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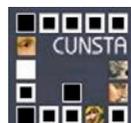
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# Rivalry on the Roman Scene: Guido Reni's Brushes versus Caravaggio's Fists

Daniel M. Unger\*

## *Abstract*

An anecdote written by Carlo Cesare Malvasia highlights the kind of relationship that existed between Guido Reni and Caravaggio. Malvasia states in his 1678 *Felsina pittrice* that Reni arrived in Rome on the invitation of Cavalier d'Arpino and that he was commissioned to make the *Crucifixion of St. Peter* for San Paolo alle Tre Fontane, which he used as an opportunity to practise his Caravaggesque manner. Caravaggio was displeased and blamed Reni for stealing his style and colouring. He warned him not to show himself near him or he would have to bear the consequences; «he would be glad to fight not with his brush, but with his fists». In this article, I want to follow Malvasia and ask what reason Caravaggio may have had to be furious with Reni. This kind of anecdote outlines a certain aspect of early modern artistic culture that reveals the kind of rivalries that existed between painters. Although not expressed explicitly, Malvasia's anecdote suggests a sophisticated reading of both Caravaggio's and Reni's versions of the *Crucifixion of St. Peter*. That Caravaggio and Reni did not see each other's versions before completing their own, might hint to the reasons for Caravaggio's fury.

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Un aneddoto raccontato da Carlo Cesare Malvasia mette in luce il tipo di rapporto che esisteva tra Guido Reni e Caravaggio. Malvasia afferma nella sua *Felsina pittrice* del 1678 che Reni arrivò a Roma su invito del Cavalier d'Arpino e che ricevette l'incarico di realizzare la *Crocifissione di San Pietro* per San Paolo alle Tre Fontane, opera che utilizzò come occasione per esercitarsi nello stile caravaggesco. Caravaggio ne fu irritato e accusò Reni di avergli rubato lo stile e i colori. Lo avvertì di non farsi vedere nei suoi paraggi, altrimenti avrebbe dovuto subirne le conseguenze; «sarebbe stato felice di combattere non con il penello, ma con i pugni». In questo articolo, intendo seguire Malvasia e chiedermi quale motivo potesse avere Caravaggio per essere tanto furioso con Reni. Questo tipo di aneddoto delinea un aspetto particolare della cultura artistica della prima età moderna, rivelando le rivalità che esistevano tra pittori. Sebbene non lo dica esplicitamente, l'aneddoto di Malvasia suggerisce una lettura raffinata delle versioni della *Crocifissione di San Pietro* di Caravaggio e Reni. Il fatto che Caravaggio e Reni non avessero visto le rispettive versioni prima di completare le proprie potrebbe offrire un indizio sulle ragioni della rabbia di Caravaggio.

The more we know about Guido Reni, the more we understand the impact Caravaggio had on his artistic development. This is especially true of those of Caravaggio's paintings that Reni could have seen during his sojourn in Rome. Reni arrived in the Eternal City in 1601, seeking fame and success where he was still unknown. By the time he left Rome in 1614, he was an internationally acclaimed painter<sup>1</sup>, and his Caravaggesque attitude helped him to achieve this fame<sup>2</sup>. His learning from Caravaggio became integrated into his style and continued to be used in paintings that he completed many years after his return to Bologna<sup>3</sup>. Pertinent here is Caravaggio's *Denial of St. Peter*, which came into Reni's possession when he received it from Luca Ciamberlano in 1613. This painting, as Michele Nicolaci and Riccardo Gandolfi have shown, was important for Reni's continued development and illustrates that his interest in Caravaggio continued well into the second decade of the seventeenth century<sup>4</sup>. In acknowledging the contribution of Caravaggio's style to Reni's success, Howard Hibbard noted that his *Crucifixion of St. Peter*, which is at the core of this article and one of his most Caravaggesque paintings, «is the artist's first Roman masterpiece and one of the landmarks of Italian painting»<sup>5</sup>. Sybille Ebert Schifferer added that «without his experience in Rome, Reni would not have been Reni»<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> For Reni's success in Rome, see especially Cappelletti 2022.

<sup>2</sup> For Guido Reni's stylistic development and eclectic approach, see Landrus 1998, pp. 1-21; Unger 2019, pp. 75-88, 105-154; Cui 2022, pp. 205-228.

<sup>3</sup> Irving Lavin wrote that Guido Reni modeled his 1633/4 *St. Jerome* (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum) in accordance with Caravaggio's *St. Matthew* (Contarelli Chapel). See Lavin 1974, p. 81. Hayden Landrus suggests that Reni's eclecticism throughout his career included elements from Caravaggio's style and defines Reni's early phase in Rome as an «experimentation with Caravaggesque elements». See Landrus 1998, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Nicolaci, Gandolfi 2011, pp. 41-55.

<sup>5</sup> Hibbard 1965, p. 504.

<sup>6</sup> «Ohne die Rom-Erfahrung wäre Reni nicht Reni geworden»: Ebert-Schifferer, 2022, p. 44.

An anecdote written by Carlo Cesare Malvasia in his life of Guido Reni, highlights the kind of relationship that existed between Guido Reni and Caravaggio in terms of the one following, emulating, copying, stealing, or simply being influenced by the other. Malvasia states in his 1678 *Felsina pittrice* that Reni arrived in Rome on the invitation of Cavalier d'Arpino and that he was commissioned to make the *Crucifixion of St. Peter* (fig. 1) for San Paolo alle Tre Fontane<sup>7</sup>, which he used as an opportunity to practise his Caravaggesque manner. Malvasia writes explicitly that:

Arpino even procured for Guido the very works that he knew were intended for Caravaggio – as occurred in the case of the *Crucifixion of Saint Peter* at the Tre Fontane, outside Rome, for which Arpino promised Cardinal Borghese that Guido would transform himself into Caravaggio, making the painting in that dark and contrasted style<sup>8</sup>.

Caravaggio, according to Malvasia, was displeased with Reni, as he blamed him for stealing his style and colouring and warned him not to show himself near him or he would have to bear the consequences<sup>9</sup>; in his words, «he would be glad to fight not with his brush, but with his fists». Malvasia continues by writing:

Stumbling upon Guido one day, Caravaggio told Guido that he did not respect him one whit: if Guido had come to Rome with the notion of competing with him, he was ready to give him any satisfaction whatsoever, and by any means, knocking all such airs out of his head. He would teach Guido to stay at home and not go to someone else's house acting annoyingly and stirring up trouble<sup>10</sup>.

At first glance, Malvasia's anecdote, which was published more than seventy years after the San Paolo alle Tre Fontane commission was completed, raises questions regarding the validity of this story. In fact, as early as 1945, Walter Friedlaender had questioned its veracity in his article on Reni's Caravaggesque period, asking how it could have come to be that Caravaggio, who was surrounded by many followers and imitators towards whom he was not

<sup>7</sup> Malvasia 2019, pp. 38-39. See also Friedlaender 1945, p. 154. Today, it is commonly accepted that Reni was invited to Rome by Cardinal Paolo Emilio Sfondrato and not by Cavalier d'Arpino, and also that the Cardinal commissioned him to paint the Cappella del Bagno in Santa Cecilia in Trastevere and not San Paolo alle Tre Fontane, contrary to Malvasia's claims. See Pepper 1984, p. 22; Schaefer 1988, p. 6; Landrus 1998, p. 22 and p. 37; Pierguidi 2022, p. 55; Terzaghi 2022, pp. 32-33.

<sup>8</sup> «si era posto a portarlo, procacciandogli anco que' lavori stessi che al Caravaggio intendeva esser destinati, come poi avvenne del San Pietro crocefisso alle tre Fontane fuor di Roma, promettendo egli al cardinal Borghese che sarebbesi Guido trasformato nel Caravaggio, e l'avrebbe fatto di quella maniera cacciara e scura, come bravamente eseguito si vede»: Malvasia 2019, pp. 38-39.

<sup>9</sup> Malvasia 2019, pp. 40-41.

<sup>10</sup> Malvasia 2019, pp. 38-39.

so aggressive or violent, had reacted to Reni in such a severe and brutal way<sup>11</sup>. It can be explained as mere hyperbole. It may also be argued that this rather extreme reaction shows the extent to which Malvasia acknowledged Reni's abilities and that he thought that they must have constituted a threat to Caravaggio. One might follow Malvasia and ask what reason Caravaggio may have had to be furious with Reni. Indeed, it is worth asking whether his anecdote contains more than meets the eye.

There is a certain nuance in Reni's *Crucifixion of St. Peter* that Malvasia could have interpreted as criticism of Caravaggio regarding the clarity of his compositions. With what we know today about both painters' characters – Reni's arrogance versus Caravaggio's quick temper – it seems logical that Caravaggio would have reacted violently if he had interpreted Reni's approach as an insult<sup>12</sup>. In what follows, I would like to follow on this hearsay witness anecdote, taking into consideration that it may be an invention by Malvasia and that it has no facts to support it. Still, this kind of anecdote outlines a certain aspect of early modern artistic culture that reveals the kind of rivalries that existed between painters<sup>13</sup>. This may also be regarded as a case study as to how should we approach Malvasia and his writings.

Count Malvasia (1616-1693), a native of Bologna and the scion of a respectable local family, wrote what is still acknowledged today as the most comprehensive and detailed account of the development of painting in Bologna between the fourteenth and the seventeenth centuries. Modern scholars agree that his *Felsina pittrice*, which was first published in 1678, was written in reaction to Giovanni Pietro Bellori's *Vite de' pittori, scultori e architetti moderni*, which had been published just six years earlier, in 1672. In addition to this extensive survey, Malvasia was the author of two other texts: his 1686 *Le pitture di Bologna* and his *Il claustro di San Michele in Bosco di Bologna, dipinto dal Famoso Ludovico Carracci e da altri eccellenti maestri usciti dalla sua scola*, which was posthumously published in 1694. Malvasia dedicated himself to extolling the achievements of Bolognese painting, especially the Carracci and their famous and most successful followers, among whom was Guido Reni. In modern scholarship Malvasia's reliability was placed under suspicion following the detection of a clear agenda of promoting the Bolognese school of painting, which supposedly disrupted his capacity for objective judgment. He was thus regarded as a manipulative writer who consciously distorted the truth for the sake of emphasizing the artistic supremacy of Bolognese paint-

<sup>11</sup> «That Caravaggio was infuriated, there can be no doubt. But it seems unlikely that the circumstance of having been imitated would have been sufficient in itself to disturb his mind so deeply»: Friedlaender 1945, p. 156.

<sup>12</sup> See Spear 1997, pp. 19-24; Sohm 2001, p. 13. See also, Locker 2019, pp. 20-27.

<sup>13</sup> Francesca Cappelletti mentions tense rivalries between other painters of that period such as that between Pomarancio and Cavalier d'Arpino. See Cappelletti 2022, p. 49.

ing. Scholars maintain that his writings should be read critically, taking into consideration his political objectives and his Bolognese patriotism<sup>14</sup>. Malvasia, wrote Donald Posner, «is marred by an almost obsessive local patriotism and, therefore, by an uncritical championship of Annibale's Bolognese, as opposed to his Roman, period, and of Ludovico Carracci over Annibale, who in Malvasia's view 'deserted' his native Bologna»<sup>15</sup>. Malvasia has been compared with Bellori who throughout the twentieth century was considered one of the most important and influential seventeenth-century art theoreticians. In contrast to modern perceptions of Bellori as a theoretician and art critic with an apparently unbiased theoretical perspective, Malvasia was viewed as a subjective, falsifying, and unreliable historian. Yet as Janis Bell has observed, Bellori was driven by his own classical agenda, fortified by political interests that brought about errors that were not always innocent<sup>16</sup>. Recent scholarship accepts Bellori's texts to be as problematic as Malvasia's and the latter's reputation has improved mainly due to the current understanding that readings of such early modern accounts must be accompanied by careful consideration of their rhetorical and descriptive manner. In her review of Charles Dempsey's revised book on Annibale Carracci, which was republished in 2002, Gail Feigenbaum summarized this approach by warning art historians against the manipulations, distortions, and uncertainties that can be found in early biographies. According to her, «art historians have not only been put on notice that the early biographies can no longer be combed naively for 'facts' and 'information,' but they have also been given guidance in how such texts operate as species of rhetoric».<sup>17</sup> As a man of his time, Malvasia is a valuable asset in any attempt to understand seventeenth-century Bolognese artistic preferences.

When Reni received the commission to make the *Crucifixion of St. Peter* for San Paolo alle Tre Fontane on the outskirts of Rome from Cardinal Pietro Aldobrandini in 1604<sup>18</sup>, he chose a style that was most in keeping with Caravaggio's in that he depicted the entire scene in a dramatic chiaroscuro, using a limited number of figures against a dark background. The vivid effect of the chiaroscuro together with the movement of the busy and focused executioners adds to the intense moment of the saint's martyrdom. Reni's *Crucifixion of St.*

<sup>14</sup> On Malvasia's reliability, see Mahon 1947, p. 36, n. 38; Mahon 1968, pp. 2-9; Mahon 1986, pp. 790-795; Cropper, Dempsey 1987, pp. 499-502; Goldstein 1988, pp. 8-28; Goldstein 1991, p. 649; Perini 2004, pp. 41-47; Cropper 2012a, pp. 419-420; Cropper 2012b, pp. 11-13 and 32-40. See also Gash 1990, p. 241. For a detailed account of Malvasia's local patriotism, see Summerscale 2000, pp. 11-24.

<sup>15</sup> Posner 1971, pp. vii-viii.

<sup>16</sup> Bell 2002, pp. 29-30. For Bellori's intentions, see also Sohm 2001, pp. 48-50; Raben 2006, pp. 131-133.

<sup>17</sup> Feigenbaum 2002, n/p.

<sup>18</sup> For the commission and payment in 1604, see Hibbard 1965, p. 503; Pepper 1984, p. 215. Lorenzo Pericolo ascribes the commission to Scipione Borghese: see Pericolo 2011, p. 311.

*Peter* is an example of his unique Caravaggism which is characterized by an embrace of certain stylistic elements on the one hand while striving for clarity on the other. The outcome is thus unique and original. In this, we should mention part of Pepper's description that Reni «adopted within his own highly ordered approach to composition characteristics of the other artist: types such as the young bravo wearing a plumed hat, dramatic chiaroscuro, emphasis on realistic detail»<sup>19</sup>. According to Richard E. Spear, «Reni just was not willing to concede the elegance of design that was so deeply ingrained in his sense of grace and *maniera* composing, nor would he break with the Carracci's principles of decorum and idealization of raw nature»<sup>20</sup>. The painting, it should be noted, received enthusiastic responses during Reni's lifetime. For example, in his *Ritratto di Roma Moderna* first published in 1638, Pompilio Totti expressed his admiration (*mirabile*) when he mentioned the painting<sup>21</sup>.

A comparison between Caravaggio's known version of the *Crucifixion of St. Peter* (fig. 2) and the version of the same scene completed by Reni shows the extent of the latter's independence. One should stress, however, that Caravaggio's *Crucifixion of St. Peter* is part of a set of decorations that includes his *Conversion of St. Paul* and Annibale Carracci's *Assumption of the Virgin*. On the ceiling, Innocenzio Tacconi and probably also Carracci completed three additional scenes from the hagiographies of the Madonna, St. Peter, and St. Paul – the *Coronation of the Virgin, Domine Qua Vadis*, and *St. Paul in Ecstasy*<sup>22</sup>. Reni's painting was meant to stand on its own as an altarpiece. The complexity of Caravaggio's religious idea contrasts with the clarity of Reni's presentation. Moreover, Caravaggio's painting should be understood in connection with the other works of art in the chapel, while Reni's painting stands alone. With regard to the paintings on the three walls, Caravaggio may be seen as appropriating Carracci's *Assumption* in order to convey a comprehensive religious idea for the entire chapel. The diagonal composition parallels the composition of his *Conversion of St. Paul* on the other side of the chapel, and both diagonals direct the viewer's gaze towards Carracci's altarpiece.

In his *Crucifixion of St. Peter*, Reni depicted the main protagonist at the centre of the composition being raised to a cross by three executioners. Each executioner is contributing, in his own way, to the joint effort to lift St. Peter to the standing cross. The executioner on the left is pulling a cord tied to the saint's feet, the one on the right is holding the saint's lower back and pulling him up,

<sup>19</sup> Pepper 1988, p. 169. See also Treves 2016, p. 17.

<sup>20</sup> Spear 1997, p. 284.

<sup>21</sup> «È bella, e mirabile pittura del gran Guido Reni il Quadro di S. Pietro Crocefisso, che stà in questa chiesa [S. Paolo alle tre Fontane] all' acque salvie; dou'i Pontefici hanno concesse grandissime indulgenze»: Totti 1638, p. 121. For other positive references from the seventeenth century, see also Pierguidi 2022, p. 62.

<sup>22</sup> Pepper 2000, p. 112; Unger 2019, pp. 212-213.

and the third executioner is standing on a ladder leaning against the cross with a hammer in one hand and a nail in the other, about to nail the saint's feet to the cross. The saint reacts to this in a most human way – he is terrified, expressing his misery and fear by lifting his right arm in an expressive gesture while spreading the other hand in wonderment. St. Peter's concentration on the nail in the executioner's hand is what makes the tense scene so effective. The drama is reinforced by the contrast between the saint's movement and the static cross, which is fixed to the ground and forms a central axis in the painting, its vertical setting highlighting St. Peter's movement. The lifting of St. Peter to the cross is also accentuated by the dark landscape against which the entire scene is placed.

Caravaggio depicted St. Peter at the centre, with his body inverted on the cross. He is gazing at the nail in his left hand with an expression of agony as the cross is hauled up by three executioners. He is depicted naked, with his blue garment lying in the right-hand corner of the composition. The entire group is set against a dark background. The composition of the painting is cross-shaped: St. Peter himself forms the crossbeam of the cross, from his left hand on the right side to the executioner, dressed in a red garment, on the left. This line is crossed by the two executioners with their backs to the viewer.

In their renditions of St. Peter, both Reni and Caravaggio focused on St. Peter's emotional reaction to the suffering he is experiencing. They are both rather sentimental and accentuate the saint's human response. The way in which Reni's St. Peter stretches his right hand towards the executioner, who is holding a hammer and a nail and is about to nail the saint's feet, is very human, as though he wants to stop him from doing what he is about to do and is asking to avoid the pain. Likewise, Caravaggio emphasized the saint's human response to pain by depicting a grieving facial expression with his gaze focused on the source of his pain: his nailed hand. As Stephen Pepper observes, «Caravaggio has made the struggle between the Saint's spiritual force and the nail's physical force the climax of his painting»<sup>23</sup>.

The similarity in both paintings can also be discerned in the fact that both painters depicted a condensed composition with three executioners who are busying themselves with St. Peter's martyrdom. The outcome for both painters is a highly expressive moment in which the saint is engaged with his human fear and pain.

However, there is a significant difference between Reni's choice of focus and that of Caravaggio in terms of the execution itself. As noted by Stefano Pierguidi, Caravaggio decided to depict the raising of the cross with St. Peter already nailed to it, Reni chose to focus on St. Peter being raised to a cross that is already stuck in the ground<sup>24</sup>. As they raise the cross, Caravaggio's

<sup>23</sup> Pepper 1971, p. 335.

<sup>24</sup> Pierguidi 2022, p. 56.

executioners' movement creates a cross-shaped composition. This diagonal depiction, with the executioners in the process of lifting the cross with St. Peter nailed to it, adds movement and drama. In contrast, Reni's executioners are raising St. Peter to a cross that is already fixed in the ground.

The initial idea of Caravaggio's *Crucifixion of St. Peter* was to focus on the saint's physical pain<sup>25</sup>, as he is gazing at the nail that has painfully penetrated his hand. In Reni's painting, the emphasis is on the saint's fear of pain. This difference is significant because it emphasizes a different attitude that can only be perceived if we question Reni's supposed reliance on Caravaggio's so-called precedent.

Today, no one would ever doubt the existence of a connection between the works of Caravaggio and those of Guido Reni that were produced in Rome. It is clear from Reni's *Crucifixion of St. Peter* that he came under Caravaggio's spell. The painting has been regarded as having been produced in a Caravaggesque manner, and it was considered as an emulation of Caravaggio's depiction of the same event in the Cerasi Chapel at S. Maria del Popolo. The early biographers probably assumed that if both painters had depicted the same scene in a style that was regarded as having been invented by Caravaggio, then Reni's depiction of the *Crucifixion of St. Peter* must have followed Caravaggio's version of this scene. Reni's early modern biographer Giovanni Battista Passeri (1610–1679) stated that he had chosen to depict the *Crucifixion of St. Peter* in a Caravaggesque manner because this had been requested by Cavalier d'Arpino. D'Arpino had held a grudge against Caravaggio since the two had worked together in the Contarelli Chapel and wanted to humiliate him. So, when Reni completed his *Crucifixion of St. Peter*, d'Arpino applauded him and described the stylistic outcome as being better than Caravaggio's. This enthusiasm for Reni's achievement, according to Passeri, was directed against Caravaggio<sup>26</sup>. D'Arpino's anger towards Caravaggio may have been a result of the story told by Karel van Mander in his book on Italian painters, in which Caravaggio painted a dwarf sticking out his tongue while looking at one of d'Arpino's paintings in S. Lorenzo in Damaso<sup>27</sup>. Nevertheless, these two stories may also be simply rhetorical devices used by the early biographers to indicate a connection between the two painters stressing a *paragone*, a not unfamiliar sentiment at that time.

The stylistic similarities that can be found in the paintings that were produced in Rome by these two painters were acknowledged by Bellori, who in his 1672 book wrote on the St. Peter paintings that:

<sup>25</sup> Stephen Pepper writes that the aims of the two painters are different in that while Caravaggio emphasizes St. Peter's pain, Reni stresses the beauty of the saint's body. Pepper 1971, p. 335.

<sup>26</sup> Passeri 1772, pp. 66–67. See also Friedlaender 1945, p. 154.

<sup>27</sup> van Mander 1616, fol. 115; Friedlaender 1955, pp. 259–260.

He [Caravaggio] received such applause for this innovation that he compelled some artists of more elevated creative powers, nurtured in the best schools, to follow him, as Guido Reni did, who at the time succumbed somewhat to the style of this man and presented himself as a naturalist, as can be recognized in the *Crucifixion of Saint Peter* at the Tre Fontane<sup>28</sup>.

Bellori thus repeated the notion that in the case of the *Crucifixion of St. Peter*, it was Reni who had followed Caravaggio, assuming that Caravaggio's rendition in the Cerasi Chapel was completed before Reni's rendition of the same scene in San Paolo alle Tre Fontane. Bellori focused only on the stylistic similarities between the two compositions. In his *Life of Guido Reni*, Bellori compared Reni's version to that made by Caravaggio and concluded:

In painting this work Guido made more use of nature than of his noble ideas, however he deployed most beautiful parts of nude figures there, with a power of brush and invention far superior to Caravaggio himself, who painted the same subject in the church of the Popolo, as we have said in his life<sup>29</sup>.

Malvasia's anecdote was published six years after Bellori's book and therefore it seems correct to speculate that his choice of words may reflect hyperbole. Yet, his description of Caravaggio's anger towards Reni holds more than mere fury.

Early modern perceptions that Reni was acquainted with Caravaggio's second version of the *Crucifixion of St. Peter* before he completed his own have been repeated in modern scholarship by such scholars as Alfred Moir, D. Stephen Pepper, Helen Langdon, and Lorenzo Pericolo, to mention only a few. Moir thought that Reni's reference to Caravaggio was «to an extent 'correcting' what to a Bolognese-trained eye must have appeared to be the errors of artistic judgment in the first Cerasi chapel painting»<sup>30</sup>. Pepper believed that Reni was acquainted with Caravaggio's version in the Cerasi Chapel, yet he rejected the idea that Caravaggio had inspired Reni, instead writing that Reni «exploited it within a very different composition»<sup>31</sup>. Pepper seems to be accepting of early modern view such as that of Virgilio Malvezzi, who observed that throughout his professional life, Reni developed in a very different manner to Caravaggio, stressing Caravaggio's forceful style of painting (*la forza del dipingere*) in contrast to Reni's nobility of expression (*la nobilita dell'aria*)<sup>32</sup>. Following Pepper, Langdon wrote that Reni's «remarkable work was inspired by Caravaggio's Cerasi *Crucifixion of St. Peter*, but the vividly naturalistic

<sup>28</sup> Bellori 2005, p. 184.

<sup>29</sup> Bellori 2005, p. 351.

<sup>30</sup> Moir 1967, p. 231.

<sup>31</sup> Pepper 1971, p. 334; Pepper 1988, p. 169.

<sup>32</sup> Malvezzi 1651, n/p.

figures and surface realism are softened by a new elegance and abstract beauty»<sup>33</sup>. Pericolo thought that Reni had emulated the posture of Caravaggio's St. Paul in the Cerasi Chapel in his depiction of St. Peter and also noted that Reni had corrected Caravaggio's St. Peter<sup>34</sup>.

In recent years, the idea that Reni's painting was influenced by Caravaggio's Cerasi paintings met with resistance. Some modern scholars, such as Heather Nolin and Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, have rejected the possibility that Reni could have seen Caravaggio's painting before completing his own version. They claim that Caravaggio received the commission for the Cerasi Chapel in 1600, but that the second version of Caravaggio's *Crucifixion of St. Peter* could not have been installed in the chapel before spring 1605<sup>35</sup>, while Reni's painting is dated to 1604/5<sup>36</sup>. Luigi Spezzaferro added that it was only on 1 May 1605 that a carpenter was paid in advance to arrange the installation of the two Caravaggio paintings in the Cerasi Chapel<sup>37</sup>. This claim follows Friedlaender's assumption that Reni might have seen the first version of the *Crucifixion of St. Peter* and that Caravaggio had changed his composition after seeing Reni's painting<sup>38</sup>. A 1605 engraving produced after Reni's version by Hendrik van Schoel (c. 1565-1622), a Flemish engraver who was active in Rome (fig. 3), makes it almost impossible to accept the possibility that Reni actually saw Caravaggio's version before producing his own, as the timespan between the two paintings is too short.

The historical facts regarding the dates of the two paintings cast doubt with regard to whether Reni would have been able to see the second version of Caravaggio's *Crucifixion of St. Peter* before completing his own version. Yet, he could have seen other paintings that Caravaggio had completed and have been impressed by his work. In fact, the stylistic similarity may be explained by the fact that Reni had studied other paintings by Caravaggio that were in the public realm, such as those in the Contarelli Chapel. When Reni arrived in Rome, Caravaggio was experiencing success. His paintings at the Contarelli Chapel had been completed and were receiving a great deal of attention. Giovanni Baglione testifies that he was a witness to an occasion in which Federico Zucchari, the founder and first president of the Accademia di San Luca in Rome, came to see Caravaggio's work in the chapel. He wrote that the old painter was rather critical and expressed his dissatisfaction by proclaiming that Cara-

<sup>33</sup> Langdon 1998, p. 281.

<sup>34</sup> Pericolo 2011, p. 313.

<sup>35</sup> Nolin 2008, p. 48; Ebert-Schifferer 2013, p. 139.

<sup>36</sup> Two documents reveal that Reni received 50 scudi on 27 November 1604 and a second payment of 50 scudi on 31 August 1605. These payments indicate that the painting was executed between these two dates. See Cappelletti 2022, p. 241.

<sup>37</sup> Spezzaferro 2001, p. 14. See also p. 111 in the same catalogue; Pierguidi 2022, p. 55.

<sup>38</sup> Friedlaender 1945, p. 157.

vaggio's work was nothing more than «il pensiero di Giorgione»<sup>39</sup>. According to Lorenzo Pericolo, Caravaggio's paintings in the Contarelli Chapel were “on everyone's lips” when both Reni and Albani arrived in Rome<sup>40</sup>.

It would be reasonable to assume that one of the first things that Reni did in Rome was to visit the Contarelli Chapel in San Luigi dei Francesi where Caravaggio completed three scenes from the hagiography of St. Matthew: *St. Matthew and the Angel* above the altar, the *Calling of St. Matthew* on the left wall, and the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* (fig. 4) on the right. These paintings were probably the first works by Caravaggio that he had seen in Rome, and, like other Roman art lovers, he was impressed<sup>41</sup>.

That Reni was influenced by the paintings at the Contarelli Chapel can be deduced from what he took and emulated in his *Crucifixion of St. Peter*, mainly from Caravaggio's *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* (fig. 4); the main protagonist, St. Matthew, raising his hand towards his executioner in a “stop” gesture as the latter is about to strike the saint with a sword. With this gesture, St. Matthew is expressing his fear of pain. His other arm is stretched above the baptismal font. Guido Reni seems to be quoting these hand gestures in that his St. Peter is pulling up his right hand in a “stop” gesture aimed at the executioner who is about to nail his feet to the cross. His other arm is open, as in Caravaggio's painting. This use of gestures is also significant in terms of the general idea that a martyrdom is supposed to deliver. At some point, Reni was seeking to use another visual reference to St. Peter's raised hand. Reni's drawing, today at the Museum of Art in Budapest (fig. 5), suggests that at one stage of developing his composition, he was thinking about Michelangelo's *Crucifixion of St. Peter* in the Cappella Paolina (fig. 6). In the drawing, St.

<sup>39</sup> Baglione 1995, vol. 1, p. 137; Friedlaender 1955, p. 231; Hibbard 1983, p. 353. For the relationship between Zuccari and Caravaggio, see Friedlaender 1948, pp. 27-36. See also Hinks 1953, p. 66; Gilbert 1995, p. 159.

<sup>40</sup> Malvasia 2019, p. 234, n. 67. For the fame of the Contarelli chapel, see also Hibbard 1983, p. 118.

<sup>41</sup> It should be mentioned that Malvasia was rather explicit in his description of Reni's first encounter with a painting by Caravaggio. In his *Felsina pittrice*, he mentioned that Caravaggio's *Incredulity of St. Thomas* was in the possession of the Lambertini family. Reni was only four years younger than Caravaggio and would have been fascinated by the prospect of being able to study a Caravaggio painting in Bologna. According to Malvasia, Reni set himself to develop his own style in accordance with what he could have perceived from this painting and «refined this practice with much study, and could pride himself on being the first and fortunate inventor of this new style» («Se ne pose alla pratica, la raffinò col gran studio, ed ebbe il vanto di essere il primo, e fortunato introduttore di questa nuova maniera»); see Malvasia 2019, pp. 28-29. However, Malvasia was wrong, as Caravaggio seems to have completed the painting after Reni was already in Rome. Here, too, as in other instances, the mistake is nothing but an attempt to emphasize the unique connection between the two painters. For the Caravaggio painting in Bologna, see Malvasia 2019, pp. 26-27; Moir 1967, p. 226 and p. 228, n. 8; Danesi Squarzina 1997, p. 773. For the Caravaggio painting in the Lambertini collection being the *Incredulity of St Thomas*, see Canato 2013, p. 121.

Peter is twisting towards his left hand in a similar movement to Michelangelo's St. Peter, though not as boldly, and unlike Michelangelo's St. Peter, his head is not turned towards the viewer. He is also depicted bending upward, like Michelangelo's protagonist. Eventually, in the final version, Reni based St. Peter's hand gestures on what he had seen in the Contarelli Chapel and it is instead one of the executioners who is lifting the saint up with both hands. The upward axis is also clearer. Bert Treffers explained the meaning of spreading one's arms as an emulation of Christ on the cross and thus a way of expressing a willingness to follow him. This imitation leads to salvation<sup>42</sup>.

As Daniele Benati – who wrote that both painters were seeking a way to express the presence of the sacred in human life – maintains, pain is certainly at the core of both compositions<sup>43</sup>. However, each painter decided to base his work on a different iconographical scheme. When the painters made their versions of the scene, there were two types of iconographical schemes that stressed different aspects of the story<sup>44</sup>. The first, which was more traditional, was that of the nailing to the cross, as can be seen in the versions created by Masaccio in the predella of the Pisa Altarpiece and Fillipino Lippi in the Brancacci Chapel. Both painters remained very strict in their depiction of the scene with a fixed vertical cross, as Giotto also did in the Stefaneschi Triptych. In this scheme, the emotional tone is absent and the emphasis is on the upside-down cross. The second iconographical scheme focuses on the raising of the cross, an invention created by Michelangelo in the Pauline Chapel. Reni seems to have followed the earlier tradition and Caravaggio the latter<sup>45</sup>. Both painters stressed both movement and pain. However, Reni emphasized the raising of St. Peter instead of the raising of the cross, while Caravaggio accentuated the cross's movement. Caravaggio decided to replace the traditional representation with an innovative composition in which St. Peter's cross is depicted diagonally, which enhances the sense of movement. Reni expressed a fear of pain, while Caravaggio underscored pain itself. The clarity in Reni's painting rests on the fact that he remains faithful to the basic compositional structure of a fixed upside-down cross marking the vertical axis with opposing expressive hand gestures. Caravaggio's St. Peter is rather quiet with his agonized face, while the active component of the painting is provided by the executioners. The compositional structure is dense and complicated, and thus more difficult to understand.

<sup>42</sup> Treffers 2001, p. 347. See also Pericolo 2011, p. 313. For the Budapest drawing, see also Eclercy 2022, cat. no. 37.

<sup>43</sup> Benati 2022, p. 25.

<sup>44</sup> For a discussion of the iconographical tradition of the crucifixion of St. Peter, see Friedlaender 1945, pp. 155-156; Nolin 2008, pp. 51-56; Pierguidi 2022, pp. 58-60.

<sup>45</sup> For a discussion of the iconography of the raising of St. Peter to the cross, see Friedlaender 1955, pp. 28-33; Pierguidi 2022, pp. 58-60.

Although not expressed explicitly, Malvasia's anecdote suggests a sophisticated reading of both Caravaggio's and Reni's versions of the *Crucifixion of St. Peter*, emphasizing a rivalry between two painters in Rome who developed simultaneously, but in different directions. It seems clear that neither saw the other painter's version before completing his own. Still, one (Reni) adopted the stylistic characters that were typical of the other (Caravaggio). Both focused on the human suffering and the emotional reaction to suffering, but in different ways. It is no secret that Malvasia favoured Bolognese painters and that he wanted to highlight their abilities. In the process, he also stressed an antagonism between the painters. Could it be that Malvasia's emphasis was deliberate and that it was meant to accentuate the differences between them?

Reni remained loyal to iconographical tradition in that he maintained the clear still-standing cross, while Caravaggio decided to tilt the cross for the sake of connecting the painting to the altarpiece as part of an overall idea regarding the entire chapel. Reni's clarity is emphasized in contrast to Caravaggio's ambiguity, which makes Reni's compositions more accessible to the viewer. Perhaps it was this clarity that Caravaggio interpreted as an attempt to correct him, which may have led Malvasia to see this as the cause of Caravaggio's fury.

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*Appendix*

Fig. 1 Guido Reni, *Crucifixion of St. Peter*, 1604/5 Pinacoteca Vaticana, Vatican City, Photo: Daniel M. Unger



Fig. 2. Caravaggio, *Crucifixion of St Peter*, 1604, Cappella Cerasi, S. Maria del Popolo, Rome, Public Domain, Photo: Panairjdde-commonswiki, Wikimedia Commons



Fig. 3. Hendrik van Schoel, *Crucifixion of St. Peter engraving after Reni*, 1605, The British Museum, London, © The Trustees of the British Museum



Fig. 4. Caravaggio, *Martyrdom of St. Matthew*, 1599-1600, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome, Public Domain, Photo: JarektUploadBot, Wikimedia Commons



Fig. 5. Guido Reni, *Crucifixion of St. Peter*, Museum of Art, Budapest

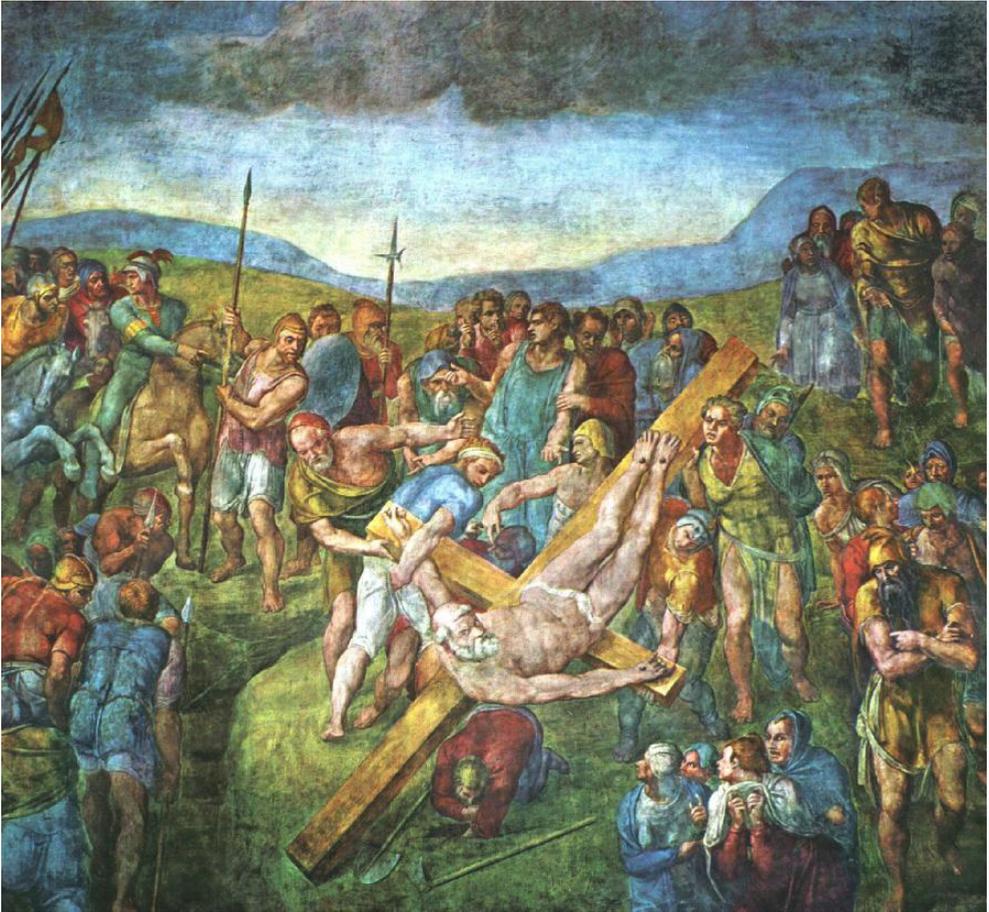


Fig. 6. Michelangelo, *Crucifixion of St. Peter*, Paoline Chapel, Vatican City, Public Domain, Photo: Arnaud, Wikimedia Commons

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