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Caravaggio and the Head of Goliath

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Michelangelo Merisi and the Head of Goliath:

The reception of Caravaggio's self-portrait



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Acknowledgments Page

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Italian society of the 16th and 17th century had quite a standardized view of academic artists. The ideal model of an artist was a sophisticated, well-mannered, and decorous individual, trained in the studio of a master under the ideals of ancient Greek and Roman classicism. Respected by the kings and queens, popes and patrons of the time, he was a knowledgeable thinker, who introduced innovations while regarding the conventional canons of painting and sculpture. Michelangelo Merisi, known as 'Il Caravaggio' (1571-1610), did not possess these ideal qualities. Born in the small *marchesato* of Caravaggio, located at the frontier of Lombardy and the Venetian territories in the northern part of the Italian peninsula, the young Caravaggio was for a period of four years an apprentice of a Bergamasque painter in the Milan-Caravaggio area, Simone Peterzano (1540-1596), who proudly introduced himself as a pupil of Titian (1488-1576).

Largely interpreted by his contemporary biographers as a rebellious artist who exploited existing standards of contemporaneous Catholic art, Caravaggio is today considered an icon of the modern artist, one who has survived thanks to, and for, his art. In light of the contribution of Stone's recent research on the final years of the painter's life, this study provides a new reading of the 1610 *David with the Head*

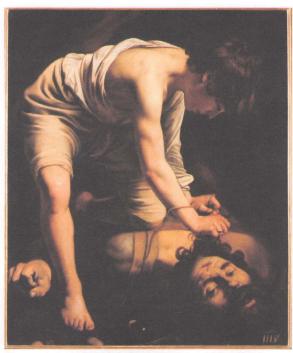
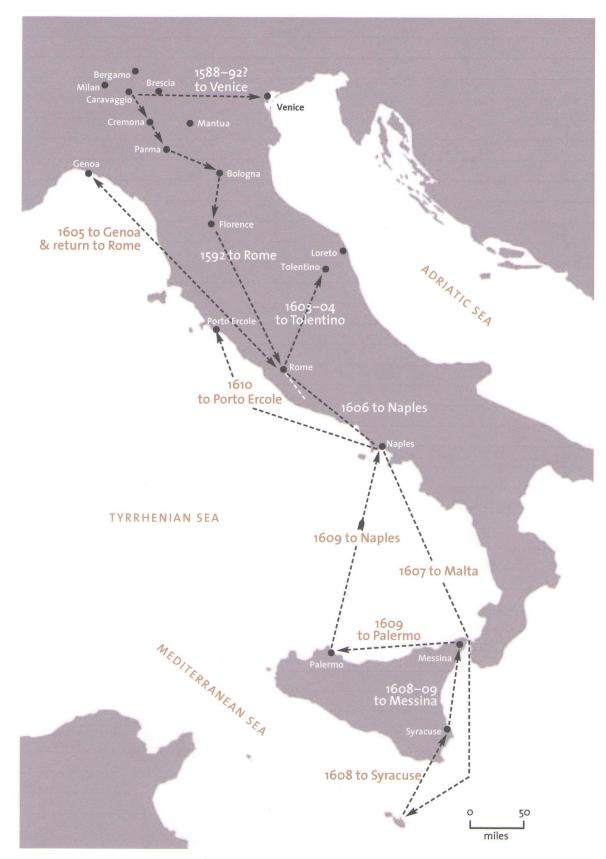


Figure 1 David and Goliath, 1601-1602; oil on canvas; Museo del Prado, Madrid.

of Goliath (see title page). Caravaggio is reinterpreted in this article under an alternative approach that explains his choices of subject matter, explicates his use of self-portraiture, and reveals his early negative reception as opposing to the modern and positive popularity in today's world of art.

After leaving Caravaggio and Lombardy in 1592 to never return, Caravaggio moved to Rome. According to writers of the 17th century, such as Fabio Masetti (dates are uncertain, c.



Map of the movements of Caravaggio from 1588 to 1610

1700), Karel van Mander (1548-1606) and Giulio Mancini (1558-1630), Caravaggio's "stravagantissimo" temperament caused him to be known as a violent and "disturbed brain", despite his excellent works and talents for naturalism.¹ During his Roman life, in fact, he never received the type of commission that a 16th century more conventional artist would obtain, but he became, during his life, a protégé of Cardinal and Archbishop of Milan, Federico Borromeo (1564-1631), cousin of Saint Charles Borromeo (1538-1584).² The connection to the ecclesiastic figure of Borromeo may have allowed Caravaggio to obtain some lesser commissions, such as the *in situ* scenes of Saint Matthew for the Contarelli Chapel in the year 1600, as well as protection in his final years, after the murder of his friend Ranuccio Tomassoni.³ The event, which occurred on May 28 1606, marked the beginning of the end of Caravaggio's public life and art commissions. Rejected by the 17th century religiously Catholic Roman society, he fled first to Malta, and then to Naples, where in his isolation he painted the *David with the Head of Goliath* in 1610.

The biblical narrative of David killing the evil Goliath was a visual topic quite

familiar to Caravaggio. Before the 1610 depiction, he already had produced two canvases of the same subject (see figs. 1 and 2). The *David with the Head of Goliath* of 1610, conserved in the Galleria Borghese in Rome, however, poses some questions, as it seems that the artist used his own face as model for the evil Goliath. The established view on



his own face as model for the evil Figure 2 David with the Head of Goliath, 1605; oil on poplar wood; Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria.

¹ Grove Dictionary of Art, "Caravaggio," (Oxford Art Online).

² Grove Dictionary of Art, "Caravaggio," (Oxford Art Online).

³ Ferdinando Bologna, "Caravaggio, the Final Years (1606-1610)," in *Caravaggio, the Final Years*, ed. Maria Sapio Silvia Cassani (Naples: Electa Napoli, 2005)., 18.

the painter's last canvas finds explanation in the belief that Caravaggio painted it to ask for forgiveness in a desperate and ultimate act of mercy to the pope.4 Despite the observations of Caravaggio's contemporaries regarding the tenebrous behavior and the violent psychology of the Lombard painter, I argue that Caravaggio did, in fact and intentionally, portray himself as the Goliath in the 1610 canvas of David with the head of Goliath. However, he did not do so to receive grace from the pope for the crimes he had committed in Rome in order to return to the eternal city. which is the accepted interpretation, but rather to persist in his revolutionary. arrogant, and rebellious behavior that made him a coherent trendsetter of naturalism and an innovative artist of the 17th century. My thesis relies heavily on Stone's article, "Self and myth in Caravaggio's David with the head of Goliath", which sustains that Caravaggio was well aware of what he was doing in the 1610 version and built himself a reputation through others' rumors. The painting in question seems to follow Leonardo da Vinci's 15th century concetto of 'ogni pintore dipinge sé stesso' (every painter depicts himself),5 an aphorism that was widely acknowledged in 17th century Italian society and would have aroused curiosity to the viewers.6

In the Borghese representation of *David with the Head of Goliath* (1610), dated to the last year of the artist's life and romantically seen as the artist's last work of art, Caravaggio offers the viewers the aftermath of the battle between the young king and the evil giant. The entire depiction heavily revolves around contrasting elements and opposites, which combine and emphasize many of the ideals of tenebrism, defined as the "abrupt juxtaposition of light and shadow without intermediate gradations of tone".7

Visually, David opposes Goliath by his youth, his liveliness and vigor, his posture and larger use of space in the composition. Contrastingly, Goliath is old,

⁴ Schama Simon, "The Power of Art: Caravaggio," in *The Power of Art* (BBC, 2006).

⁵ David M. Stone, "Self and Myth in Caravaggio's David and Goliath," in *Caravaggio: Realism, Rebellion, Reception*, ed. Genevieve Warwick (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2006)., 36.

⁶ Frank Zøllner, "Ogni Pittore Dipinge Sè". Leonardo Da Vinci And "Automimesis", Der KüNstler ÜBer Sich in Seinem Werk. Internationales Symposi-Um Der Bibliotheca Hertziana (Rome1992)., 2.

⁷ Grove Dictionary of Art, "Tenebrism," (Oxford Art Online).

bearded, dirty and aesthetically tasteless, morbid and decaying. David is posed vertically and centrally in the composition, while Goliath is on the lower right corner, occupying a small section of the canvas. Symbolically, sacred and profane are significant ingredients of the canvas: the biblical subject matter is infused by Caravaggio's relentless convention of using low class models for the saints, the martyrs and the Madonna.8 Caravaggio's naturalism made him known by his contemporary peers as the painter who used prostitutes for the Virgin Mary and servants for the saints. What Caravaggio revealed in his models was the reality of society and the careful observation of human conditions and body language. Rome in the 17th century was far from the ideal image of an eternal city. Urban growth attracted new patrons and wealthy commissioners, but also soldiers, prostitutes, beggars, orphans, pickpockets, and vagabonds. Caravaggio himself was among these social types, who came to Rome in the hope for a change. The taverns and bordelli were his playground and his eyes adjusted to the tenebrae of the interiors, revealing the realism of poverty, corruption, violence and cruelty. Rejecting idealization for a truer naturalism, Caravaggio brought the streets and taverns into Roman art, attracting the criticizing eyes of prototypical classicists.

Excessively anachronistic for the century he lived in, the reception of Caravaggio's art was largely negative – a disgrace for admirers of classical baroque and for religious over-traditionalists alike. 17th century biographer Giovanni Pietro Bellori (1613-1696), author of '*Le Vite de Pittori*', often commented on Caravaggio's "*terribile*" art, and the consequent removal of his paintings from public spaces, criticizing the painter by saying:

"He debased art itself mainly by showing in his canvases the actions of low class people, imitating their every vile gesture, and what's more, giving to his religious paintings little

⁸ David M. Stone and Keith Sciberra, *Caravaggio: Art, Knighthood, and Malta* (Malta: Gutenberg Press, 2006)., 2.

decorum by filling them with every sort of vulgarity, resulting in their being removed from the altars..."9

A revolutionary, who took his chances, Caravaggio made many enemies while working in Rome. The painter and art historian Giovanni Baglione sued the Lombard for libel, which put Caravaggio in jail for two weeks. History suggests that Caravaggio and his *bardassa*, or servant boy, may have written satirical verses on the art historian and passed them throughout the taverns, tennis courts, and artistic circles of Rome. Baglione, threatened by the Lombard derisive behavior, began a personal campaign with the purpose of destroying Caravaggio's reputation. Similarly, the writer Bellori was no enthusiast of Caravaggio's art, as seen above, and negatively commented on the Lombard painter's private life as heavily as he did on his style. Stone is convinced that Caravaggio's biography has been unfairly manipulated by Bellori's critical view in his biography on the Lombard's naturalism, that heavily contrasts with the author's own preference for classical idealization. In particular, Bellori, who strongly advocated the works of Domenichino (1581-1641) and Poussin (1594-1665) for their devoted use of classicism, blamed Caravaggio for misleading an entire generation of young painters.

To sustain their argumentation, Bellori, along Baglione and other 17th century classicist biographers heavily emphasized the idea that Caravaggio might not have been psychologically stable. Caravaggio's campaign of interference with the classical canons of idealization that the Church had established during the Council of Trent was, according to Bellori, a sign of his debatable inner psychology, "a damaged mind", which made him depressed and violent, and was furthermore a reflection of his 'unpleasant' exterior aesthetic appearance.¹⁴ In a later letter, dated to 1624, Cardinal Federico Borromeo too would have to admit that Caravaggio's

⁹ Stone, "Self and Myth in Caravaggio's David and Goliath.", 37.

¹⁰ Stone, "Self and Myth in Caravaggio's David and Goliath.", 37.

¹¹ Grove Dictionary of Art, "Caravaggio," (Oxford Art Online).

¹² Stone, "Self and Myth in Caravaggio's David and Goliath.", 36.

¹³ Sciberra, Caravaggio: Art, Knighthood, and Malta. 3.

¹⁴ Stone, "Self and Myth in Caravaggio's David and Goliath.", 38.

manipulation of biblical stories indeed infringed the Counter Reformation canons of art:

"Men who are contaminated must not occupy themselves with divine things, since they have proved unworthy of such function; full of vices and faults as they are, it is not clear how they can imbue their images with that piety and devotion which themselves they lack." ¹⁵



Figure 3 David with the Head of Goliath (detail), 1610; oil on canvas; Galleria Borghese, Rome.

Poussin himself would blame Caravaggio after his death for misleading an entire generation of painters and young artists toward a style of art that emphasized color, lacked disegno, elevated alla prima method, and depicted lower genres like still life.16 According to the French art historian André Félibien (1619-1695), Poussin said that Caravaggio was a god of self-gratification and drunken excess that "came into the world to destroy painting". 17 In actuality, Caravaggio seems to have exploited contemporary criticism to create for himself the reputation of a rebel, who approached life, art, and self-portraiture according to his taste. Indifferent to social standards, he acted imprudently to both his companions, and wealthy commissioners, who progressively grew to hate the artist, but not the art. Caravaggio, well aware of his artistic talent and demand for novelty in an otherwise classical world, pursued a careless way of living that allowed him to mock baroque standards

¹⁵ Bologna, "Caravaggio, the Final Years (1606-1610).", 18.

¹⁶ Sciberra, Caravaggio: Art, Knighthood, and Malta., 3.

¹⁷ Stone, "Self and Myth in Caravaggio's David and Goliath.", 37.

and classical idolatry. By using his own portrait in the *David with the Head of Goliath*, Caravaggio emphasized the behavioral qualities of a revolutionary that was by the end of the 17th century and, above all today, seen as an individual unlike no other with artistic talents, knowledge of texts and egotistical personality highly anachronistic for his time. Caravaggio portrayed himself truly following his life motto "Nec Spec Nec Metu" – without hope without fear.¹⁸

Therefore, if the 1610 David with the Head of Goliath did not appeal to his contemporaries, who would condemn the work of art for its provocative tone and distasteful nature, the canvas does reinforce their claim of the artist's tendency of using naturalism and rejecting idealization. In the Borghese canvas, Caravaggio not only used his own head for Goliath. He used Francesco Cecco Boneri del Caravaggio, his bardassa and servant, as David, traditionally depicted in partial clothes and in all his youth (see fig. 3). Francesco Boneri, the so-called 'Il Caravaggino", was Caravaggio's servant, pupil and model.¹⁹ His bare chest is covered by a white creased textile, tucked diagonally in shaded beige pants, thus forming a line that is parallel to the blade of the sword on the lower left corner. His upper torso emerges from the darkness into the revealing light of knowledge that was so dear to Caravaggio's practice of tenebrism, showing his youthful strength in a frontal posture and his low social status, both reflected in the public position of the servant and in the plebeian rank of the biblical shepherd David. Naturalism is conveyed through the softness of the body, the choice of modest clothing and the use of light, which contrasts the darkness of the surrounding tenebrae. Once again, Caravaggio proved his familiarity with everyday people and the actuality of contemporary Italian life, heavily affected by poverty and brutality. The bordelli, taverns and streets he gathered in during his days in Rome shaped the artist's view of the world, and he would not exchange naturalism for a hypocritical search of idealization.

While one of David's arms is projected in a straight line into the foreground to reveal a fist that tightly seizes the head of Goliath, the right arms is partially revealed out of the shadows holding the sword he just used to decapitate the giant.

¹⁸ Schama, "The Power of Art: Caravaggio," in *The Power of Art* (BBC, 2006).

¹⁹ Stone, "Self and Myth in Caravaggio's David and Goliath.", 39.

17th century critics saw Caravaggio's practice of tenebrism as a sign of lacking skills in drawing: they were certain that Caravaggio did not know how to compose and organize composition, and most of all that he used the darkness of his canvases to hide his mistakes.²⁰ The boy's bright body is however meticulously and gently painted in a tilted pose to the right, with his left arm holding the decapitated head of his master Caravaggio as the evil Goliath. Naturalism plays in the young boy's pose a central role - the sympathetic eye, the lenient arm and the tilted forgiving head of David accentuate Caravaggio's acute observation of life, which is a sign of the artist's inner sensitivity and convincing representation of reality. Above all, in that narcissistic face of Goliath, stubborn look, and controversial evil, Caravaggio portrays the veracity of his being - an individual who followed his own ideals, independently from standards, customs and traditions. According to Stone's article, Manilli wrote in 1650 a statement about the canvas that fully supports the idea that this is first and foremost a self-portrait of the Lombard artist: "il quale in quella testa [Goliath] volle ritrarre sé stesso, e nel David il suo Caravaggino" ("He - Caravaggio in that head [Goliath] wished to portray himself and in the boy he portrayed his Caravaggino").21

Caravaggio adopted Da Vinci's concetto of "ogni pintore dipinge sé stesso" (every painter depicts himself) and took it literally, rather than figuratively. The concept of Leonardo da Vinci was a very popular notion in 17th century Italy, and a trope often used in everyday language as well as literature. "Ogni pintore dipinge sé stesso" seem to have appeared for the first time in the Italian language between 1477 and 1479, and was often associated to a similar line by Filippo Brunelleschi that goes "natura pazza scaglia pazzi effetti" (Mad nature throws mad effects).²² Both sayings suggest the idea that every "agens performs its act in its own image," and that every individual attempts imitation, or auto-mimesis.²³ In other words, one reflects his way of being in what he does and produces. Caravaggio was well aware

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²⁰ Sciberra, Caravaggio: Art, Knighthood, and Malta., 3.

²¹ Stone, "Self and Myth in Caravaggio's David and Goliath.", 44.

²² Zøllner, "Ogni Pittore Dipinge Sè". Leonardo Da Vinci And "Automimesis"., 2.

²³ Zøllner, "Ogni Pittore Dipinge Sè". Leonardo Da Vinci And "Automimesis"., 2.

at the time of the 1610 *David with the Head of Goliath* of the concept of automimesis and seemed to have almost ridiculed it by conspicuously using himself in his canvases, continuing that process of negligence that made him so revolutionary.

It is important to clarify that by the time of Caravaggio's works, the idea behind "ogni pintore dipinge sé stesso" had taken on a negative connotation hat exterior features reflected interior temperament. Italian biographer Filippo Baldinucci (1624-1696), for instance, was convinced that Caravaggio's style of tenebrism was determined by his exterior aesthetics and reflected in his personality. In a criticism on Caravaggio, he commented:



Figure 4 Engraving of Caravaggio by Albert Couwet in Bellori's "Le Vite de' Pittori"

"Everything that is not wisely painted greatly offends the eyes and imagination of connoisseurs, and it vilifies and blackens art itself... We must pardon Caravaggio his style of using the brush, since he wanted to demonstrate, using himself as an example, that proverb which says that 'ogni pittore dipinge sé stesso'. Indeed, if you consider his manner of conversation, you'll find confirmation of everything I

have just stated above. And if you look at his personal behavior, you will find no one more outlandish."²⁴

In his biography *Le vite de' Pittori* (published in 1672), Bellori uses an engraving of Caravaggio by Albert Clouwet (1636- 1679) that is quite reflective of his conception of the painter (Fig. 4). He described Caravaggio as an individual with

²⁴ Stone, "Self and Myth in Caravaggio's David and Goliath.", 37.

dark complexion and dark eyes, with black eyebrows and hair. The grin on his mouth and the blatant look of his face render Caravaggio an enigmatic figure. Bellori would state multiple times that his physical appearance affected the artist's judgment, based mostly on the statement by the same Leonardo da Vinci that "a painter who has clumsy hands will paint similar hands in his works". In other words, due to the gloomy look of Caravaggio, his figures become gruesome as well. This is seen in many of the painter's early works, such as the Medusa (Fig. 5) or Judith Beheading Holofernes (Fig. 6), but it is not a concept that can exclusively be





Figure 5 Medusa, 1597; painting; Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Figure 6 Judith Beheading Holofernes, 1597-98; painting; Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

addressed based on a popular belief. Leonardo da Vinci stated that the aphorism of "ogni pintore dipinge sé stesso" is a defect guided by judgment, which in his understanding of the concetto is closely associated to the soul.²⁶ The soul is furthermore described as the ruler of both movements and formation, therefore by association judgment "is so powerful that it moves the painter's arm and makes him copy himself, since it seems to that soul that this is the true way to construct a man".²⁷ There is a psychological, as well as a behavioral component that Caravaggio took advantage of: he was as aware of the criticism of his personality, life style and work, as well as of da Vinci's concept; hence, why not take full advantage of "ogni pintore".

²⁵ Stone, "Self and Myth in Caravaggio's David and Goliath.", 37.

²⁶ Zøllner, "Ogni Pittore Dipinge Sè". Leonardo Da Vinci And "Automimesis"., 5.

²⁷ Zøllner, "Ogni Pittore Dipinge Sè". Leonardo Da Vinci And "Automimesis"., 5.

dipinge sé stesso" to openly put himself in his works?

In the monstrous and perplexed look of Goliath himself, we see a Caravaggio that in the year 1610 was tired of the society he lived in (Fig. 7). His bearded face and abundant hair blend in the shadows, but his eyes are more vivid than ever. His face muscles are still firmly tensioned by the forehead in an expression of selfabsorbance. His expression is a photograph through time: a shot that will forever remember Caravaggio as the clever and narcissistic poet of his own canvases.²⁸ Movement is quite subtle and restrained as if he wished to show himself as a satire and a provocation of "art theoretical commonplaces".29 If one should read death and a quest for forgiveness in the hope for a welcoming back to the eternal city, it is hard to find it in this painting. A rejected Caravaggio is a Caravaggio that ignores conventions and masters, canons and idealizations. He was the emblem of emancipation and of the modern artist that survives of his art and for his art only. According to Karel van Mander, Caravaggio searched for elegance and decorous clothes, but he did not take them off until they fell to pieces.³⁰ His behavior was unheard of from the beginning of his career, and by the time of his death, he built himself the reputation of a homosexual, and of an immoral and secular painter.³¹ Karel van Mander on the same criticism to Caravaggio would say:

"He does not study his art constantly, so that after two weeks of work he will sally forth for two months together with his rapier at his side and his servant-boy after him, going from one tennis court to another, always ready to argue or fight, so that he is impossible to get along with..."³²

2003.

²⁸ Stone, "Self and Myth in Caravaggio's David and Goliath.", 37.

²⁹ Stone, "Self and Myth in Caravaggio's David and Goliath.", 37.

³⁰ Claudio Strinati, "Bacon E Caravaggio: Un'occasione Di Incontro.," in *Caravaggio Bacon 2009*, ed. Micheal Peppiat (Milan: Federico Motta Editore, 2009), 44.

Calvesi, Maurizio. "Caravaggio: l'arte eccelsa di un pittore calunniato." In *Caravaggio Bacon 2009*, edited by Michael Peppiat, 51-67. Milano: Federico Motta Editore, 2009, 51.
 Capon, Edmund. "Caravaggio and His World." edited by Art Gallery of New South Waler,

In those taverns where he would enjoy himself and pick fights, Caravaggio saw the paradoxes of life: light versus dark, right versus wrong, good versus evil, and brought them into his paintings.³³ Under the surface of the rebellious Caravaggio, there is an artist with a great sense of human emotion and inner sensitivity. If David portrays the most humane feelings of repugnance, revulsion, and averting triumph over the evil Goliath, there is in his look a sense of piety and empathy toward the giant and toward himself. In his glimpse, there is little victory – he appears to be the least triumphant of all heroes. Goliath, on the other hand, offers a petrifying look that much resembles the one of the Medusa, and locates the viewer as the direct victim of his stare. Furthermore, the naturalism of color, the painterly quality of the canvas and the soft brushstrokes bring the entire depiction to life. If the painting could speak, Goliath's groan would endure through time, as a way to call for revolution in the arts and as a mean to be heard through ages.³⁴

David with the Head of Goliath becomes the last pronouncement of the artist in an age, in which transformation was a synonym of ugliness, homosexuality, secularism, and foolishness. With the concept of "ogni pintore dipinge sé stesso" engraved in mind, Caravaggio fashioned himself as the rebel that his society envisioned behind his external appearance, within the soul. In the 1610 David with the Head of Goliath, just before his death, Caravaggio became the storyteller of his own paintings and the driver of his life plot, building an artist whose voice echoes through times as the groan of the Goliath breaks the boundaries between art and reality. With his 1610 David with the Head of Goliath, Caravaggio provokes standards and authority, remarking that as "Nec Spec Nec Metu" was his life motto, so will it be during death. He does not need forgiveness or acceptance – he is Caravaggio in the head of Goliath.

³³ Capon, Edmund. "Caravaggio and His World." edited by Art Gallery of New South Waler, 2003

³⁴ Stone, "Self and Myth in Caravaggio's David and Goliath.", 42.



Figure 7 David with the Head of Goliath (detail), 1610; oil on canvas; Galleria Borghese, Rome.

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Annotation: Calvesi tries to clean the reputation that Caravaggio had acquired during the years prior his death. The article may prove that *David with Head of Goliath* is not to intended as a self-portrait of Caravaggio.

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- 3. (detail) See title page.
- 4. Albert Clouwet. Engraving of Caravaggio
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