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Isaac Laughing: Caravaggio, non-traditional imagery and traditional identification

Conrad Rudolph and Steven F. Ostrow

In the history of Western art, few paintings have engendered more debate about their subject than Caravaggio's canvas representing a nude pre-pubescent boy embracing a ram in the Pinacoteca Capitolina in Rome (plate 17). Over the course of the nearly four hundred years since it was painted, various writers have interpreted it as either a sacred or a profane image, and have bestowed upon it more than half a dozen different titles. The most commonly held view is that it is a devotional painting representing – albeit in a highly unconventional way – the precursor of Christ, Saint John the Baptist.¹ However, this identification has also been vigorously contested by many viewers, who have, in turn, proposed entirely different readings of its subject. Several writers have affixed pastoral or mythological titles to the work: it has been dubbed a 'Pastor friso' (a title that has been variously interpreted to mean the legendary Phryxus from Greek mythology, a generic Phrygian shepherd, or the Phrygian shepherd Paris);² a 'Coridone' (that is, Corydon, a generic name for a shepherd in ancient and Renaissance pastoral literature);³ and, simply, 'a young shepherd caressing a ram'.⁴ Others have viewed it in allegorical terms, embodying the ideas of lust and innocence, the sanguine temperament, and divine love.⁵ And still other viewers have read the painting as lacking any specific iconography, portraying nothing more than a 'nude youth with a ram'.⁶

In his monographic study of Caravaggio of 1983, Howard Hibbard remarked that 'there are persistent and well-founded doubts about Caravaggio's intentions in this painting.'⁷ These doubts are no less prevalent today, as revealed by Catherine Puglisi's statement in her recent monograph on the artist that 'consensus about the [authenticity of the] picture and its outstanding beauty has not yet resolved the debate about the painting's subject and its meaning.'⁸ Indeed, all the titles proposed for the work are problematical – in terms of reconciling them with what is actually depicted in the painting and, no less important, what is not; moreover, many of the arguments put forward in support of such titles have involved considerable hermeneutical acrobatics. The notion that it represents the young St John is confounded by the absence of the Baptist's traditional attributes – the reed cross, banderole, bowl, or lamb – as well as by the figure's emphatic nudity and his smile. The various mythological, pastoral and allegorical interpretations, while resolving some of these problems, raise new ones in their stead and have been argued in such convoluted ways as to render them unconvincing. Phryxus, for example, was a



17 Caravaggio, *Isaac Laughing*. Rome, Pinacoteca Capitolina. Scala/Art Resource, NY.

prince, not a shepherd – which befits neither the figure’s designation as a ‘Pastor’ nor his humble (nude) appearance – and the animal in the painting is decidedly not the golden fleece, Phryxus’s mythological attribute. The painting also lacks the traditional attributes of Paris – the Phrygian cap, shepherd’s staff, dog and golden apple – making this identification equally improbable.⁹ And it is highly unlikely that Caravaggio would have painted this work with as generic a subject in mind as a ‘nude youth with a ram’, for none of his other paintings – whether sacred or profane – lacks a specific subject, and there was no tradition of subjectless works in early Seicento Rome.¹⁰

Ultimately, the reason for this confusion has been both Caravaggio’s use of a non-traditional subject with a very striking psychological dynamic and the persistent attempts by scholars to read this same image as an ‘odd’ version of traditional subject matter. This paper proposes what we believe to be a simple solution to the question of the subject of Caravaggio’s canvas. Simply stated, it depicts a variation on the Sacrifice of Isaac, with Isaac sitting on the altar, at the precise moment of his salvation, when the ram miraculously appears as an offering to God. In support of this reading, we first consider the painting’s documentary and historiographical record, which provides evidence, at the very least, for challenging all previous interpretations. We then turn to the painting’s iconography, examining the ways in which it both conforms to and departs from the visual and exegetical tradition of the Sacrifice of Isaac. Lastly we analyse the work within the context of Caravaggio’s approach to art-making, especially in terms of both his visual strategies and his often radical manner of interpreting subjects. We also briefly discuss the painting’s place within the collection of its patron, and conclude with a consideration of the implications of re-identifying one of Caravaggio’s most compelling Roman works.¹¹

The documentary and historiographical record

In a series of studies, Francesca Cappelletti and Laura Testa have unequivocally demonstrated that Caravaggio’s *Isaac Laughing* (as we shall refer to it here) was one of three works executed by the artist for Marchese Ciriaco Mattei (1542–1614), one of the most discerning art collectors in early Seicento Rome.¹² The first of the three was *The Supper at Emmaus* in London, for which the painter received 150 scudi on 7 January 1602.¹³ One year later, on 2 January 1603, Ciriaco recorded a payment of 125 scudi for *The Taking of Christ*, the recently rediscovered work that is now in Dublin.¹⁴ Two additional payments to Caravaggio, the first in the amount of 60 scudi on 26 June 1602 and the second for 25 scudi on 5 December 1602, are also recorded in the marchese’s *libro dei conti*; no title or subject is indicated.¹⁵ There is good reason to believe, however, as Cappelletti and Testa have argued, that these payments refer to the work in question, for a date of 1602 accords with the style and pictorial handling of the painting; the work is known to have been executed for the Mattei; and 85 scudi was an appropriate sum to pay at the time for a painting with a single figure.¹⁶

Of the three Mattei paintings, only the Capitoline picture is not mentioned by title in the account book; *The Supper at Emmaus* is referred to as ‘il quadro de

N[ostro] S[ignore] i[n] fractione panis', *The Taking of Christ* as the 'quadro ... d'un Cristo preso all'orto'. Why this was so and what it means are unclear. What is certain, however, is that from the time the work was completed in 1602 we have no record of its title. Within a few years the painting did acquire one of its various titles: 'Pastor friso', so named by Gaspare Celio in his guidebook to paintings in Rome.¹⁷ Although Celio's guide was not published until 1638, it was largely completed by 1620; and in all probability Celio first encountered and bestowed a title on Caravaggio's painting in 1607, when he began decorating one of the rooms in the palace of Ciriaco's younger brother Asdrubale (1556–1638), next door to Ciriaco's palace in which the Caravaggio painting hung. In 1615, when Celio was again painting in Asdrubale's palace, he could have studied the work anew. And a third opportunity arose in 1616, when he completed a canvas for Giovanni Battista Mattei (1569–1624), Ciriaco's eldest son.¹⁸ Celio's text provides neither his reasons for calling the painting a 'Pastor friso', nor what, exactly, he meant by this title. But the likelihood that he first saw the work within five years of its completion and may well have had the opportunity to discuss it with Giovanni Battista Mattei, who inherited it from his father, would seem to lend Celio – and the title he gave the painting – a certain credence.¹⁹

Celio's reading of the painting's subject was not, however, shared by others. In the 'Inventario della Guardarobba di Giovan Battista Mattei', drawn up in 1616, the painting was listed as 'Un quadro di San Gio: Battista col suo Agnello di mano del Caravaggio'.²⁰ What had been viewed by Celio as a secular painting of a Phrygian shepherd or of a Phryxus had become – in the mind of Giovanni Battista Mattei's *guardaroba*, who drew up the inventory – a sacred image of Saint John the Baptist.²¹ Seven years later, in 1623, when the Capitoline picture was next documented, it was again called a Saint John the Baptist. This occurred in the will of Giovanni Battista Mattei, in which he instructed that the painting 'di S. Giovanni Battista del Caravaggio' should be left to Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte, one of Caravaggio's earliest and most significant patrons.²²

That the painting is identified as a Saint John the Baptist in both Giovanni Battista Mattei's inventory and his will has been taken by some scholars as proof of its being a Saint John, for, it is assumed, its owner would certainly have known its true subject.²³ This is not necessarily the case, however. Unlike his father Ciriaco, and his uncles Asdrubale and Girolamo, Giovanni Battista Mattei was not known as a distinguished patron of the arts and, indeed, he did little to develop his family's collection.²⁴ Furthermore, his will reveals that he divested his largely inherited collection of a number of its best paintings – including two works by Caravaggio – leaving them to various cardinals and other members of the Roman aristocracy. While the bequeathing of prized paintings to high-ranking individuals was a common practice in early Seicento Roman society, as a means to curry favor for one's family, Giovanni Battista's giving away the paintings may also be seen as evidence of a striking inattention to his own collection of paintings. This, in turn, may account for his having been uncertain of the subject of the painting in question, or in his identifying it, conveniently, as his eponymous saint, John the Baptist.²⁵

When Caravaggio's painting was next recorded, in Cardinal del Monte's posthumous inventory of 1627, it retained the Saint John the Baptist

identification.²⁶ One year later, however, when the cardinal's nephew and heir, Alessandro del Monte, sold the painting – in a lot along with Caravaggio's *Gypsy Fortune-Teller*, a *Saint Sebastian* by Guido Reni, and an *Orfeo* by Bassano – it was recorded as 'il Coridone'.²⁷ Whether this new title – Corydon – was intended to refer to a specific shepherd from ancient or Renaissance pastoral literature (for example, Theocritus' *Idylls*, Virgil's *Eclogue*, and Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* all feature characters of this name) or whether it was used in its more generic sense, as a convenient name for a rustic figure, remains unclear.²⁸ But it is noteworthy that Caravaggio's painting was once again interpreted as a secular work, as an image of a shepherd.

The sale's record of 1628 does not name the individual who purchased the painting, but there exists a general consensus that the buyer was Cardinal Emanuele Pio, who was then amassing a large collection of pictures and in whose posthumous inventory of 1641 the work was next recorded. It was listed neither as a Saint John the Baptist nor as a shepherd – whether 'Coridone' or 'Pastor friso' – but instead as 'a nude youth ... who embraces a lamb with his right arm'.²⁹ Caravaggio's enigmatic boy was now deprived of any biblical, mythological, or literary identity; he had become, simply, an anonymous youth (at least in the mind of the inventory's compiler).

To Giovanni Baglione, however, who reported that Caravaggio executed the painting for Ciriaco Mattei, its subject was not an anonymous youth; it was a Saint John the Baptist. Similarly, Francesco Scannelli and Giovan Pietro Bellori, both of whom saw Caravaggio's painting in the Pio collection, described it as representing the Baptist.³⁰ Later in the seventeenth century, in a guidebook to Rome, the painting was listed once more as a 'a young Saint John the Baptist, who plays with the little lamb'; but in an inventory of the Pio collection compiled in 1724, Caravaggio's canvas was recorded – much as it had been in the 1641 inventory – as a 'nude youth, who ... embraces the head of a lamb'.³¹ In 1740 the painting was again recorded in a Pio inventory – this time, however, as a Saint John the Baptist.³² But in the inventory of 1749, compiled in anticipation of the sale (in 1750) of a large number of paintings from the Pio collection to Pope Benedict XIV, it was listed without any title at all – a choice, one cannot help but suppose, that reflects the longstanding confusion over the painting's subject.³³

The paintings acquired by Benedict XIV from the Pio collection formed the nucleus of the Pinacoteca Capitolina, and the record of Caravaggio's painting within its new setting is no less contradictory than when it was in the possession of the Mattei, the del Monte and the Pio families. Although the work was called a Saint John the Baptist in the revised edition (of 1765) of Roiseco's guide to Rome and in Vasi's guidebook of 1794, in Venuti's guide of 1766, in Rossini's of 1771, and in nearly a dozen other Roman guidebooks and catalogues of the Capitoline collection published between 1794 and 1914, it was recorded as a 'nude youth', with his companion either being ignored or variously identified as a lamb, a ram, or even a goat.³⁴ Bocconi's guide to the Capitoline collections of 1925 makes no mention at all of the picture, as it had been removed from the Pinacoteca Capitolina sometime between 1918 and 1921.³⁵ It was 'rediscovered', however, by Denis Mahon in 1953, hanging in the office of the mayor of Rome. Mahon announced his discovery in an article of that year, calling it a Saint John the

Baptist. But two years later, when it was exhibited in London, he reversed himself, cataloguing Caravaggio's painting under the title 'Nude Youth with a Ram', and referring to it as a 'monumental genre' which appeared so 'strange, irritating, and yet fascinating' to its audience 'that it was imperative to provide the composition with some title which would give it respectable pictorial status' – that is, Saint John the Baptist.³⁶

The foregoing overview of the documentary and historiographical record underscores the extent to which Caravaggio's canvas has defied precise identification, intermittently being called a 'Pastor friso', a 'San Giovanni Battista', a 'Coridone', and a 'giovane nudo'. It is a record that demonstrates, if nothing else, that there has been no consensus about its title or subject. One could, of course, argue that some sources are more reliable than others, but which of the many records of the painting should be so privileged? Should Celio, presumably the first to assign the painting a title, but the only one to identify the subject as a 'Pastor friso', be believed, or should we put more faith in Giovanni Battista Mattei's inventory and will, in which the painting is called a Saint John? Is the record of the painting's sale in 1628, in which it is called a Corydon, more or less authoritative than other documents? Should we believe Bellori, who twice called it a Baptist? And what stock should we put in the four Pio inventories, in which it is listed twice as a nude youth, once as a Saint John, and once without any title whatsoever?

In evaluating the reliability of the surviving documentation, it may be noted that we have five distinct types of records. The first consists of the two payment documents of 1602, which are impossible to evaluate as they do not name the painting in any way. Early guidebooks and artistic biographies comprise a second category. Limiting ourselves to those written in the seventeenth century, one, Celio's *Memoria*, calls the painting a 'Pastor friso', while the other four affix to it the title of Saint John the Baptist. Celio's 'authority' has been addressed at length by Creighton Gilbert and discussed briefly above; it is striking, however, that the title he gave the work finds no corroboration until the late twentieth century, when Leonard Slatkes, Gilbert and Avigdor Posëq embraced the 'Pastor friso' identification, albeit each interpreting this title in very different ways. As a painter working in Rome in the same years as Caravaggio, Giovanni Baglione was in a position to have firsthand information about his life and works. Notwithstanding his enmity for Caravaggio, his biography of the artist – especially for the Roman years – has proved to be generally accurate, 'in most cases', as Walter Friedlaender wrote, 'more reliable than that given by Bellori'.³⁷ In contrast, Francesco Scannelli was a medical doctor and an amateur of painting, who wrote at some years' remove from Caravaggio's Roman period. Gilbert dismisses his biography of the artist as being 'not very informative'; and indeed, it offers no new information, being highly derivative of Baglione's *vita*. Giovan Pietro Bellori's credentials need little comment. In the words of Julius von Schlosser, he was 'the most important historiographer of art not only of Rome, but of all Italy, even of Europe, in the seventeenth century'.³⁸ His biography of Caravaggio, however, while containing valuable information, especially about the painter's post-Roman years, is coloured by his classicist bias and distorted by a reading of Caravaggio's art through the lens of the artist's violent life.³⁹ Finally, the last of the seventeenth-century texts to

mention the painting is the guidebook written by the Rossi. Although a useful guide to the art of Rome, it carries little weight in its own right, as it depends directly on earlier guides and *vite*, and its description of Caravaggio's canvas is an almost verbatim recapitulation of Bellori's of 1664.

The third kind of record is the document of sale of 1628. It is a financial document, listing the monies received for works in the sale of Cardinal del Monte's collection and paid into the Banco di S. Spirito. Although one would expect such an official document to be an accurate and complete source, this is only the case in terms of the amount of money paid. Of the five hundred and ninety-nine paintings sold, in fact, only forty-two are identified by artist; a number of works are listed generically as 'quadri diversi'; and in a number of instances the painters are indicated, but the paintings' subjects are not. The reliability of the Corydon title bestowed on Caravaggio's painting in this list is, therefore, difficult to ascertain, but the fact that this is the only record with such a title raises serious doubts.

The testament, drawn up by Giovanni Battista Mattei in 1623, constitutes the fourth type of record. A legal document notarized by a certain Chrisanthes Rosciolus, it was, presumably, as was the norm, dictated by Mattei to a scribe. The way Caravaggio's picture is listed in the will – as a 'S Gio: Battista' – depended, therefore, on Giovanni Battista Mattei's conception of its subject, and as discussed above, in light of his having not been the patron of the work, he could well have misconstrued its theme, which, as we have seen, was already in doubt at the time.

Inventories make up the fifth and final category of evidence, and we have six inventory records of Caravaggio's painting. The first is Giovanni Battista Mattei's inventory of 1616, compiled by his *guardaroba*, Lodovico Carletti, which lists the work as a Saint John the Baptist and presumably reflects the opinion of its new owner (although Carletti himself may have been responsible for naming the work). The second is Francesco Maria del Monte's posthumous inventory of 1627, a notarial document accounting for all of the deceased cardinal's possessions, signed by the notary Paulus Vespignanus; it too records the work as a Baptist – in keeping with the title by which it was known when Cardinal del Monte inherited it, but a far cry from 'il Coridone', the title by which it was sold one year later. The final four are Pio inventories dated 1641, 1724, 1740 and 1749. Those of 1641 and 1724, whose authors are unknown, record the painting as a 'nude youth'; in the 1740 inventory, compiled by the painter Francesco Trevisani, it appears as a Saint John the Baptist; and in that of 1749, written by the painter Giovanni Paolo Pannini, no title is listed. The lack of agreement among the inventories – especially those of the Pio collection – is notable and illuminates the degree to which inventory records, while essential tools for establishing provenance, can be unreliable. Incorrect authors of works are listed with great frequency, as are erroneous titles and subjects. In the 1633 inventory of the Ludovisi collection, for example, Guido Reni's *Artemesia* was recorded as a 'Circe Maga', while Annibale Carracci's *Saint Roche* was listed as 'Un San Giacomo' by Ludovico Carracci.⁴⁰ When Vincenzo Giustiniani's collection was inventoried in 1638, a Salome was erroneously recorded as a Judith.⁴¹ And to cite one additional example, in the 1724 Pio inventory, Bartolomeo Manfredi's *David* was identified as a Saint John the Evangelist, and his harp misconstrued as an eagle.⁴²

In the end, we are confronted by a mass of contradictory information, albeit with the majority of the early sources identifying the work as a Saint John. Yet the authors of the early biographies and guides and those responsible for writing the various documentary records possessed no definitive knowledge of the work's title. Each identified it according to his own reading of its subject or on the basis of what he was told its subject was; and it is not surprising that a young nude male figure seated in a landscape, accompanied by a ram, would be called a 'Pastor friso', a Corydon, a nude youth, or, as in the majority of cases, a Saint John the Baptist. All of these titles, however, present objective difficulties, and none accounts for what we actually see in the painting in terms of its iconography and its visual dynamics. It is on this basis, then, that we propose a new reading of Caravaggio's painting.

The visual tradition

In 398, only eighty-five years after the Peace of the Church, Augustine could feign astonishment at the apparent ignorance of one of his former teachers (albeit a very short-lived one), wondering how it was possible that this great master could appear to be ignorant of the biblical subject of the sacrifice of Isaac, characterizing it in his attack as

'so well known that a person becomes aware of it without having to read or even ask about it – indeed, it is sung in so many languages and painted in so many places that it strikes the ears and eyes of even those who would like to avoid it!⁴³

Twelve hundred years later, in 1602, the situation seems to have been little different. Of great scriptural importance as the ultimate act of faith, marking the confirmation of the covenant between God and his people, and serving as the pre-eminent Old Testament type of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, the sacrifice of Isaac was currently undergoing a renewal of popularity which it now owed (not without a little irony) to the writings of Augustine himself, in particular to the *City of God*, where the subject receives perhaps its classic exegetical interpretation.⁴⁴ In painting the Sacrifice of Isaac in the early seventeenth century, one potential issue to be addressed by an artist of Caravaggio's temperament was, then, how to create a dynamic alternative to the traditional iconographic form while still employing enough traditional iconography to make the image effective.

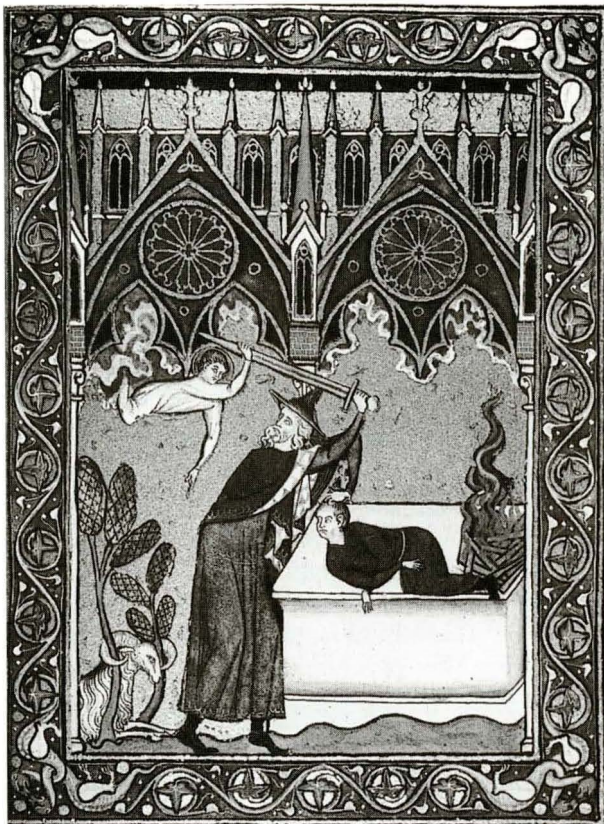
This was not necessarily as easy as it might sound, even for an artist with the individuality of Caravaggio, and, completely aside from this, such a thing might not at all be desired by a particular patron. The traditional iconographical components of the Sacrifice of Isaac (or the Sacrifice of Abraham, depending on just where your sympathies lie), were well established early on.⁴⁵ A complete listing of iconographical components of the kind of Sacrifice of Isaac that eventually became standard in the West includes Abraham with knife or sword in hand; Isaac, either nude or clothed; an altar, typically monumental; wood; fire; the ram, whether free or caught in the bush; the bush in which the ram was



18 Caravaggio, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi. Alinari/Art Resource, NY.

caught, often depicted as if it were a tree; and the angel. While there was always a fair amount of freedom in the depiction of this subject, variations were characteristically unimaginative and typically consisted of eliminating one or another minor component of the traditional iconography (for example, the angel is often omitted); on occasion, a traditional component might be altered somewhat (for example, rather than a monumental altar, the altar might be depicted as if improvised); and very, very rarely a major component might be eliminated (for example, Isaac, leaving only Abraham and the ram; or even both Isaac and Abraham, leaving the ram alone).⁴⁶ The level to which Caravaggio could accommodate himself to the traditional scheme, more or less complete, is made quite clear in his Uffizi *Sacrifice of Isaac* of 1603, where almost all the traditional components appear – Abraham with knife, an apparently nude Isaac, an altar (here improvised), the ram, the bush or tree, and the angel – the only exceptions being the wood and fire, which presumably are cut off by the lower frame of the painting (plate 18). Furthermore, despite all its drama and implication of escalating violence, each of the main narrative devices employed by Caravaggio in this painting had also appeared earlier, such as Isaac screaming, the angel gripping the arm of Abraham, and the angel pointing to the ram – however unique and conceptually independent is the final creation, in fact (for example, plates 19 and 20).

However, in any number of his other biblical works, whether he had greater patronal freedom or whether the Muse was simply with him, Caravaggio



19 *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, Psalter of Saint Louis. Cliché Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, MS lat. 10525:10.



20 Filippo Brunelleschi, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello. Alinari/ Art Resource, NY.

brilliantly addressed the problem of freshly rendering age-old stories based on almost equally ancient formats. He did this not simply by making the drama palpable, as he did in the Uffizi *Sacrifice of Isaac*, or by eliminating one of the minor iconographical components, as had been feebly done for centuries, but by reconceiving the narration in a very specific way. *The Calling of Matthew* has its traditional customs house and table, but it also has a visual narrative so psychologically subtle that it has prompted an enormous amount of disagreement as to the very identity of its main subject, Matthew.⁴⁷ *The Conversion of Saint Paul* and *The Entombment of Christ* have their customary horse and tomb slab, respectively, but their compositions are rendered so dynamically – despite the fact that Bellori described the former as ‘completely without action’ – that the very narrative is transformed psychologically from a third-hand to a first-hand experience, as it were.⁴⁸ And *The Penitent Magdalene* has her jewellery, her vase of ointment, her *décolletage* and her long, loose hair, but even so the painting managed to be criticized by the same Bellori as a depiction of a woman drying her hair, rather than the Magdalene, crying in penitence, with a tear running down her face, sitting in emotional isolation.⁴⁹ In these cases, Caravaggio thus typically takes the traditional iconographical format but transforms it by intensely developing the psychological component: the image remains narrative (or narrative-evoking, as in the case of the Magdalene), but in a way that is virtually frozen at the moment of greatest psychological drama.

The situation is similar, though a bit more extreme, with the Capitoline painting – which leads us to the question of just which iconographical components of the Sacrifice of Isaac are in it, and, eventually, to the more interesting question of which are not.

As we have said, earlier depictions of the Sacrifice of Isaac in Western art typically employ a monumental altar, before the twelfth century usually antique (something that probably originally came about because of its narrative legibility within the context of a common understanding of Mediterranean religious practice) and either antique or Christian thereafter.⁵⁰ While Isaac is often shown on unfired wood on top of this altar (for example, plates 21 and 22), he is just as often shown either next to a pile of burning wood or on a grill-like altar with a fire below (for example, plates 19 and 20).

But such an altar and the presence of fire on or under it is not what is described in the Genesis account. In Genesis 22:1–19, it is said that, having brought cut wood and fire with him (the wood carried by Isaac), Abraham built an improvised altar on the spot – a far cry, for example, from Brunelleschi’s depiction of a monumental stone altar with a relief of the Annunciation to the Virgin carved on its side (plate 20). Abraham then, according to this account, arranged the wood on the altar and placed Isaac upon it; but the wood remained unfired – at least in the imagination of those who undertake a close reading of the passage – for nothing more is said of the fire that Abraham is described as having carried there.

It is in accordance with this close reading, rather than with the traditional iconographic tradition, that Caravaggio chose to depict these elements of the story. The boy Isaac sits upon an arrangement of wood which is not the naturally fallen timbers of some pastoral scene but which show clear signs of having been cut: the cut wood that Isaac had carried with them, just as described in Genesis.



21 *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, from Saint Paul's, Rome. Rome, Bib. Vat. MS Barb. lat. 4406:38.



22 Lodovico Carracci, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. Rome, Musei Vaticani. Scala/Art Resource, NY.



23 Peter Paul Rubens, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. Paris, Louvre. Scala/Art Resource, NY.

This wood, in turn, lies on top of the improvised altar of the Genesis account, made on the spot and here largely obscured by Isaac, his clothing and the wood. Although the depiction of improvised altars is not the norm before this time, it is not at all uncommon after the first few years of the seventeenth century, and Caravaggio is far from alone in his depiction of an improvised altar or even of Isaac's cast-off clothing upon it (for example, plate 22 for an earlier example, and plates 23 and 24 for later ones).⁵¹ But where he departs from his predecessors is in his wonderfully imagined and realistic recreation of this altar and the related details – including what seems to be the jumbled stacking of unworked stones of the altar in the lower left corner, though the repainted and damaged state of this area (with traces of an earlier arrangement of Isaac's red robe) makes it problematic.⁵²

As in the vast majority of Sacrifices in the Western tradition, the important iconographical component of the ram is present. Also present, in the upper right corner of the painting, immediately next to the ram, is the almost equally important bush or tree in which the ram had been caught, barely emerging from the darkened background of the wild, almost primeval setting. This tree, with its hooked branch – perhaps the branch upon which the ram was caught, a motif found in the Uffizi *Sacrifice* and in other Sacrifice imagery, but in no other work of Caravaggio – is essentially no different from those which had appeared in Sacrifice iconography for centuries, though, here, brought up to date through Caravaggio's highly naturalistic approach (compare plates 18 and 25). The logic



24 Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. St Petersburg, Hermitage. Bildarchiv Foto Marburg/Art Resource, NY.



25 *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, Rome, Musei Vaticani.

of the pairing of these two traditional components is clear enough, once recognized. The similarity, however, between this animal and the animal in Caravaggio's *John the Baptist* in the Galleria Borghese (plate 26) has led to the fundamentally flawed basic premise of an argument that has contributed greatly to a misunderstanding of both paintings and the misidentification of the Capitoline one. It goes like this. Because the Borghese John, whose reed staff identifies him as the Baptist, seems to be shown with a ram rather than the lamb which is appropriate to his recognition of Christ as the Lamb of God (John. 1:29, 36) – even though this would be inexplicably contrary to

Scripture – the Capitoline painting, which shows a more or less similar animal, must also depict a Baptist, despite the fact that the Capitoline figure, in contrast, has none of the attributes of the Borghese John; that the figure is inappropriately totally nude, unlike every other Baptist ever painted by Caravaggio; and that a ram would make no more sense here, if this figure were a John, than it would in the Borghese painting.

There is no need to go to such lengths. The key to understanding the character of these animals – both sheep in the generic sense of the term – lies straightforwardly in Caravaggio's most renowned trait: his naturalism. The sheep in the Borghese *John* has been described by art historians as a ram, contrary to what the subject matter demands, because of its horns. But the identification of a sheep as a ram because of its horns is not that simple. Even 'spring lambs' (i.e., lambs in their first year) may have horns, though they are traditionally depicted in art without them. However, 'yearling lambs' (lambs in their second year, after which they become capable of breeding and so are called rams, in the narrow sense of the word) typically have what could be called a full set of horns in non-polled (i.e., horned) varieties. Indeed, the Lamb of the Apocalypse is able to be described as horned for this very reason, and is regularly shown as horned in the conventional manner (with two horns, rather than the seven described in the Bible). While the Baptist is traditionally depicted with a hornless lamb, the Lamb of God of John 1:29 was understood by some exegetes as referring to the yearling lamb (*anniculus*) of the Passover (Exodus 12:1–14), which is, at times, depicted with full horns.⁵³ And this is precisely what Caravaggio has shown in the Borghese painting, a horned lamb, not a ram. According to Professor Flint Freeman of California State Polytechnic University, a specialist on sheep, the curvature of a sheep's horns is indicative of its age. The horns of the Borghese sheep arc gently down and out, the type of horn growth, according to Professor Freeman, characteristic of a lamb of around twelve months. It is his opinion that the animal should definitely be considered a lamb. Dr Michael L. Ryder, the distinguished British historian of the



26 Caravaggio, *John the Baptist in the Desert*. Rome, Galleria Borghese. Alinari/Art Resource, NY.

sheep and author of *Sheep and Man*, agrees with this assessment of age exactly, also seeing the Borghese sheep as around twelve months old.⁵⁴

While the Capitoline and Borghese animals are similar in that they both belong to the same variety of sheep, according to Freeman (though modern breeds only came after this time), the horns of the two are distinctly different. As sheep get older, their horns curve more and the curve becomes tighter. In contrast to those of the Borghese lamb, the horns of the Capitoline sheep have generally curled up and in, in the tighter spiral thought of as the classic arrangement of a ram's horns and almost exactly the same in their curvature as the ram's horns in the *Sacrifice of Isaac* in Princeton, attributed by many scholars to Caravaggio (plate 27). But, in fact, the description of the animal of the Sacrifice as a 'ram' is a factor of the broad meaning of the word, not the narrow one: in the Latin of the Vulgate (*aries*), in early seventeenth-century Italian (*montone*), and in modern English, the word 'ram' can mean either a male sheep of breeding age or simply any male sheep, regardless of age.⁵⁵ And, in an Italian translation of the Bible of 1607, the sheep of the Sacrifice is first called a lamb (*agnello*) and then a male sheep or 'ram' (*montone*), the same pattern found in the Hebrew from which it was translated.⁵⁶

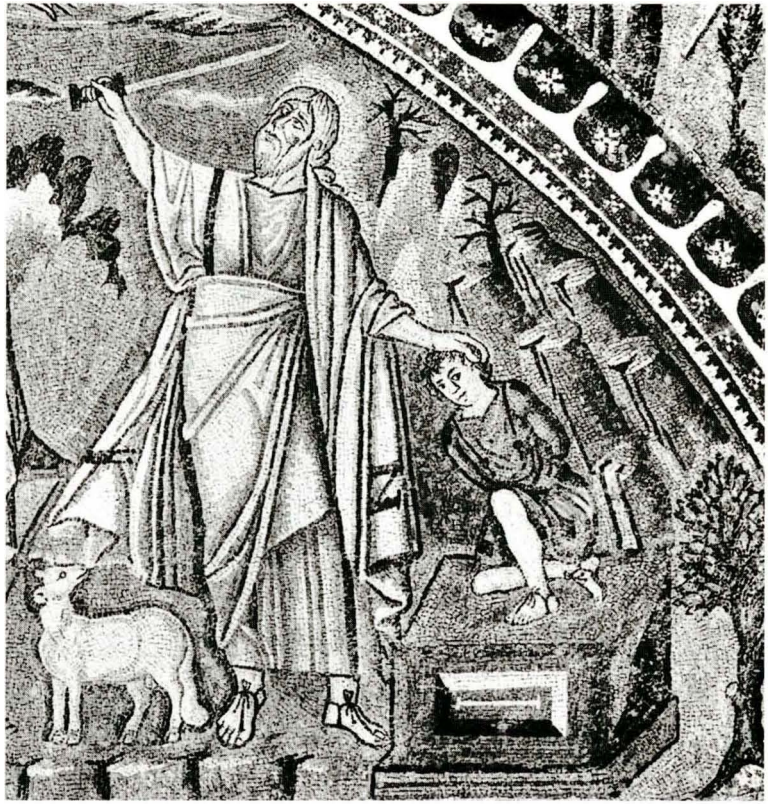


27 (above) Attributed to Caravaggio, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. Princeton, The Barbara Piasecka Johnson Collection.



28 (left) Jacopo della Quercia, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. Panel. Bolgna, Porta Magna, San Petronio. Scala/Art Resource, NY.

29 *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. Ravenna, San Vitale. Alinari/Art Resource, NY.



Indeed, many artists before Caravaggio chose to portray the ram of the Sacrifice according to the broad meaning, with either no horns at all (for example, plates 25 and 28) or with only the very short horns of a spring lamb (for example, plate 21). While none of this is to say that Caravaggio was versed in the subtleties of zoology, it is to say that the universally recognized level of naturalism that permeates his work – seen elsewhere in the Capitoline painting, for example, in the mullein plant in the lower right corner, a rendering which would not be out of place in a botanical textbook – does extend to his depictions of animals as well; and that the very close attention to age seen in his human subject matter is also seen in his portrayals of animals. There is no need to look for any non-scriptural inconsistencies or contradictions in regard to the sheep of either of these paintings. Caravaggio has simply followed traditional iconography – depicting a lamb in the Borghese *John* and a ram in the Capitoline piece – in his own, naturalistic way.

While the angel is not present, the angel was often not included in this subject for the simple fact that, according to the Genesis account, the angel never physically appears before Abraham, but only speaks ‘from heaven’. In fact, at one point the angel identifies himself as God. It is for this reason that, while the depiction of the hand of God was common enough (for example, plate 29), it was also not unheard of to show neither an angel nor the hand of God in Sacrifice imagery (for example, plates 21 and 25) – the latter being something that would be distinctly discordant with Caravaggio’s naturalism.⁵⁷



30 *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. Choir, Saint-Benoit-sur-Loire. Photo: The Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art.

And, of course, the youthful Isaac is present – here, totally nude, something which would be entirely inappropriate for John the Baptist, and which is found in none of Caravaggio’s paintings of the Baptist.⁵⁸ On a general iconographical level, his basic pose is not at all unusual, leaving aside for the moment some of its more particular aspects, as well as its probable derivation from one of Michelangelo’s Sistine *ignudi*.⁵⁹ For example, the general arrangement of the legs is found again and again, in both unclothed and clothed examples going back hundreds of years (for example, plates 29 and 30, and the later 23 and 24), these seated figures bearing a close relation with a variety in which Isaac kneels on one leg (for example, plates 20 and 25). Thus, although the impression of Caravaggio’s figure is fundamentally different, the basic pose itself falls into the general iconographical tradition. But what is more important here, what is new and different, is the purpose of the pose, in the broadest sense of the term, a pose that has been radically reconceived in regard to Sacrifice imagery. For, despite the presence of the iconographical components of the altar, the wood, the ram, the bush or tree and Isaac himself, what Caravaggio has done is only a bolder example of what he did in his other biblical works mentioned earlier. He has taken the traditional iconographical format – or part of it – and frozen the narrative at the emotional highpoint, in this case, the highpoint in regard to the history of salvation. And he has done this by having Isaac partially rise from the altar, embrace the ram, directly address the viewer – and laugh.

The exegetical tradition

In some ways, the exegetical tradition of the Sacrifice of Isaac is perhaps as well known to art historians today as it seems to have been in Augustine’s time. Even

so, just as the visual tradition of the Sacrifice of Isaac is one that Caravaggio both incorporated and went beyond, so is the Capitoline painting a field both for the traditional exegetical interpretations known to art historians through traditional depictions as well as for other equally traditional – equally well known – exegesis which, to the best of our knowledge, was never worked into a major depiction of this subject and so is something that is ultimately unique in the visual tradition of the Sacrifice of Isaac.

Already found in Paul and appearing relentlessly throughout the Fathers and later sources – from Irenaeus to Tertullian to Origen to Ambrose to Augustine to Chrysostom, among many, many others – the exegetical interpretation of Isaac as a type of Christ is one of the best-known Christological foreshadowings of the Old Testament.⁶⁰ The willingness of the father Abraham, to offer his son Isaac, was seen as a type of God the Father's willingness to sacrifice his son, Christ. A little more specifically, according to Augustine and others, the carrying of the wood by Isaac for his own sacrifice was interpreted as the carrying of the cross by Christ.⁶¹ Even more specifically still, Isaac was placed on the altar just as Christ was 'hung on the tree' (*in ligno suspensus*), according to Isidore of Seville, in a passage that found its way into the widely diffused *Glossa Ordinaria*, a text which had undergone many printings by Caravaggio's time and had lost none of its status as 'The Standard Gloss'.⁶² In regard to this specific exegetical component, then, what we see in Caravaggio's stunning work is the Old Testament type of Christ in the context of his own sacrifice, sitting on the means of his sacrifice, the wood of the cross, a sacrifice for which his father was both willing and a witness.

We have noted that Isaac's basic pose is not iconographically unusual. But that does not mean that Caravaggio simply blindly appropriated it. As Caravaggio employs it, it has become something more. Isaac has partially risen from the altar and, resting his left arm on it, twists to embrace the ram before completing the rise, his right foot placed on the ground in anticipation of this. Exegetically, the rising motion conveys the idea of Isaac/Christ rising from the expectation of death or from death itself, an idea that first makes its appearance already in the Epistle to the Hebrews and which is repeated by virtually every major exegete thereafter.⁶³ This is not to deny the sensual manner in which Caravaggio rendered the general pose. However, while this sensuality may accompany the traditional iconographical and exegetical traditions, it by no means displaces them.

This brings us to the 'perfection' of the body of Isaac, a body which is treated with neither the relative modesty of Caravaggio's Baptists in general, nor with the heavy shadows of his Kansas City *John* in particular, where the heavy shadows tend to de-emphasize any ideal qualities of the youthful body (plate 31). Indeed, while Caravaggio ultimately depicts the Capitoline figure in a distinctly homoerotic manner – though perhaps one that was seen as somewhat less homoerotic within Roman culture of the early seventeenth century than it is today – for our purposes the main point is the figure's bodily perfection. Although we personally feel that Caravaggio needed no theological justification for the perfection of the nude Isaac – the classicizing undercurrent of early Seicento artistic culture and his own predilections being enough – the fact is that there was such a patristic basis. As the type of the perfect man, Christ, or simply as the historical Isaac himself, texts such as Chrysostom's *Homilies on Genesis* provided



31 Caravaggio, *Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness*. Oil on canvas, 172.7 × 132.1 cm. Kansas City, Missouri, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art (Purchase: Nelson Trust). Photography by Robert Newcombe and Edward Robinson. © 2001 The Nelson Gallery Foundation. All reproduction rights reserved.

a point of acceptability for such a depiction in their references to 'the external elegance and internal beauty of the boy, his obedience, grace, and the bloom of his youth'.⁶⁴ And so while the sensuality of the figure may test the limits of a religious subject – Cardinal Ottavio Paravicino wrote the very year after this work was finished that Caravaggio's paintings lay somewhere 'between the religious and the profane'⁶⁵ – the perfection which is the basis of this sensuality is entirely in keeping with the spiritual conception of Isaac/Christ, whatever else may be operative here.

The same seems to be true for the rich clothing (the white tunic, the red robe and the fur of Isaac): a patristic or theological explanation can be found, although we do not feel that one is necessary in this particular case. For example, in the Jewish tradition, *The Book of the Generations of Adam* (which was first published in Italy in 1552 and again not long after the painting was made) tells how Isaac was dressed in 'a very fine and beautiful garment'.⁶⁶

If Isaac is universally seen as a type of Christ, the ram that was to be sacrificed in confirmation of the covenant between God and his people has an equally vast base of support among the Fathers as a type of Christ as well.⁶⁷ In fact, according to Augustine, 'Isaac was Christ and the ram was Christ. . . . Christ was in both Isaac and the ram', an opinion in which he was not alone.⁶⁸ This seems to be the thought behind the pronounced juxtaposition of the face of Isaac and the face of the ram, an arrangement that is also seen in the Uffizi *Sacrifice* (plate 18), though to somewhat less effect. A visual equation is being drawn, underscoring that Christ was in both Isaac and the ram, although one need not turn specifically to Augustine for what was simply common knowledge within the religious culture of the period.⁶⁹

A corollary of the interpretation of the ram as a type of Christ is that the bush or tree (*lignum*), as it was often called, in which it was caught is a type of the cross (just as is the wood that Isaac carried).⁷⁰ Some exegetes even saw the site of the bush or tree as the site of Christ's coming crucifixion.⁷¹ As if to make clear this connection with the cross, a grape-vine grows up this tree – a grape-vine like the one from which the Lamb of God eats in anticipation of its sacrifice in the Borghese *John the Baptist* (plate 26)⁷² – in indication of the Christological and even eucharistic meaning embedded in this important element of the painting.

In all of this, we see that Caravaggio has followed the basic and well-established iconographical and exegetical traditions of the Sacrifice of Isaac, while at the same time diverging from both in a uniquely creative and independent manner whenever the need or opportunity arose. In no way any less well known than the interpretation of Isaac and the ram as types of Christ, and no less fully supported by the exegetical literature, is by far the most unique and independent, even striking, element of the painting: the smile or laugh that is so effectively rendered on Isaac's face, an element that dominates the work and to which the eye returns again and again for psychological as well as compositional reasons. First found in the pre-Christian writings of Philo Judaeus, and taken up by many Christian writers, typically as exegetical commentary on Abraham and Sarah's 'laughing' when told that Sarah would give birth to Isaac – for example, Clement of Alexandria, Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome (in his *Liber Interpretationis Hebraicorum Nominum*, no less, one of the basic biblical reference works of

the Middle Ages and Renaissance) and Gregory the Great, and dutifully recorded in the *Glossa Ordinaria* – the name Isaac is repeatedly interpreted in the exegetical literature as meaning ‘laughter’, ‘laughter or joy’, or ‘laughter [as] a sign of joy’.⁷³ It is thus no accident that this is exactly what we see in Caravaggio’s *Isaac Laughing*. The reason that Isaac is laughing here, however, is not in recognition of the narrow etymological interpretation of Jerome and others, but to express the more developed understanding first expressed by Clement of Alexandria, though by no means dependent upon him:

Isaac is explained as meaning ‘laughter’. . . . He laughed mystically, foretelling that the Lord would fill us with laughter, we who have been redeemed from death and corruption by the blood of the Lord. . . . For Jesus arose unharmed after his burial, just as Isaac was released from sacrifice.⁷⁴

The expression and gesture of Isaac, therefore, are not those of a simple recognition of the ram as Christ in the sense of John the Baptist acclaiming the Lamb of God.⁷⁵ Nor is their principal purpose here to refer to Christ’s willing acceptance of the passion, as in Leonardo’s Christ Child and the Lamb in *The Madonna and Saint Anne* in the Louvre. Rather, they primarily indicate joy in salvation and the welcoming of Christ as saviour – Christ, the ram, who has come forward voluntarily, as is appropriate for any proper sacrifice, from the tree up which the life-giving eucharistic vine grows. But with whom is Isaac laughing? Towards whom does he naturally turn and make eye contact at this special moment? Where is the boy’s much-relieved father Abraham?

As we have said, virtually nothing appears in this painting that is entirely new in the strict sense of having no basis either in the visual or the exegetical traditions, and this is true even for the psychological dynamic of the painting, a dynamic that has determined its viewpoint both emotionally and compositionally. Already with Josephus’s *Jewish Antiquities*, which had been translated early on from Greek into Latin and was widely read in Christian culture (there were many Italian editions by Caravaggio’s time), an overt emotional component missing in the Genesis account was introduced, with Isaac and Abraham being described as having been ‘restored to each other beyond all hope’ and ‘embracing’ after the ram was brought forth from ‘obscurity’ for them to see.⁷⁶ But it is with Chrysostom, the most widely translated and read Greek exegete in the West, that the sacrifice of Isaac is most fundamentally rendered from the psychological point of view of the father, Abraham:

With what eyes did he gaze upon the boy bringing along the wood upon which he himself was soon to sacrifice him? How was his hand able to hold the fire and the sword? Indeed, his hand carried a visible fire, but an interior fire fanned the flames of his very mind and consumed his reason. . . . *And Isaac said to his father, Abraham, ‘Father . . . where is the sheep for the whole burnt-offering?’* Think at this point, I ask you, about the anguish of this just man, how he bore hearing this, how he managed to answer the boy, how he did not become rattled in his mind, how he

managed to conceal from his son what was going to happen, and instead said with noble spirit and a resolute soul, 'God himself will see to a sheep for the whole burnt-offering, my son.'⁷⁷

Indeed, this passage continues with the one cited earlier, evoking the process through which Abraham increased his own mental anguish by thinking about his son's 'external elegance and internal beauty, his obedience, grace, and the bloom of his youth'. And this is precisely the viewpoint chosen by Caravaggio, although we do not mean to imply that he was necessarily directly dependent upon Chrysostom. In the Uffizi *Sacrifice*, Caravaggio followed one iconographical tradition of the Sacrifice by portraying the intervening angel, whose physical presence is not supported by the Genesis account. But in *Isaac Laughing*, he followed the equally venerable iconographical tradition that was based on a more literal reading of Genesis which did not include the angel. In doing this, however, he took a less travelled path by choosing not to include the hand of God which usually (though not always) acts in place of the angel, apparently seeing it as archaic by seventeenth-century standards and as alien as well to his own naturalistic approach to biblical depiction. All that is really missing in *Isaac Laughing*, iconographically, is Abraham. But Abraham is only missing visually. Psychologically and emotionally, he is forcefully present, though outside the space of the picture. For Isaac, following the widespread and venerable exegesis mentioned earlier, is understood as having been brought back from death and restored to his father, from whose viewpoint – psychologically, emotionally and visually – the entire event is conveyed. The viewer is put in the place of Abraham, a radically conceived viewpoint in that the viewer is expected to enter more deeply into the narrative of the event, indeed, play a role in it, figuratively. The viewer becomes part of the dynamic of the painting through the implied positioning of Abraham, the father who was about to commit his son to blood sacrifice as a holocaust – a whole burnt-offering – and who now has his son returned to him through the grace of God.

* * *

Thus, in Caravaggio's *Isaac Laughing*, we see Isaac partially rising from the wood laid on the altar just as Christ rose after the crucifixion from the tomb. He rises, as it were, from death and, embracing his saviour, the ram – who has just come forth from the tree on which the salvific eucharistic vine grows – laughs in joy at his salvation, both physical and spiritual. Basic to both the spiritual interpretation and the pictorial composition is the traditional exegetical understanding that Isaac is Christ and the ram is Christ, that Christ is in both Isaac and the ram, an understanding that accounts for the basic relation between Isaac and the ram, as well as for the juxtaposition of their heads. Isaac looks the viewer right in the eye, establishing an astonishingly direct psychological relationship, a psychological relationship that is fundamental to the narrative basis of the painting. Indeed, this painting only makes real sense when understood as a narrative: Isaac's laughing, his nudity, his partial rising motion, his turned head, his direct look, his embracing of the ram – all are components of the emotional high point of the

story (in the context of the history of salvation), when he is ‘brought back from death’ and restored to his father, Abraham, from whose viewpoint we see Isaac.

The painting is based almost entirely on the visual and exegetical traditions, though uniquely rendered by Caravaggio. Iconographically, virtually all the traditional components are present: Isaac, the altar, the wood, the ram and the tree in which the ram was caught. Only Abraham is omitted. Exegetically, the case is the same: all the religious meaning embedded in this work came right out of the mainstream exegetical and homiletic precedent, including the psychological displacement of Abraham to outside the space of the picture, equating his implied viewpoint with the viewer’s actual one – the real visual innovation of Caravaggio. Absolutely none of this exegesis was arcane or obscure; virtually all of it was articulated by major authors, repeated by other major authors, and/or ‘codified’ in the *Glossa Ordinaria*. Caravaggio did not have to be a scholar to become familiar with any of this, nor did he even have to read the exegetical literature himself. It was all easily obtainable from any of the many educated clerics whom Caravaggio knew, including any number of current and former patrons, of whose culture he was an integral part, not the least of whom were Cardinal Francesco del Monte and Cardinal Girolamo Mattei, in whose households Caravaggio had been living prior to, and during, the time he painted *Isaac Laughing*. But none of this exegesis directly accounts for the immediate and strangely compelling power of *Isaac Laughing*; nor, actually, does Chrysostom’s homily, though it is certainly possible that it may have acted as an indirect impetus to it. Rather, it comes right out of the dramatic psychological and emotional potential of the narrative itself – a potential recognized by Augustine, whose observation describes the dynamic operating in *Isaac Laughing* much as one of Caravaggio’s contemporaries might have:

I do not know how it is, but every time [the story of the sacrifice of Isaac] is read, it is as if it were happening at that very moment, it so affects the minds of those listening.⁷⁸

This seems to have been the very goal of Caravaggio himself.

Concluding thoughts

Among his many concerns as a painter, Caravaggio, as is widely recognized, sought to make his art accessible, to depict his subjects with a physical and psychological immediacy so as to engage and ultimately captivate the viewer in an unprecedented way. By means of his dramatic tenebrism, his depiction of extreme and momentary expressions, and his ability to capture a sense of the fleeting moment, the instantaneous action, Caravaggio created images of astonishing reality, which provoke, as Sydney Freedberg has aptly called it, ‘a transaction of experience’ between the spectator and the pictures.⁷⁹ In the lateral canvases in the Cerasi Chapel, *The Conversion of Saint Paul* and *The Crucifixion of Saint Peter* (1600–01), the painter achieved this level of engagement by designing the compositions in terms of the spectator’s (oblique) line of vision; the figures seem to project into the space

of the chapel, beckoning the viewer to become involved in the remarkable events unfolding across the paintings. Another way Caravaggio achieved this ‘transaction of experience’ was through portraying his figures gazing directly at the beholder. In a number of his early secular paintings, among them the Borghese *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* and the Uffizi *Bacchus*, the subjects look directly at us, stare us in the eye, making it impossible for us to remain passive observers. We are compelled, as it were, to reach for a piece of the boy’s fruit and to accept the glass of wine from the youthful god. This kind of implication of the viewer was also enacted by the artist in his *Entombment of Christ* (1602–04), albeit with an entirely different purpose. Here Nicodemus, as he struggles with the weight of Christ’s lifeless body, casts his gaze downwards, as if imploring the viewer to assist him in his task, to become a virtual participant in the religious drama.

Isaac Laughing exemplifies Caravaggio’s goals as an artist in their most pronounced form. It presents the biblical hero as a pre-pubescent boy frozen in time at the heightened moment of his salvation. Dramatically illuminated, physically proximate, and highly expressive, Isaac confronts the viewer with his eyes, with his laughter, so as to make inevitable a ‘transaction of experience’. The spectator inescapably becomes involved in the drama, visually and psychologically, assuming the role of Abraham, to whom Isaac will be restored. This relationship between Isaac and the viewer is imbedded in the structure of the painting; Caravaggio’s canvas, in other words, thematizes its relation to the viewer, who, as a surrogate Abraham, is integral to its narrative. Although he identified the painting’s subject as a Saint John the Baptist, Sydney Freedberg nevertheless clearly recognized this remarkable visual dynamic of Caravaggio’s work. ‘Here’, he wrote,

Caravaggio has created a voyeuristic situation into which the spectator . . . necessarily must fall. The meaning of the picture thus depends not only on the presence Caravaggio has evoked in it, but on the situation he has now made. There is no meaningful action . . . that occurs within the painting; what is meaningful comes instead from the relationship . . . between the model-image and ourselves.⁸⁰

Indeed, the painter has created a work in which the viewer is expected – even required – to enter the subject and complete its plot. The meaning of the painting hinges upon the engagement between the work and the viewer, an engaged viewer who becomes a participant in the historical narrative.

* * *

As we have discussed in the previous section of this essay, with the exception of Abraham, Caravaggio’s *Isaac Laughing* contains all the essential and traditional iconographical components of the Sacrifice of Isaac. The omission of Abraham, however, is nothing short of extraordinary, without any direct pictorial precedent or progeny, and it was for this very reason that Howard Hibbard rejected the possibility (which had been suggested to him orally) that the painting’s subject could be Isaac.⁸¹ The fact is, however, that Caravaggio often departed from

iconographic tradition, sometimes subtly, sometimes more radically, and he frequently interpreted traditional subjects in highly personal and novel ways. In his *Uffizi Sacrifice of Isaac* (plate 18), for example, the angel approaches Abraham not from above, as was the norm, but from behind, and Isaac's expression of terror, while not unprecedented, is unusual to the degree presented here.⁸² No less contrary to tradition was his now lost *Resurrection* of c. 1608, which hung in Sant' Anna dei Lombardi in Naples, in which, as an early description records, Christ was 'represented not as usual, agile, and triumphant in the air, but in . . . [an] audacious manner . . . with one foot in and the other outside the sepulchre on the ground'.⁸³ When painting *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula* (1610, Banca Commerciale Italiana, Naples), Caravaggio rejected the typical epic presentation of the scene, with a cast of thousands, opting instead for an intimate presentation of the event with only five figures. And as Puglisi has recently commented, 'so unusual is his conception of the theme that when the canvas was first rediscovered, its subject was vaguely labeled as an allegory'.⁸⁴ Numerous other iconographic novelties, or ambiguities, could also be cited in this context (first among them, the uncertain identity of Matthew in *The Calling of Saint Matthew*). The point is simply that Caravaggio, throughout his career, experimented with and sometimes radically altered traditional iconography, which contributed fundamentally to the originality of his artistic vision. The departure from pictorial tradition in *Isaac Laughing* – or, more precisely, the way in which it presents an entirely new conception of the sacrifice narrative – should thus be viewed as in keeping with the artist's lifelong effort to transform the conventional into the unconventional.

* * *

Of course, the patron of *Isaac Laughing*, Ciriaco Mattei, could have been a catalyst in Caravaggio's reinvention of the subject. He may have provided the painter with the idea of casting the viewer (himself) as Abraham or, as seems more likely, requested a painting of the Sacrifice of Isaac and asked that it be something novel. The marchese was, after all, a collector of exceptional taste, a connoisseur, who demanded much from the artists whose works he commissioned.⁸⁵ Cardinal Girolamo Mattei (1546–1603), who shared the dwelling of his brother Ciriaco – in which Caravaggio was living in 1601–02 – may also have inspired the choice and/or the interpretation of the subject matter, much as he appears to have done for the painter's *Supper at Emmaus* and *The Taking of Christ*.⁸⁶ But if, in the end, we can only speculate about how and why Caravaggio arrived at such an unprecedented interpretation of the subject, we can state with certainty that the Sacrifice of Isaac was a theme particularly favoured by the Mattei, as archival documentation and inventories of their collections reveal. Soon after Caravaggio completed his canvas, in 1607–08 Asdrubale Mattei had the subject painted by Francesco Nappi on the vault of a bedroom in his palace.⁸⁷ Another *Sacrifice of Isaac*, without attribution, is recorded in the 1613 inventory of Asdrubale's collection, and still another painting of the subject, attributed to 'Giovannino' (i.e., Giovanni Lanfranco), is listed in the 1616 inventory of Giovanni Battista Mattei, who inherited the work from his father Ciriaco.⁸⁸ Less than a decade later, c. 1625, Asdrubale purchased an additional painting of the Sacrifice, by Orazio

Riminaldi, which is recorded in the 1631 inventory of his collection as hanging in the gallery of his palace.⁸⁹ And in the post mortem inventory of Asdrubale's son Girolamo (d. 1676), the universal heir of Giovanni Battista, one final *Sacrifice of Isaac* is listed, which in an eighteenth-century inventory acquired an attribution to Guido Reni.⁹⁰ Thus, including Caravaggio's canvas, the Mattei owned six versions of Isaac's sacrifice, making it the most frequently depicted Old Testament subject in their collections.⁹¹

* * *

As we have argued, all the subjects proposed for Caravaggio's painting are difficult to reconcile with the visual evidence. As the painter did not portray the figure as a prince, he cannot be Phryxus; the omission of a Phrygian cap, shepherd's staff, dog, or golden apple excludes the possibility that the figure is



32 Anon. *St John the Baptist*, Oil on canvas, 115.4 × 85.9 cm. Glasgow Museums: Art Gallery and Museum, Kelvingrove.

Paris; and the absence of a reed cross, banderole, or bowl, not to mention the figure's exuberant demeanour, argue against his being the Baptist, whom Caravaggio consistently portrayed as an introspective, even melancholic, youth. The question remains, however, of why the work was repeatedly and most frequently called a Saint John the Baptist, and by such informed critics as Baglione and Bellori? The answer lies, we suggest, in Caravaggio's unprecedented reinvention of the Sacrifice of Isaac theme, for in his removal of Abraham, in his casting the beholder as Isaac's father, he created a work that challenged the viewer's expectations. To the eyes of Baglione, Bellori and others, all unaware of Caravaggio's *invenzione*, the nude male figure set in a landscape and accompanied by a woolly creature could only be Saint John. The painting *appeared*, in other words, to conform to the visual tradition of Saint John the Baptist in the wilderness to such an extent that it made such an identification virtually inevitable. As Ernst Gombrich observed (in another context), 'Expectation created illusion.'⁹² Or, to put it another way, it was identified on the basis of an analogous pattern, whereby the painting's visual data – a youthful male figure, a landscape setting, and a lamb-like creature – were read in terms of the pattern of a Saint John the Baptist in the wilderness.⁹³ It should be mentioned, however, that this was not always the case. In at least two instances, when artists made (variant) copies after Caravaggio's painting, they recognized that certain elements were at odds with the tradition of Baptist imagery. Consequently the copyists added the appropriate attributes (the reed cross and the bowl) and transformed the horned ram into a hornless lamb (plate 32).⁹⁴

Throughout this essay, we have sought to look at Caravaggio's Capitoline painting unencumbered by expectations, and to re-examine all the evidence – historiographic, iconographic and visual – surrounding and within the picture itself. This evidence, in the end, leads us to one conclusion: that the painting produced for Ciriaco Mattei in 1602, known over the centuries by a number of different titles, depicts Isaac partially rising from the altar, embracing the ram that was his salvation, and, with an expression of joy, gazing at the viewer, who enacts the role of Abraham. It is a reading of the image that accounts for both what we see and what we do not; which is consistent with Caravaggio's artistic practices; and which requires far less of the overly complex interpretive arguments put forth in support of other titles. This reading of the painting as *Isaac Laughing* is also one that we believe recovers much of its original meaning and serves further to deepen our understanding of Caravaggio as one of the most innovative and provocative painters of early modern Europe.

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Notes

When dual systems of traditional numeration exist for primary sources, reference is made to the more precise of the two. All biblical references are to the Vulgate. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are our own. The following abbreviations have been employed: *Corpus Christianorum* (C.C.), Series Latina (Turnhout, 1953-); *Patrologia Graeca-Latina* (PG), ed. Jacques-Paul Migne, 162 v. (Paris, 1857-1866); *Patrologia Latina* (PL), ed. Jacques-Paul Migne, 221 v. (Paris, 1844-1864).

- 1 See, esp., Maurizio Marini, *Io Michelangelo da Caravaggio*, Rome, 1974, pp. 154, 382-5; idem, *Caravaggio: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio 'pictor praesantissimus'*, Rome, 1987, pp. 444-6; Mia Cinotti, *Michelangelo Merisi detto il Caravaggio (I pittori bergamaschi: Il Seicento, I)*, Bergamo, 1983, pp. 521-3; Maurizio Calvesi, *Le realtà del Caravaggio*, Turin, 1990, pp. 242-7; Sergio Guarino, 'San Giovanni Battista', in *Caravaggio e la collezione Mattei*, exhib. cat., Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica di Palazzo Barberini, Rome, Milan, 1995, cat. no. 2, pp. 120-3; Catherine Puglisi, *Caravaggio*, London, 1998, pp. 205-207; Helen Langdon, *Caravaggio: A Life*, London, 1998, pp. 213-14, 230, 281. After the completion of this article, we became aware of B. Teffers, *Caravaggio nel sangue del Battista*, Rome, 2000, in which (pp. 9-19 and *passim*) the author argues for an identification of the Capitoline painting as a Saint John the Baptist.
- 2 As is discussed below, the painting was first called a 'Pastor friso' by Gaspare Celio, *Memoria delli nomi dell'artefici delle pitture che sono in alcune chiese, facciate, e palazzi di Roma*, Naples, 1638, p. 134, facsimile edn, ed. Emma Zocca, Milan, 1967, p. 41. For its identification as a Phryxus, see Leonard J. Slatkes, 'Caravaggio's Painting of the Sanguine Temperament', in *Actes du XXII^e Congrès internationale d'histoire de l'art* (1969), Budapest, 1972, II, pp. 17-24 and 'Caravaggio's "Pastor Friso"', *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* vol. 23, 1972, pp. 67-72. Avigdor W. G. Posëq, 'Caravaggio's "Pastor Friso"', *Source*, vol. 8, 1988, pp. 13-17, further develops this identification and raises the possibility that Celio's 'Pastor friso' might simply refer to a (generic) Phrygian shepherd. A reading of the painting as a Paris is developed *in extenso* in Creighton E. Gilbert, *Caravaggio and his Two Cardinals*, University Park, 1995.
- 3 When the painting was sold in 1628 (on which, see below), its title was listed as 'il Coridone'.
- 4 X. Barbier de Montault, *Les Musées et Galeries de Rome, Catalogue général*, Rome, 1870, p. 42: 'jeune berger caressant un belier'.
- 5 F.W.B. von Ramdohr, *Über Mahlerei und Bildhauerarbeit in Rom*, Leipzig, 1787, vol. 1, p. 265, identified it as a Saint John the Baptist, allegorically expressing the ideas of 'Wollust und Unschuld'; Slatkes, op. cit. (note 2), argued that the painting 'is the most fully developed rendering of the sanguine temperament', a theme he further related to Phryxus, Aries and the month of March. Calvesi, op. cit. (note 1), titled the work "San Giovannino" o il Divino Amore'.
- 6 Denis Mahon and Denys Sutton, *Artists in 17th Century Rome*, exhib. cat. Wildenstein and Co., 2nd edn, London, 1955, cat. no. 17, pp. 20-4. As noted by Rosalia Varoli-Piazza, 'Il "San Giovanni Battista": dalle fonti all'immagine', in *Identificazione di un Caravaggio. Nuove tecnologie per una rilettura del "San Giovanni Battista"*, ed. Giampaolo Correale, Rome, 1990, p. 35, the painting was referred to as a 'giovane nudo' in published texts as early as the mid-eighteenth century. Veronika Schroeder, *Tradition und Innovation in Kabinettbildern Caravaggios*, Munich, 1988, *passim*, esp. pp. 78-91, flirts with identifying the painting's subject as a Ganymede, but concludes by calling it a 'Knabe mit Widder'.
- 7 Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, New York, 1983, p. 306.
- 8 Puglisi, op. cit. (note 1), p. 205.
- 9 Walter Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, Princeton, 1955, p. 91, first noted that Phryxus was a prince, not a shepherd. Gilbert, op. cit. (note 2), *passim*, esp. p. 13-54, provides additional and convincing arguments against reading the painting as a Saint John the Baptist or a Phryxus; his efforts to identify the subject as Paris, however, are marked, as Helen Langdon noted in her review of his book (*Burlington Magazine*, vol. 137, 1995, p. 621), by a 'strained and dizzying complexity'. Gilbert proposes that Caravaggio's 'Paris' was painted as a critique of Annibale Carracci's figure of Paris in the Galleria Farnese, 'a suggestion', Langdon further notes, 'that involves Caravaggio making extremely recondite, subtle, Warburgian criticisms of the iconography of the Farnese ceiling.' It should be noted that Slatkes's reading of the painting as a Phryxus and an allegory of the sanguine temperament is based (in part) on his misidentification of the branch formation in the upper left corner of the painting as a bird. Further on the problems of Slatkes's interpretation of the iconography, see Gilbert, op. cit. (note 2), p. 48-54.
- 10 Puglisi, op. cit. (note 1), p. 205.
- 11 Hibbard, op. cit. (note 7), p. 307, briefly raised and then summarily dismissed the possibility that the figure could be Isaac, as did Marini, 1987 op. cit. (note 1), p. 445. The reasons for Hibbard's rejection of this identification are discussed below. As we were completing this manuscript,

- Liliana Barroero's essay, 'L' 'Isaaco' di Caravaggio nella Pinacoteca Capitolina', *Bollettino dei Musei comunali di Roma*, vol. 9, 1997, pp. 37–41, came to our attention. We were pleased to discover that a number of Barroero's arguments for identifying the painting as an Isaac parallel and corroborate those reached independently here. As will be evident to readers, however, the range of our discussion is much broader than that of Barroero, who concerns herself solely with the painting's iconography. On the basis of Barroero's brief article, the painting has recently been catalogued under the title 'Saint John the Baptist or Isaac' by Sergio Guarino in Maria Elisa Tittoni, Patrizia Masini, and Sergio Guarino, *Caravaggio's St. John and Masterpieces from the Capitoline Collection*, exhib. cat., Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, 1999, cat. no. 2, pp. 18–19. In addition, when this article was in production, the following piece, which reaches conclusions very similar to our own, was brought to our attention: Rodolfo Papa, 'Il Sorriso di Dio', *Art e Dossier*, vol. 14, no. 131 (1998), pp. 28–32.
- 12 Francesca Cappelletti and Laura Testa, 1990a, 'I quadri di Caravaggio nella collezione Mattei. I nuovi documenti e i riscontri con le fonti', *Storia dell'arte*, vol. 69, pp. 234–44; Francesca Cappelletti and Laura Testa, 1990b, 'Ricerche documentarie sul 'San Giovanni Battista' dei Musei Capitolini e sul "San Giovanni Battista" della Galleria Doria-Pamphilj,' in *Identificazione di un Caravaggio. Nuove tecnologie per una rilettura del 'San Giovanni Battista'*, ed. Giampaolo Corrales, Rome, 1990, pp. 75–101; Francesca Cappelletti and Laura Testa, 1994, *Il Trattenimento di virtuosi. Le collezioni secentesche di quadri nei Palazzi Mattei di Roma*, Rome, pp. 39–41, 101–106; and Laura Testa, 'La collezione di quadri di Ciriaco Mattei,' in *Caravaggio e la collezione Mattei*, Milan, 1995, pp. 29–38. Further on Caravaggio and the Mattei, see Elisabeth Schröter, 'Caravaggio und die Gemäldesammlung der Familie Mattei,' *Pantheon*, vol. 53, 1995, pp. 62–87, and Alessandro Marabottini, 'Caravaggio e la collezione Mattei: qualche considerazione e un contributo', *Commentari d'arte*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1995, pp. 62–72.
- 13 Recanati, Archivio Antici-Mattei (hereafter cited as AAM), Mazzo 43A, Rincontro I, unpag. Cappelletti and Testa, 1994, op. cit. (note 12), p. 139, Appendix A, doc. nos. 31. See also Cappelletti and Testa, 1990a, op. cit. (note 12), p. 235; Cappelletti and Testa, 1990b, op. cit. (note 12), p. 77; Testa, op. cit. (note 12), p. 33; and Schröter, op. cit. (note 12), p. 65–6.
- 14 AAM, Mazzo 43 A, Rincontro I, unpag. Cappelletti and Testa, 1994, op. cit. (note 12), p. 140, Appendix A, doc. no. 47. See also Cappelletti and Testa, 1990a, op. cit. (note 12), p. 237–8; Cappelletti and Testa, 1990b, op. cit. (note 12), p. 77; Testa, op. cit. (note 12), p. 33; and Schröter, op. cit. (note 12), p. 33; and Schröter, op. cit. (note 12), p. 70.
- 15 AAM, Mazzo 43 A, Rincontro I, unpag. Cappelletti and Testa, 1994, op. cit. (note 12), p. 139–40, Appendix A, doc. nos. 33 and 49. See also Cappelletti and Testa, 1990a, op. cit. (note 12), p. 237; Cappelletti and Testa, 1990b, op. cit. (note 12), p. 77; Testa, op. cit. (note 12), p. 34; and Schröter, op. cit. (note 12), p. 68.
- 16 See Cappelletti and Testa, 1990a, op. cit. (note 12), p. 239, and Testa, op. cit. (note 12), p. 34. Puglisi, op. cit. (note 1), p. 205, generally accepts Cappelletti and Testa's association of these payments with the picture, but notes (p. 401) that 'the language recording the small payment suggests it may have been a bonus from Ciriaco to Caravaggio.' Guarino, op. cit. (note 1), p. 120, writes that 'è estremamente probabile che si tratti proprio di questo quadro', a position with which Langdon, op. cit. (note 1), p. 230, concurs. The suggestion by Gilbert, op. cit. (note 2), p. 279, n. 5, that the painting was a gift to Ciriaco from Caravaggio, rather than being a commissioned work, is not convincing, as it does not accord with the pattern of patronage between patron and client. Equally unconvincing is Schröter's, op. cit. (note 12), p. 68, proposal that the two payments refer to not one but two paintings, the one under consideration and his *Doubling Thomas* (in Potsdam). Eighty-five scudi seems insufficient payment for two works by Caravaggio. In fact, in light of the sums paid for *The Supper of Emmaus* and *The Taking of Christ*, four- and six-figure compositions respectively, one would expect the four-figure *Doubling Thomas* to have commanded an equivalent price. Moreover, *The Doubling Thomas* was painted for the Giustiniani and not the Mattei, despite the claim of Giovanni Baglione, *Le Vite de' Pittori Scultori et Architetti. Dal Pontificato di Gregorio XIII. del 1572. In fino à tempi di Papa Urbano Ottavo nel 1642*, Rome, 1642, facsimile edn, ed. Valerio Mariani, Rome, 1935, p. 137.
- 17 See n. 2 above.
- 18 Celio's guide bears a dedication to his friend Giovanni Vittorio de' Rossi dated 1620. Gilbert, op. cit. (note 2), pp. 36–41, convincingly dates Celio's first encounter with the painting to 1607. See also Hibbard, op. cit. (note 7), p. 290. On Celio's work for Asdrubale in the Palazzo Mattei di Giove, which he carried out in 1607–08 and 1615, see Gerda Panofsky-Soergel, 'Zur Geschichte des Palazzo Mattei di Giove', *Römisches Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 11, 1967–68, pp. 137, 141, 175, 180, docs. XXI, XXIV and XXXII. In 1616 Celio completed his *Battle of Caesar and Pompey* (now in the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome) for Giovanni Battista Mattei's collection, which, together with the old Palazzo Mattei (now Caetani), he inherited from his father. On the

- painting, see Cappelletti and Testa, 1994, op. cit. (note 12), pp. 39, 109.
- 19 Virtually all Gilbert's argument in favour of identifying the painting as a 'Paris' depends on the authority of Celio.
 - 20 AAM, Mazzo 105, fol. 21r. Cappelletti and Testa, 1990a, op. cit. (note 12), p. 239; Cappelletti and Testa, 1990b, op. cit. (note 12), p. 77; Cappelletti and Testa, 1994, op. cit. (note 12), p. 106; and Schröter, op. cit. (note 12), p. 82, doc. 2, no. 12.
 - 21 The inventory was written and signed by Lodovico Carletti, the *guardaroba* of Mattei.
 - 22 Christoph Luitpold Frommel, 'Caravaggios Frühwerk und der Kardinal Francesco Maria del Monte', *Storia dell'arte*, vol. 9/10, 1971, p. 9, n. 31, and Schröter, op. cit. (note 12), p. 83, doc. 3. AAM, Mazzo 31, fol. 2v: 'Item lascio all'ill.mo S.r Cardinale del Monte come unico mio Signore, et Padrone il quadro di S. Gio: Battista.' The testament was first drawn up on 21 Jan. 1623 and then rewritten with a codicil on 5 June, 1624.
 - 23 Marini, 1974, op. cit. (note 1), p. 384; Guarino, op. cit. (note 1), p. 123, writes 'è davvero certo che Giovanni Battista Mattei, identificando il quadro, in più di un'occasione, come in [sic] "San Giovanni Battista", fosse del tutto consapevole di quello che diceva.'
 - 24 See Carla Benocci, 'Il rinnovamento seicentesco della Villa Mattei al Celio: Francesco Peperelli, Andrea Sacchi, Andrea Lilli ed altri artisti', *Storia dell'arte*, vol. 66, 1989, pp. 187–96; Cappelletti and Testa, 1994, op. cit. (note 12), *passim*; and Gilbert, op. cit. (note 2), pp. 44–45. His exclusive focus was the renovation and enlargement of his father's Villa Celimontana. As Benocci notes (p. 191), the 'Libro di memorie fatte dal Signor Marchese Giovanni Battista Mattei', spanning the years 1614–24, records the purchase of only two paintings, Celio's *Battle of Caesar and Pompey* (cited above, n. 18) and one portrait.
 - 25 Cf. Gilbert, op. cit. (note 2), p. 45–6, who offers a similar argument. Barroero, op. cit. (note 11), p. 40–1 suggests that Giovanni Battista Mattei may have wanted to deliberately transform the boy (in the painting) into his name saint.
 - 26 Frommel, op. cit. (note 22), p. 31. Archivio di Stato di Roma, 30 Notai Capitolini, Paulus Vespignanus, ufficio 28, vol. 138, fol 575v: 'Un' S. Giovanni Battista del mano del Caravaggio ...'
 - 27 W. Chandler Kirwin, 'Addendum to Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte's Inventory: the Date of the Sale of Various Notable Paintings', *Storia dell'arte*, vol. 9/10, 1971, pp. 53, n. 1, 55. Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Arciconfraternita del Santissimo Crocifisso di San Marcello, vol. F, XIX, 20: 'A di 5 Maggio d' [1628] Per il Coridone e Zingara del Caravaggio, S. Bastiano di Guido Reni, e l'orfeo del Bassano——— scudi 240. Kirwin mistakenly believed that 'il Coridone e Zingara' referred to a single picture. Cardinal del Monte had first left the Capitoline painting to his nephew Ugucione, and then to the latter's brother Alessandro, bishop of Gubbio. See Cappelletti and Testa, 1990b, op. cit. (note 12), p. 77.
 - 28 On Corydon, see Posèq, op. cit. (note 2), pp. 14, 17, n. 13.
 - 29 Cappelletti and Testa, 1990a, op. cit. (note 12), p. 240; Cappelletti and Testa, 1990b, op. cit. (note 12), pp. 78, 89. Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Archivio Pio Falcò, Inventario dei beni dell'Eredità del R. mo Sig. re Eman.le Card.le Pio 1641: 'Un quadro con un giovine nudo à sedere mezzo calco, quale tiene col braccio dritto abbracciato un' agnello'. See also Laura Testa, 'Un collezionista del Seicento: il cardinale Carlo Emanuele Pio', in *Quadri rinomatissimi: il collezionismo dei Pio di Savoia*, ed. Jadranka Bentini, Modena, 1994, pp. 93–100.
 - 30 Baglione, op. cit. (note 16), p. 137: 'un s. Gio. Battista'; Francesco Scannelli, *Il microcosmo della pittura*, Cesena, 1657, p. 197: 'nella Galeria dell'Eminentissimo Pio alcuni Quadretti, ed in particolare una figura di S. Gio. Battista ignudo'; Giovanni Pietro Bellori, *Nota delle musei, librerie, gallerie et ornamenti di statue e pitture ne' Palazzi, nelle Case, e ne' Giardini di Roma*, Rome, 1664, p. 45: 'S. Giovanni giovinetto scherza con l'Agnello di Michele da Caravaggio'; and Giovanni Pietro Bellori, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori e architetti moderni*, Rome, 1672, ed. Evelina Borea, Turin, 1976, p. 217: 'Dipinse San Giovanni nel deserto, che è un giovinetto ignudo a sedere, il quale sporgendo la testa avanti abbraccia un agnello.'
 - 31 Michel Angelo and Pier Vincenzo Rossi, *Descrizione di Roma moderna*, Rome, 1697, p. 275: 'S. Giovanni Battista fanciullo, che scherza con l'Agnellino, di Michel' Angelo da Caravaggio'. Cappelletti and Testa, 1990b, op. cit. (note 12), p. 97, and Sergio Guarino, 'L'inventario Pio di Savoia del 1724', in ed. Jadranka Bentini, op. cit. (note 29), p. 122, no. 132: 'Altro quadro di un Giovine nudo, quale appoggia il braccio sinistro sopra i suoi panni, e con il destro abbraccia la testa di un agnello ... del Caravaggio'.
 - 32 The inventory, drawn up by Francesco Trevisani, records the painting as 'Un Quadro depinto in tela rappresentante un San Giovanni Battista ... del Caravaggio'. See Cinotti, op. cit. (note 1), p. 522, and Cappelletti and Testa, 1990b, op. cit. (note 12), p. 83, n. 73.
 - 33 Cinotti, op. cit. (note 1), p. 522, and Cappelletti and Testa, 1990b, op. cit. (note 12), p. 79: 'Un quadro di misura di palmi 5 per alto, con cornice dorata, compagno della suddetta Maria Egizziaca, originale di Michel Angelo da Caravaggio, di valore scudi 60'. Caravaggio's picture, along with the rest of Cardinal Emanuele Pio's collection, was left to his brother Ascanio,

- and then to his son Carlo Francesco. The 1724 inventory was compiled after the death of Francesco Pio, heir to the family collection.
- 34 Gregorio Roisecco, *Roma antica e moderna*, Rome, 1765, vol. I, p. 360: 'S. Giovanni Battista fanciullo di Michel Angelo da Caravaggio'; Giuseppe and Mariano Vasi, *Itinerario istruttivo di Roma*, Rome, 1794, ed. Guglielmo Matthiae, Rome, 1970, p. 92: 'un S. Gio: Battista del Caravaggio'; Ridolfino Venuti, *Accurata, e succinta descrizione topografica e storica di Roma moderna*, Rome, 1766, pp. 200, 377: '[un] giovane nudo': Giovanni Pietro Rossini, *Mercurio errante. Supplemento*, Rome, 1771, p. 129: '[un] giovane ignudo'. For the other guides and catalogues, see Maria Elisa Tittoni, 'Il "San Giovanni Battista" nelle collezioni capitoline,' in *Identificazione di un Caravaggio. Nuove tecnologie per una rilettura del "San Giovanni Battista"*, ed. Giampaolo Corrales, Rome, 1990, p. 13, and Varoli-Piazza, op. cit. (note 6), pp. 35–6.
- 35 Settimo Bocconi, *Musei Capitolini. Pinacoteca e Tabularium*, Rome, 1925. See Tittoni, op. cit. (note 34), p. 14, and Carlo Pietrangeli, 'La riscoperta di un Caravaggio', in *Identificazione di un Caravaggio. Nuove tecnologie per una rilettura del "San Giovanni Battista"*, ed. Giampaolo Corrales, Rome, 1990, pp. 15–16.
- 36 Denis Mahon, 'Contrasts in Art-Historical Method: Two Recent Approaches to Caravaggio', *Burlington Magazine* vol. 95, 1953, p. 213, n. 7; and Mahon and Sutton, op. cit. (note 6), esp. p. 22.
- 37 Friedlaender, op. cit. (note 9), p. 229.
- 38 Julius Schlosser Magnino, *La letteratura artistica*, 3rd Italian edn, Florence, 1964, pp. 464–5.
- 39 Cinotti, op. cit. (note 1), p. 210, writes of Bellori's biography of Caravaggio that the author 'si cammina sulle sabbie mobili, per la mescolanza di dati preziosi, di giudizi illuminati e di invenzioni'.
- 40 Klara Garas, 'The Ludovisi Collection of Pictures in 1633–II', *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 109, 1967, pp. 345 and 346 (nos. 119 and 196).
- 41 Luigi Salerno, 'The Picture Gallery of Vincenzo Giustiniani', *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 102, 1960, p. 137 (no. 49).
- 42 Guarino, op. cit. (note 31), p. 118, n. 7, and Rita Randolfi, 'La vita di Bartolomeo Manfredi nei documenti romani e un'ipotesi sulla sua formazione artistica', *Storia dell'arte*, vol. 74, 1992, p. 90, n. 45.
- 43 Augustine, *Contra Faustum* 22:73, ed. Joseph Zycha, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 25:6:1, Vienna, 1891, p. 671: '[The Sacrifice of Isaac is] ita nobile, ut non lectum nec quaesitum animo occurreret, ut denique tot linguis cantatum, tot locis pictum et aures et oculos dissimulantis feriret.' On Augustine and Faustus, see *Confessiones* 5:11–13, ed. Lucas Verheijen, CC 27, Turnhout, 1975, pp. 62–4.
- 44 Genesis 22:1–19; on the covenant proper, see Genesis 17. Augustine, *Civitas Dei* 16:32, eds Bernhard Dombart and Alfons Kalb, CC 47–48, Turnhout, 1955, pp. 536–8. On the renewed interest in Augustine and the Sacrifice of Isaac, see Mina Gregori, 'Sacrificio di Isaaco', ed. Mina Gregori, *Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio: Come nascono i capolavori*, Florence, 1991, p. 230.
- 45 Fernand Cabrol and Henri Leclercq, 'Abraham', *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, eds Fernand Cabrol and Henri Leclercq, Paris, 1907, vol. 1, part 1, cols 111–27. Alison Moore Smith, 'The Iconography of the Sacrifice of Isaac in Early Christian Art', *American Journal of Archaeology*, series 2, vol. 26, 1922, pp. 159–73. Henri Leclercq, 'Isaac', *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, eds Fernand Cabrol and Henri Leclercq, Paris, 1924, vol. 7, pt. 2, col. 1553–77. Theodor Klausner, 'Abraham', *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, Stuttgart, 1950, vol. 1, pp. 18–27. Isabel Speyart van Woerden, 'The Iconography of the Sacrifice of Abraham', *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol. 15, 1961, pp. 214–55. F. Lucchesi Palli, 'Abraham', ed. Englebert Kirschbaum, *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, Rome, 1968, vol. 1, pp. 20–35. To the bibliography in Kirschbaum should be added Friedrich-August von Metzsch, *Johannes der Täufer: Seine Geschichte und seine Darstellung in der Kunst*, Munich, 1989; and ed. Sandro Bellesi, *Mostra dedicata all'effigie di San Giovanni Battista*, Florence, 1994.
- 46 Van Woerden, op. cit. (note 45), p. 234.
- 47 The debate is summarized in P.J. Burgard, 'The Art of Dissimulation: Caravaggio's "Calling of Saint Matthew"', *Pantheon*, vol. 56, 1998, pp. 95–102. See also Irving Lavin, 'Caravaggio's "Calling of Saint Matthew": The Identity of the Protagonist,' in *Past-Present: Essays on Historicism in Art from Donatello to Picasso*, Berkeley, 1993, pp. 85–99.
- 48 Bellori, 1976, op. cit. (note 30), p. 222: *affatto senza azione*.
- 49 Bellori, 1976, op. cit. (note 30), p. 215.
- 50 Van Woerden, op. cit. (note 45), p. 234.
- 51 For even earlier examples, see the capitals in the cloister at Moissac and the nave aisle of St-Lazare in Autun; Meyer Schapiro, 'The Romanesque Sculpture of Moissac I', in *Romanesque Art*, New York, 1977, fig. 84; Denis Grivot and George Zarnecki, *Gislebertus: Sculptor of Autun*, New York, 1961, p. 139.
- 52 What appears to be a fire or burning embers in the lower left corner of the painting – and was identified as such by Calvesi, op. cit. (note 1), p. 245, and Barroero, op. cit. (note 11), p. 40 – is, in fact, underpainting, a *pentimento*, red pigment from a piece of drapery first painted there by the artist; on this see Paola Sannucci, 'I materiali e la tecnica', in *Identificazione di un Caravaggio. Nuove tecnologie per una rilettura*

- del 'San Giovanni Battista'*, ed. Giampaolo Corrales, Rome, 1990, pp. 56, 63. See also Varoli-Piazza, op. cit. (note 6), p. 38.
- 53 On the exegesis of this passage, see, for example, Origen, *Commentaire sur Saint Jean* 10:97, ed. and trans. Cécile Blanc, Sources chrétiennes 157, Paris, 1970, vol. 1, p. 441. For an example of the Paschal Lamb with full horns, see the fourteenth-century *Golden Haggadah* now in the British Museum, Add. Ms. 27210:15 (reproduced in Bezalel Narkiss, *The Golden Haggadah*, Rohnert Park, 1997, fig. 30).
- 54 Professor Freeman conveyed his opinions to us in a phone call of 5 June, 2000; Dr. Ryder in a letter of 5 July 2000. Our thanks to both of them for their invaluable help.
- For an exposure-adjusted black and white photograph of the Borghese *John*, in which the lamb and background are much clearer than in colour reproductions, see von Metzsch, op. cit. (note 45), fig. 154.
- 55 See *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*, Venice, 1612, under 'montone'.
- 56 Genesis 22:7-8, 13. Cf. *La Bibbia, cioè, i libri della Vecchio e del Nuovo Testamento*, trans. Giovanni Diodati, Geneva, 1607; *The NIV Interlinear Hebrew-English Old Testament*, ed. John R. Kohlenberger, Grand Rapids, 1979. Caravaggio's depiction of Matthew correctly writing his gospel in Hebrew characters from right to left in the now-lost first San Luigi dei Francesi *Matthew* shows that he was not unaware of the philological aspect of the Bible, something that was currently of enormous interest in intellectual circles throughout Europe.
- 57 Genesis 22:11-18.
- 58 Those arguing in favour of the Capitoline painting's being a Saint John the Baptist often cite Leonardo's *Saint John* in the Louvre and Bronzino's painting of the saint in the Galleria Borghese as precedents. However, both of these figures are, in fact, partially draped.
- 59 On the possibility of some more immediate, contemporary models, see Keith Christiansen, 'Thoughts on the Lombard Training of Caravaggio', ed. Mina Gregori, *Come dipingeva il Caravaggio*, Milan, 1996, pp. 11-16.
- The absence of pubic hair supports the youthful age of Isaac as implied in Genesis 21-22.
- As to Isaac's uncircumcized state (cf. Genesis 21:4, where it is stated that he was circumcised when eight days old), this is one of those things that are very disconcerting to the modern mind but which were clearly far less so to that of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although reference could be made to the naturalism of Caravaggio, which received so much attention from contemporaries (e.g., Bellori, 1976., op. cit. [note 30], pp. 215-18), and exegetical explanations could be given (e.g., Acts 15; Romans 2:25-29; 1 Corinthians. 7: 18-19; Galatians 5:2-6; Ambrose, *De Abraham* 2:78, ed. Karl Schenkl, *Sancti Ambrosii Opera*, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 32:1. Vienna, 1897, pp. 630-1), the fact is that it was standard in this period to ignore the depiction of circumcision in biblical figures: one need look no further than Michelangelo's *David*, Brunelleschi's *Sacrifice* (plate 20), or Ghiberti's *Sacrifice*. On this, see also Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, New York, 1983, pp. 157-9. Far, far more of an anachronism in Caravaggio is the appearance of the man with eyeglasses in his *Calling of Saint Matthew*. Our thanks to Thomas Izbicki for his thoughts on this.
- 60 Hebrews 11:17-19 (on this, see Augustine and the *Glossa Ordinaria*, cited below). Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses* 4:5:4, ed. and trans. Adelin Rousseau, Sources chrétiennes 100, Paris, 1965, vol. 4, part 2, p. 434 (Irenaeus was translated early on into Latin). Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 3:18, ed. A. Kroymann, CC 1, Turnhout, 1954, pp. 531-2; taken up again virtually word for word in *Adversus Judaeos* 10:6, p. 1376; cf. also *ibid.* 13:20-21, pp. 1388-9. Origen, *Homiliae in Genesim* 8, PG 12:203-210. Ambrose, *De Abraham* 1:66-79, op. cit. (note 59), pp. 545-53; *De Isaac vel Anima* 1:1, ed. Schenkl, op. cit. (note 59), p. 641; *De Cain et Abel* 1:7, ed. Schenkl, op. cit. (note 59), p. 343. Augustine, *Civitas Dei* 16:32, op. cit. (note 44), p. 536-37; *In Psalmos* 30, enar. 2, ser. 2, vol. 9, eds E. Dekkers and J. Fraipont, CC 38, Turnhout, 1990, pp. 208-09; *Sermones de Vetere Testamento* 19:3, ed. Cyril Lambert, CC 41, Turnhout, 1961, pp. 253-54. Chrysostom, *Homiliae in Genesim* 47:3, PG 54:432-3. These are only a few of the many, many sources that take up this subject, including the widely read *Glossa Ordinaria*, Genesis 22, PL 113:137-139.
- 61 See, for example, Augustine, *Civitas Dei* 16:32, op. cit. (note 44), p. 537, among many others, both earlier and later, which we will not cite here.
- 62 Isidore of Seville, *Quaestiones in Vetus Testamentum*, In Genesis 18:10, PL 83:251. *Glossa Ordinaria*, Genesis 22:9-11, PL 113:139.
- 63 Hebrews 11:17-19. Ephraem Syrus, *Commentarius in Genesim* 20:2-3, ed. R.-M. Tonneau, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 153, p. 69 (Ephraem was translated into Latin at an early date). Ambrose, *De Isaac vel Anima* 1:1 (ed. Schenkl, note 59), p. 641. Augustine, *Civitas Dei* 16:32, op. cit. (note 44), p. 536. Jerome, *Ep.* 118:5, ed. and trans. Jérôme Labourt, *Saint Jérôme: Lettres*, Paris, 1948-1963, vol. 6, pp. 94-5. Chrysostom, *Homiliae in Epistolam ad Hebraeos* 25:1, PG 63:173. *Glossa Ordinaria*, Genesis 22:5-8 (citing Alcuin), PL 113.
- 64 Chrysostom, *Homiliae in Genesim* 47:2, PG 54:431, we translate from the Latin: 'Pueri elegantiam externam, internamque

- pulchritudinem, obedientiam, gratiam, aetatis florem'; and cf. *Homiliae in Genesis* 47:1, PG 54:428–9. Cf. also Gregory of Nyssa, *De Deitate Filii et Spiritus Sancti*, PG 46:568–72; and Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, Philadelphia, 1968, vol. 1, p. 280.
- 65 Ottavio Paravicino, *tra il devoto, et profano*; as cited in Gaetano Cozzi, 'Intorno al cardinale Ottavio Paravicino, a monsignor Paolo Gualdo e a Michelangelo da Caravaggio,' *Revista storica italiana*, vol. 73, 1961, p. 44. Mina Gregori, 'Saint John the Baptist,' in *The Age of Caravaggio*, exhib. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, cat. no. 85, p. 300, notes that 'The pose and the somewhat perplexing nudity of the youth . . . are difficult to reconcile with the ostensibly religious subject matter. . . .'
- 66 As recorded by Ginzberg, op. cit. (note 64), vol. 1, p. 275; also cited by Barroero, op. cit. (note 11), p. 38.
- 67 Tertullian, *Adversus Iudaeos* 13:20–21, op. cit. (note 60), pp. 1388–9. Origen, *Homiliae in Genesim* 8:9, PG 12:208–209. Ephraem Syrus, *Commentarius in Genesim* 20:3, op. cit. (note 63), p. 69. Augustine, *Civitas Dei* 16:32, op. cit. (note 44), p. 537; *In Psalmos* 30, enar. 2, ser. 2:9, op. cit. (note 60), pp. 208–209; *Sermones de Vetere Testamento* 19:3, op. cit. (note 60), pp. 253–4. Paulinus of Nola, *Epistula* 29:9, ed. G. de Hartel, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 29, Vienna, 1894, pp. 256–7. Chrysostom, *Homiliae in Epistolam ad Hebraeos* 25:1, PG 63:173–4. Isidore of Seville, *Quaestiones in Vetus Testamentum*, In *Genesis* 18, *Pl.* 83:249–51. Rabanus Maurus, *Commentaria in Genesim* 3:3, *Pl.* 107:568–9 (following Isidore). *Glossa Ordinaria*, *Genesis* 22:9–11, *Pl.* 113–139 (following Isidore).
- 68 Augustine, *Sermones de Vetere Testamento* 19:3, op. cit. (note 60), pp. 253–4. 'Et Isaac Christus erat, et aries Christus erat. . . . Sed in Isaac et in ariete Christus.' See also Chrysostom, *Homiliae in Epistolam ad Hebraeos* 25:1, PG 63:173–4.
- 69 In light of the equation between Isaac and the ram, it is noteworthy that the hair of Isaac is depicted in a way distinctly different from that found in other of Caravaggio's paintings. The model used for Isaac is believed to have been an apprentice named Francesco Boneri (also known as Cecco da Caravaggio), a boy who appears in several of Caravaggio's paintings, most notably in the Odescalchi *Conversion of Saint Paul*, the *Victorious Amor* and the *Uffizi Sacrifice of Isaac* (plate 18). On Boneri, see Gianni Papi, 'Caravaggio e Cecco', ed. Mina Gregori, op. cit. (note 44), p. 126. In these works, the boy's hair is treated in what might be called a generally regular manner: it is fairly long and fairly curly, but within these parameters nothing stands out in its arrangement; attention is drawn to nothing by any pattern. This is not the case with the Capitoline Isaac, who is depicted with a distinctive curl standing out near the ear on each side of the head – an arrangement that mirrors the horns of the ram, which curl forward, like the hair, though it is kept from looking too awkward or unnatural by a third curl toward the top of the head. In contrast to this visual parallel, in the *Uffizi Sacrifice*, where no such curling horns are found on the ram, no isolated locks of hair curl out at the sides of Isaac's head. While this parallel arrangement in the Capitoline figures is a type of formal device employed by Caravaggio from time to time, it is possible that its use here may have been meant to reinforce the statement made by the juxtaposition of the heads: 'Isaac was Christ and the ram was Christ Christ was in both Isaac and the ram.'
- 70 Although this is very widely implied, for specific statements, see Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 3:18, op. cit. (note 60), pp. 531–2; *Adversus Iudaeos* 10:6, p. 1376; Augustine, *Civitas Dei* 16:32, op. cit. (note 44), p. 536; idem, *Sermones de Vetere Testamento* 19:3, op. cit. (note 60), pp. 253–4; Isidore of Seville, *Quaestiones in Vetus Testamentum*, In *Genesis* 18, *Pl.* 83:250; Rabanus Maurus, *Commentaria in Genesim* 3:3, *Pl.* 107:568 (following Isidore).
- 71 For example, Honorius Augustodunensis, *Speculum Ecclesiae*, Dominica de Passione Domini, *Pl.* 172:911. Nicolaus of Lyra, *Postilla Super Totam Biblam*, *Genesis* 22:6, Straßsburg, 1492, repr. Frankfurt am Main, 1971, n.p. And cf. *The Hours of Catherine of Cleves*, ed. John Plummer, New York, n. d., p. 97, fig. 82, where the site of the sacrifice of Isaac is associated with the tomb of Adam, which is the site of the coming crucifixion of Christ.
- 72 This is not a beech tree, as has been stated by Gilbert, op. cit. (note 2), p. 22.
- 73 *Genesis* 17:17–19 and 18:12–15. Although these particular quotes—*risus*, *risus vel gaudium*, *risus autem insigne laetitiae est*—are from Ambrose and Jerome (cited below), they are repeated everywhere, with *risus* being the virtually standard interpretation of Isaac in Latin. The support for this is endless; we cite only a few: Philo Judaeus, *De Abrahamo* 36, ed. and trans. F.H. Colson, Cambridge, Mass., 1959, p. 98. Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 1:5, PG 8:276–277. Ambrose, *De Isaac vel Anima* 1:1, op. cit. (note 59), p. 641. Augustine, *Civitas Dei* 16:31, op. cit. (note 44), pp. 535–6, and cf. 16:32, p. 536. Jerome, *Liber Interpretationis Hebraicorum Nominum*, *Genesis*, ed. Paul de Lagarde, CC 72, Turnhout 1959, p. 67; *Hebraicae Quaestiones*, *Genesis* 17:17–19, ed. Paul de Lagarde, CC 72, Turnhout, 1959, p. 22. Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job* 9:106, ed. M. Adriaen, CC 143, Turnhout, 1979, p. 532. *Glossa Ordinaria*, *Genesis* 17:17–18, *Pl.* 113:124 (following Jerome). Other authors influential in disseminating this exegesis were Isidore of Seville, *Quaestiones in Vetus Testamentum*, In *Genesis*

- 14:13, *Pl.* 83:244–5; and Rabanus Maurus, *Commentaria in Genesim* 2:21, *Pl.* 107:552 (following Isidore).
- 74 Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 1:5, *PG* 8:276–7, we translate from the Latin: 'Isaac risus exponitur. . . Mystice autem risit, praedicens fore ut Dominus nos risu impleret, qui sanguine Domino ab interitu et corruptione redempti sumus. . . Surrexit enim post justa facta funeris Jesus non passus, quemadmodum Isaac dimissus est e sacrificio.'
- 75 John 1:29, 36.
- 76 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 1:13, trans. H. Thackeray, Loeb Classical Library, London, 1956, vol. 4, p. 116.
- 77 Chrysostom, *Homiliae in Genesim* 47:2, *PG* 54:430–1; we translate from the Latin: 'Qualibus oculis spectabat puerum ligna afferentem, super quae non multo post illum immolaturus erat? Quomodo manus ferre potuit ignem et gladium? Et manus quidem ferebat ignem, sensibilem, ignia autem interior accendebat ipsius mentem, et rationem absumebat. . . Dixit autem, inquit, Isaac ad Abraham patrem suum, 'Pater. . . Ubi est ovis ad holocaustum?' Considera, obsecro, hic justi viri cruciatum, quomodo tulit auribus, quomodo potuit respondere puero, quomodo non est confusus mente, quomodo filio occultare potuit id quod futurum erat, sed inquit generoso spiritu et forti anima, 'Deus videbit sibimetipsi ovem ad holocaustum, fili'.' This psychological approach is an undercurrent throughout the homily. Nor was Chrysostom alone in recognizing the dramatic potential of the sacrifice; cf. also Origen, *Homiliae in Genesim* 8, esp. 8:1 and 8:6, *PG* 12:203–10, esp. cols. 203–204 and 206; and Gregory of Nyssa, *De Deitate Filii et Spiritus Sancti*, *PG* 46:568–72.
- 78 Augustine, *Sermones de Vetere Testamento* 2:1, op. cit. (note 60), p. 9: 'Nescio quomodo, quotiescumque legitur, quasi tunc fiat, ita afficit mentes audientium.' Similarly, cf. Origen, *Homiliae in Genesim* 8:6, *PG* 12:206.
- 79 Sydney J. Freedberg, *Circa 1600: A Revolution of Style in Italian Painting*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1983, p. 54.
- 80 *ibid.* See also Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Caravaggio's Secrets*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1998, pp. 46, 82–3.
- 81 Hibbard, op. cit. (note 7), p. 307.
- 82 See Mina Gregori, 'The Sacrifice of Isaac,' in *The Age of Caravaggio*, exhib. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1985, cat. no. 80, 282, who discusses the painting's 'unprecedented iconography'.
- 83 Luigi Scaramuccia, *Le finenze de' pennelli italiani*, Pavia, 1674, pp. 75–6: 'Christo, non come d'ordinario far si suole, agile, e trionfante per l'aria; ma con quella fierissima maniera . . . con un piede dentro, e l'altro fuori del Sepolcro posando in terra', as cited and translated in Friedlaender, op. cit. (note 9), p. 224. Further on the iconographic novelty of the painting, see Cinotti, op. cit. (note 1), p. 572, with additional bibliography.
- 84 Puglisi, op. cit. (note 1), p. 354. For an illustration, see her fig. 178.
- 85 On Ciriaco Mattei as a patron, see n. 12, above, and Gilbert, op. cit. (note 2), *passim*.
- 86 See Gilbert, op. cit. (note 2), pp. 99–103, 135–58, and Franco Mormando, 'Just as Your Lips Approach the Lips of Your Brothers': Judas Ascariot and the Kiss of Betrayal', in *Saints & Sinners. Caravaggio and the Baroque Image*, ed. Franco Mormando, exhib. cat., McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, Boston, 1999, pp. 179–90.
- 87 See Panofsky-Soergel, op. cit. (note 18), p. 138 and fig. 139.
- 88 AAM, Mazzo 90, fol. 32v: 'Un quadro grande con cornice indorato di Abraham che volea sacrificare Isahac'; and AAM, Mazzo 105, fol. 22v: 'Un altro quadro simile, del sacrificio di Abramo, di mano dell'istesso Giovannino'. Cappelletti and Testa, 1994, op. cit. (note 12), pp. 167 and 175 respectively, and, on the latter work, see also p. 119.
- 89 AAM, Mazzo 90, fol. 95v: 'Il Sacrificio d'Abraham. Oratio Senese'. Cappelletti and Testa, 1994, op. cit. (note 12), p. 195. On Riminaldi's painting, today in the Galleria Nazionale, Rome, see Cappelletti and Testa, 1994, op. cit. (note 12), pp. 119–20; Rossella Vodret, 'Sacrifice of Isaac', in *Caravaggio and His Italian Followers from the Collections of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica di Roma*, exhib. cat., Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Venice, 1998, cat. no. 13, pp. 89–92.
- 90 Francesca Cappelletti, 'The documentary evidence of the early history of Caravaggio's "Taking of Christ"', *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 135, 1993, pp. 743–4.
- 91 In contrast, the Mattei owned only two paintings of Saint John the Baptist (not counting Caravaggio's work). See Cappelletti and Testa, 1994, op. cit. (note 12), pp. 171 and 196.
- 92 Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, 1960, rev. edn., Princeton, 1969, p. 204.
- 93 See Patricia Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari: Art and History*, New Haven and London, 1995, p. 126, who discusses Vasari's misidentification of Francia's *Marriage of S. Cecilia* in the Oratory of S. Cecilia, Bologna as a Marriage of the Virgin.
- 94 See Alfred Moir, *Caravaggio and His Copyists*, New York, 1976, pp. 125–6, figs. 62 and 64. The first is a painting in the Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum (our plate 32), the second a drawing, attributed to Matthias Stomer, in the Oppé Collection, London.