025 (Palazzo Barberini – Gallerie Nazionali di Arte Antica, 7 March – 6 July 2025)¹

Joining the fanfare of *Anno Sacro* exhibitions in Rome, the *Caravaggio 2025* show at the Barberini Corsini National Gallery presents twenty-four of the artist's known and lesser-known masterworks in an effort to illuminate his artistic impact. Born in the small town of Caravaggio, near Milan, Michelangelo Merisi (1571–1610) became known for his ability to depict religious scenes with unprecedented realism. He rejected idealisation in favour of gritty authenticity, often using ordinary people as models for sacred figures. Caravaggio, whose scholarly appreciation was propelled by Roberto Longhi's mid-century accreditations, remains one of the most studied – and most appreciated – figures of early modern Italian painting. The current exhibition, the most extensive in Rome since the 2010 Scuderie del Quirinale Caravaggio retrospective, brings together works from museums across Europe and the United States.

Caravaggio's career is traced chronologically across four rooms on the ground floor of Palazzo Barberini, beginning with his earliest works created shortly after his arrival in Rome around 1595. Curiously, upon entering the first room, visitors are welcomed by two contentious works: the Barberini's own *Narcissus* and the *Boy Peeling Fruit* from the Royal Collection Trust. The former, although labelled *attributed to*, has recently been attributed to Lo Spadarino instead. The latter, unequivocally attributed to Caravaggio on its label, is probably a contemporary copy after a Caravaggesque

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¹ This review was written in April 2025. The authors wish to note that more recent developments, notably the acquisition of the portrait of Maffeo Barberini by the Italian government in March 2026, are not reflected in the text.

invention. Though appealing in its intimacy, the attribution does not hold up next to the Borghese's striking *Sick Bacchus*, dated to the same period. Fortunately, the works after 1597, when Caravaggio met his most prestigious patron Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte, are less controversial. The exhibition unites the cheerful and sensory paintings – the *Cardsharps*, the *Concert* and the *Fortune Teller* – all three of which were made for the music-loving cardinal.

Exceptionally, the show was paired with the opportunity to visit the nearby Roman Casino Boncompagni Ludovisi, once the residence of Cardinal del Monte, in small guided groups. This historic residence houses Caravaggio's only known ceiling painting: a captivating oil on plaster work depicting Jupiter, Neptune and Pluto (ca. 1595-1599), painted in the Cardinal's *camerino*. Normally closed to the public as a private residence, a visit to the Casino represents a visit to one of Rome's most unique treasures.

Returning to the exhibition's first room, one can admire Caravaggio's initial version of the *Conversion of St Paul*, meriting its prominent position. This work, part of the private Odescalchi collection, is normally difficult to access. In 1600, Caravaggio was commissioned to paint the subject of the apostle's conversion on the road to Damascus as well as its pendant with the *Crucifixion of St Peter* for the Cerasi Chapel in the church of Santa Maria del Popolo. In 1605, however, the chapel, designed by Carlo Maderno, had not yet been realised. Due to a disparity in size between the architectural frames and the panels, Caravaggio had to repaint both works, which can still be seen in situ. However, on this work, as throughout the exhibition, the directional lighting system, seemingly intended to enhance Caravaggio's lauded chiaroscuro, seriously impedes proper viewing and appreciation.

The exhibition's second room presents the most compelling thematic comparisons. Two portraits of the Palazzo's former owner, Maffeo Barberini – the later pope Urban VIII – are on display, both part of private collections and attributed to the Lombard painter (one of which is labelled *attributed to* and the other unequivocally assigned to Caravaggio). The unique presentation of the two portraits side by side feeds the scholarly debate around their attribution, underscoring, in any case, that they cannot be by the same hand. Furthermore, the second room exhibits *St Catherine*, *Judith Beheading Holofernes* and *Martha and Mary Magdalene*. The sitter, the same woman for all three paintings, can perhaps be identified as the Roman courtesan Fillide Melandroni.

Caravaggio's stupendous *Martha and Mary Magdalene* from the Detroit Institute of Arts shows the painter's debt to Renaissance form as the figure of Mary recalls Verrocchio's *Lady with Flowers* from the Florentine Bargello. The nearly opaque, rotated convex mirror revolutionises the compositional device introduced by Jan van Eyck (National Gallery), and further developed by Petrus Christus (The MET) and Quentin Matsys (The Louvre Abu Dhabi) in their depictions of moneylenders. This resonates particularly well with Mary Magdalene's need to relinquish earthly delights. Reflections of this nature could have contributed to a more profound exploration of the artwork.

The third and fourth rooms, dedicated to Caravaggio's final years in Rome and his sojourns in Naples, Malta and Sicily, lack the thematic strength of the first and second

rooms. However, this does not detract from the works themselves, which are among Caravaggio's most emotive. The tormented *John the Baptist* from The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art looks away as if he cannot tolerate the viewer's voyeurism into his private space. In the newly discovered, and still highly debated, *Ecce Homo* (no pictures allowed), Pontius Pilate instead makes the viewer an accomplice in Christ's mockery. A remarkable omission from the label is the painting's relation to the Genoese version of the same subject. Nevertheless, its presentation next to the impressive Neapolitan *Flagellation* is moving. Unfortunately, due to the chronological format of the exhibition, the *Capture of Christ* from the National Gallery of Ireland (no pictures allowed) and the *Martyrdom of St Ursula* – the painter's last work – are placed in two different rooms. Displaying them side by side would have showcased Caravaggio's development in conceiving group portraits.

In short, as monographic exhibitions have regained their appeal, *Caravaggio 2025* is no different. The show succeeds as a celebration of the artist and certainly deserves a visit in its own right. Commendably, the curators have avoided the common bibliographical mythification of Caravaggio's oeuvre, a pitfall similarly highlighted by Keith Christiansen in his opening essay for the exhibition catalogue. Yet, while showcasing what Caravaggio undoubtedly does best, the exhibition missed opportunities to explore new interpretive perspectives, particularly in comparing works or addressing ongoing attribution debates. Lastly, the exhibition could have benefited from a thoughtful nod to Caravaggio's influence on contemporaries – such as the Utrecht Caravaggisti – who, like the pilgrims flocking to the Vatican during this Jubilee, journeyed to Rome in search of inspiration.