

Series

Grace in Three Acts: Caravaggio's Saint Matthew Cycle

In three monumental canvases painted for the Contarelli Chapel in the church of San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome, Caravaggio paints the drama of Matthew's life as a story of grace: summoned from the shadows, inspired to speak God's word, and strengthened to bear witness even unto death. The brush makes visible the divine light that breaks into human darkness with calling, guidance, and life beyond death.

1. The Calling of Saint Matthew: Grace That Interrupts | June 21

At a tax collector's table, in a dimly lit room, Christ's hand extends toward Matthew, breaking open his world with a single gesture. Caravaggio captures the interplay of light, gesture, and calling.

2. The Inspiration of Saint Matthew: Grace That Guides | June 28

Caravaggio paints the fragile moment of divine inspiration. An angel bends close, guiding Matthew's hand, while the evangelist wrestles with awe, responsibility, and the weight of words.

3. The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew: Grace That Triumphs | July 5

Caravaggio plunges us in the chaos of violence and the quiet steadfastness of faith. Here the evangelist's own life gives witness to the Risen Lord.

1. THE CALLING OF SAINT MATTHEW: GRACE THAT INTERRUPTS

Historical details

4. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610)

- 4.1. Born September 29, 1571, in Milan (or the town of Caravaggio, his namesake).
- 4.2. Apprenticed in Milan under Simone Peterzano, a pupil of Titian.
- 4.3. Moved to Rome in early 1590s; early years marked by poverty and minor commissions.
- 4.4. Gained patronage of Cardinal Francesco del Monte by mid-1590s.
- 4.5. Rose to fame c. 1599–1600 with the Contarelli Chapel commission (Saint Matthew cycle).
- 4.6. Known for violent temper, frequent brawls, and multiple arrests.
- 4.7. Killed Ranuccio Tomassoni in a duel in 1606; fled Rome, lived as a fugitive.
- 4.8. Worked in Naples, Malta, and Sicily; knighted briefly by the Knights of Malta, then expelled and imprisoned.
- 4.9. Died July 18, 1610, near Porto Ercole, Tuscany, under unclear circumstances, while attempting to return to Rome.

5. The Calling of Saint Matthew was Caravaggio's first public commission. He was required to paint according to a statement and agreement made in 1591.

- 5.1. The client, Matteo Contarelli wanted the paintings to be dedicated to his name saint, Matthew, and thus its decorations should show subjects from Matthew's life, amongst them the saint's calling and martyrdom.
- 5.2. In the scene depicting the calling, he wished, more precisely, the saint to be shown in the tax collector's office, counting money, preferably in the act of rising at Jesus' call.¹

Counter-Reformation influences on Caravaggio

6. Ignatian Spirituality

- 6.1. Jesuit meditative practice, especially Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*, (published in Latin in 1548) trained the faithful to perform a "composition of place" — to imaginatively insert themselves into a Gospel scene as if it were happening now, in their own body, their own room.
- 6.2. Caravaggio's contemporary dress and tavern-like setting do visually what the *Exercises* do mentally: collapse the distance between the past and the viewer's present.
- 6.3. Some quotations from Ignatius' *Exercises*:

(47) The First Prelude is a composition made by imagining the place. Here we should take notice of the following. When a contemplation or meditation is about something that can be gazed on, for example, a contemplation of Christ our Lord, who is visible, the composition consists of seeing in imagination the physical place where that which I want to contemplate is taking place.

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¹ Camilla Annerfeldt, *Costume as a Social Marker in the Works of Caravaggio*, 60.

(114) The First Point. This is to see the persons; that is, to see Our Lady, Joseph, the maidservant, and the Infant Jesus after his birth. I will make myself a poor, little, and unworthy slave, gazing at them, contemplating them, and serving them in their needs, just as if I were there, with all possible respect and reverence [...].

(116) The Third Point. This is to behold and consider what they are doing; for example, journeying and toiling, in order that the Lord may be born in greatest poverty; and that after so many hardships of hunger, thirst, heat, cold, injuries, and insult, he may die on the cross! And all this for me!²

7. Caravaggio gives the viewer a chance to participate in the scenes he portrays.
 - 7.1. For instance, the dress of the actors is contemporaneous with Caravaggio's time. This costuming would have been inviting to the viewer, who would not have felt so detached from the artwork.
 - 7.2. In *The Calling of Matthew* there is a spot at the table left empty for the viewer, who is invited to participate in the scene by joining the other characters.³
8. The contours and presence of objects and bodies is accentuated by chiaroscuro and his characteristic cinema-style lighting (provided, in the studio, by an overhead skylight).
 - 8.1. Since the Renaissance, artists had attempted to represent how things look from a particular, one-point, perspective. The picture frame can be seen as holding a transparent sheet through which viewers look, and from which, behind the painting, the scene recedes.
 - 8.2. Caravaggio is not constrained by this approach. We are drawn to become active in the scene.
 - i. At the *Supper of Emmaus* we are tempted to nudge the basket back onto the table.
 - ii. The stool in *The Inspiration of St Matthew* is about to topple into our world (we almost want to reach out to catch it) and in various works the corners of tables and masonry threaten to pierce the canvas.
 - iii. The sharp edge of the stone tomb in *The Entombment of Christ* thrusts into the space of the viewer, breaking down the divide between our reality and that of the picture. Bodies press up against the canvas.⁴
9. **Naturalism**
 - 9.1. Post-Tridentine writers pushed against idealized, classicizing beauty in sacred art on the grounds that it falsified the truth of the events depicted and indulged the senses rather than the soul.
 - 9.2. Caravaggio's unflattering, observed faces — the spectacled man squinting at his coins, the worn features of the older tax-collectors — embody this insistence on truth over beauty. The sacred is found in ordinary, unglamorous humanity, not despite it.

One way Caravaggio presented the humanity of Christ was through an innovative style that became associated with the word baroque. The word baroque has origins in two medieval Latin words.

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² Reidar Hvalvik, *Light from the Outside. The Paintings of Caravaggio in their Theological and Ecclesiastical Context*, 20.

³ Joseph Ostenson, *Caravaggio and Christ. The Humanity of a God*, 122.

⁴ Dan O'Brien, *Caravaggio, Empathy, and Christ*, 2f.

- The first, **barrocco**, with two 'r's, means "misshapen pearl." Glorifying the ugly and mundane was a very popular theme both in baroque art and baroque literature.
- The second medieval Latin word is **barocco**, with just one 'r'. his word is roughly defined as "something belonging to the ordinary person."
- Taken together, these two meanings, "misshapen pearl" and "belonging to the ordinary," apply rather appropriately to Caravaggio's work. He incorporates these two elements in what was called "deliberate realism."
- Caravaggio preferred nature as his best and only teacher. For Caravaggio, art imitated life. In fact, it was Caravaggio's habit to employ passers-by in the street as models for his paintings.⁵

10. Chiaroscuro

- 10.1. The primary purpose of this technique was to make the depiction of reality extremely truthful.
- 10.2. Furthermore, through this chiaroscuro technique, Caravaggio was able to join the noblest tradition of Christian spirituality, according to which light is a sign of inner enlightenment triggered in the soul by the act of grace.⁶

The Calling of Matthew in the Gospel

Mt 9.1 And getting into a boat he crossed over and came to his own city. 2And behold, some people brought to him a **paralytic**, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven." 3And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man is blaspheming." 4But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? 5For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? 6But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he then said to the paralytic—**"Rise, pick up your bed and go home."** 7And he rose and went home. 8When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.

9As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.

10And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. 11And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" 12But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 13Go and learn what this means: **'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.'** For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

Analysis of the painting

- 11. The picture is divided into two parts

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⁵ Joseph Ostenson, *Caravaggio and Christ*, 119.

⁶ Daniel Estivill, *Iconography and Iconology in Caravaggio. A Catholic Key to Understanding the Works*, 93.

- 11.1. The standing figures on the right forming a vertical block and those at the table a horizontal one.
 - 11.2. Their costumes reinforce the contrast: Christ and Peter are wrapped in loose, undated drapery and are barefoot, while Matthew and the other characters are dressed in the fashion of Rome around 1600: rich, colorful clothing, with feathered hats - one figure even has a pair of glasses.
 - 11.3. The two groups are separated by a void, bridged literally and symbolically by Christ's hand.
- 12. There is a single diagonal light beam from upper right crossing the canvas that illuminates faces, hands, and the table surface while the remainder of the room remains in deep shadow
- 13. Jesus' hand seems to be pointing to the bearded character in the middle of the table (two people on his right and two on his left). He is usually identified as Matthew. His hand mirrors Jesus' and seems to mean: "Who, me?"
- 14. Peter's hand seems directed at the young man whose body is angled toward the entering pair. There is an intrusion while they are counting money. It could be a threat. He might be reaching at the sword at his left and Peter could be inviting him to restraint.
- 15. The identification of Matthew in this painting is more complicated than it looks at first sight.
- 16. The bearded character in the middle of the table and flanked symmetrically on either side by two other characters,
 - 16.1. is presented almost unobstructed by other figures and with his head turned into the divine light emanating from above Christ,
 - 16.2. He has an expression of embarrassed astonishment, looks thoughtfully in the direction of Christ and points to himself as if to say "Do you mean me?"
 - 16.3. The paradigm of speedy conversion seems to have been transformed into a 'doubting Matthew'. In order to achieve the desired effect, Christ will have to confirm or re-affirm his order.⁷
- 17. Jesus though is not there to stay or argue. If we look carefully at the bare feet on the right of the painting, we notice that hidden behind Peter's legs we see the feet of Christ
 - 17.1. while Jesus' head and hand are directed toward the left,
 - 17.2. his feet are turning to the right – already in the act of leaving the scene.
 - 17.3. Jesus is not there to convince or reiterate his call. Matthew's conversion is supposed to happen suddenly.⁸
- 18. Then we start noticing other details about the dress:
 - 18.1. The bearded man who is supposed to be Matthew wears a hat and so do the young men at his left side. They are evidently visiting.
 - 18.2. The two men at his right instead are bare headed.
- 19. If we focus on what is happening on the table we notice that
 - 19.1. The bearded man seems to deposit coins on the table

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⁷ Thomas Puttfarcken, *Caravaggio's 'Story of St Matthew': A Challenge to the Conventions of Painting*, 171.

⁸ Thomas Puttfarcken, 169.

- 19.2. While the young man on the far left of the table is counting them and bringing them to himself.
- 19.3. The older man with the spectacles is just as intent as the young man to count the coins (possibly as a personification of greed or avarice) – they are the only two characters completely oblivious of the intrusion.
- 20. Both the clothes and the activities on the table tell us that what we are seeing here is a wealthy travelling merchant, accompanied by his two splendidly dressed pages or bodyguards, paying his dues and that these are received and counted by a business-minded official, at home in his office and absorbed in his work.⁹
- 21. This leads us to identify the young man at the end of the table as the tax collector.
- 22. Once we have recognized the young tax collector on the left as Matthew, with his head bent down, his gaze fixed on the money on the table, we need to re-assess the dramatic situation of Caravaggio's composition.
 - 22.1. It is now not the case that Christ's gesture is met by doubt and hesitation, it is simply met by incomprehension on the part of the merchant and his pages - those to whom it is not addressed.
 - 22.2. The merchant at least seems to recognize the direction of Christ's command: his hand [...] is not pointing at his own chest asking, 'Do you mean me?'
 - 22.3. **It is pointing at Matthew.**
 - 22.4. What Caravaggio has chosen to depict here is not the traditional event of Matthew responding to Christ's call, but the split-second between the call and Matthew's response to it.
 - 22.5. Matthew is still absorbed in collecting the money and still unaware of the presence of the Lord.
 - 22.6. He will recognize the Lord at the very next moment, will obey instantly, and leave behind his company and his profession in which he is now still so totally involved.
 - 22.7. These details are not made obvious, but appear deliberately hidden and obscured.¹⁰
- 23. This makes the power of Jesus' call even more dramatic – especially considering that already before the instant of conversion, just as he utters his call, Jesus is already leaving, knowing that Matthew will follow him.

Jesus' Hand

- 24. Christ's hand with a relaxed wrist, fingers loosely curled rather than rigidly extended is widely recognized as a deliberate echo of Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* in the Sistine Chapel.
 - 24.1. Michelangelo's fresco has two hands in dialogue: God's, firm and fully engaged, actively reaching; Adam's, listless, barely roused, waiting to be animated.
 - 24.2. We would expect Jesus' hand to echo God's active, life-giving hand.
 - 24.3. Instead, Caravaggio gives Adam's limp gesture to Christ rather than God's active one.
 - 24.4. So the hand that calls Matthew into new life is shaped like the hand that originally only *received* life.

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⁹ Thomas Puttfarcken, 172.

¹⁰ Thomas Puttfarcken, 172.

- 25. The *intent* and *direction* of the gesture are divine (a sovereign summons), but the *form* it takes is human, creaturely, true God and true man.
- 26. In the Sixtine ceiling, God's hand crosses a gap to *bestow* life on Adam for the first time. In Caravaggio's painting, Jesus' hand does the same – brings Matthew back to life.

Psychological Realism

- 27. Caravaggio painted faces and gestures as records of inner states, not as types, through an original use of light and shadow to isolate gesture and expression rather than to decorate the scene.
- 28. In the *Calling*, this shows in the differentiated, almost case-by-case treatment of response. Nothing is generic: each face is doing its own, separate psychological work inside the same single instant
 - 28.1. The man in spectacles is absorbed in the coins, oblivious;
 - 28.2. the bearded figure (usually read as Matthew) registers shock with a hand drawn to his own chest, as if the gesture itself were the thought "me?" forming in real time;
 - 28.3. the youth in the feathered cap turns with open curiosity rather than alarm;
 - 28.4. the armed boy behind him reacts with bodily wariness before any conscious decision is visible.
 - 28.5. The hunched youth at the far end of the table, head bowed, fingers drawn around the coins as if pulling them toward himself even as the room shifts behind him, caught mid-grasp, not yet looking up. His psychological state is pure habit, the body still finishing the task the mind hasn't yet interrupted.
- 29. That's precisely why this figure is the strongest rival candidate for Matthew: if he is the one being called, the painting captures something sharper than the bearded man's self-aware "who, me?" - it captures the instant *before* self-awareness, the call landing on someone who hasn't even registered that anything has happened.
- 30. The two readings produce genuinely different psychologies of conversion.
 - 30.1. If Matthew is the bearded man, the drama is *recognition* — a startled "me?"
 - 30.2. If Matthew is the youth still drawing in his coins, the drama is *interruption* — grace breaking in on someone who hasn't yet noticed he's been addressed, his hand still finishing the activity he is about to abandon.
 - 30.3. Caravaggio may well have wanted the ambiguity to stand: two simultaneous models of how a person is called, neither canceling the other.





