



**THE ARTIST:** When, in 1610, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio died at Port'Ercole of a malignant fever he had already managed to crowd enough art and notoriety into thirty-six years to keep critics, historians, and students of rowdiness fascinated for three centuries. In a period when painting and lawlessness were plentiful Caravaggio's two-sided reputation was a major achievement. For decades his work was a center of controversy. Recently, however, he has enjoyed an astonishing popularity on all sides. In 1951 a Caravaggio exhibition was held in Milan, and in the last three years four books have been written about him. These tell how Caravaggio studied in Milan, then probably went to Venice before going on to Rome, where he promptly displayed his non-conformity by revolutionizing the academic schools and shocking the *popolo*. A naturalist with deep religious feelings, he was a master of *chiaroscuro*, a form he labored over in a studio composed of a skylight and black-painted walls. The moment he put down his brushes, however, he usually took up trouble, and his name appears a number of times in Rome's police records, c. 1600. Among other things, he allegedly threw stones at the police, helped write offensive verse against another painter (he was sued for libel), and, finally, on May 29, 1606, killed a man in a duel after a game of *palla a corda*—a sort of tennis. Forty-eight hours after the tragedy, he skipped town. He fled to Naples, then Malta (another fracas), then Sicily (more fracas). The Pope finally pardoned him, but he died en route to Rome. His carryings-on have prompted the Encyclopædia Britannica to call his life "stormy," the Columbia Encyclopedia to call his nature "violent," and the New International Encyclopedia to dash to his defense: "... the animosities which he excited involved him in constant quarrels . . . although he certainly did not provoke all the quarrels attributed to him." But a sentence or two later it adds: "It is true, however, that he killed a comrade in a quarrel over a game, and had to leave Rome for this offense." —BERNARD KALB.

## FINE ARTS

# Rebel Master Reexamined

*"Caravaggio Studies," by Walter Friedlaender (Princeton University Press. 320 pp. 250 illus. \$25), is a volume of studies of the life and work of a sixteenth-century Italian painter whose greatness has only recently become widely appreciated. Our reviewer is Wolfgang Stechow, professor of the history of art at Oberlin College.*

By Wolfgang Stechow

UNTIL about twenty-five years ago no great master of the past had been dealt more flagrant and continuous injustice by art historians and critics than Michelangelo da Caravaggio. Long after all other prejudices of academic classicism had been abandoned the cry raised against the great rebel from Lombardy by seventeenth-century writers was still echoing through the most diverse books on the history of art: he was still the vulgar naturalist, the trickster with light and shadow, the *enfant terrible* of the Baroque.

This lack of insight into his real stature was matched by a great uncertainty about his authentic oeuvre; even today textbooks abound with glaring misattributions, from which characterizations of equally glaring inadequacy are derived. This reviewer well remembers the time when, in

connection with Caravaggio, few cared to recall Delacroix's prophecy that perhaps one day another vulgar naturalist, Rembrandt, would be considered a greater painter than Raphael. Try as we might, we could not convince more than a handful of people that the clergy of Santa Maria della Scala had been tragically wrong in rejecting Caravaggio's "Death of the Virgin" because the artist had "so disrespectfully represented the Madonna all swollen-up and with bare legs" (which didn't disturb Rubens, who immediately seized upon the painting); nor that his rendering of the two unforgettable pilgrims in the "Madonna di Loreto" as "a man with muddy feet and a woman wearing a soiled and torn cap" is no less profound an expression of the eager pilgrimage of poor and devout country folk than Rembrandt's "Saul" drying his tears on a curtain is the most human proof of his contrition.

The recent rediscovery of Caravaggio's greatness was due to various causes. As it became more and more evident that his paintings, directly or indirectly, had made fundamental contributions to the art of Rubens and Rembrandt, De la Tour and Terbrugghen, Ribera and Velasquez, and even of his Italian antipodes such as Guercino and Reni, the study of his mature style and its international diffusion received high priority among art-historical research problems. At



"Crowning with Thorns."

the same time, new documentary proofs concerning his birth date, his apprenticeship in Milan, the continual police record of his violent clashes with society, and his dismal end after years of tragic peregrination, were partly the cause, partly the result of a keener interest in the chronological development of his personal style: problems still being widely discussed.

**B**UT in spite of all this eager probing into the problems of Caravaggio's life and style, which culminated in the great exhibition held in Milan in 1951 and in the recent monographs by Roberto Longhi, Lionello Venturi, and Roger Hinks, one main facet of the phenomenon, Caravaggio, failed to be elucidated: his religious attitude and its impact upon his work. It is in this respect that Walter Friedlaender's "Caravaggio Studies" breaks new ground and achieves greatest distinction. In the beginning of that part of the book which is dedicated to Caravaggio studies proper, Professor Friedlaender patiently, and at the same time brilliantly, throws light upon two of the artist's most commanding religious masterpieces, the "Conversion of Saul" and the "Martyrdom of Saint Peter" in Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome, and defines their place among other representations of the same subjects throughout the history of Western art, including Michelangelo's. This is indeed the soundest method by which to disprove the old notion of Caravaggio as a mere naturalist and to convince the reader of the real greatness of his works, in which profound religious vision, supported by a wise economy of means, gave birth to an art comparable to Giotto's and Masaccio's in monumentality and spiritual depth. In a later

chapter, which follows a series of enlightening studies on other aspects of Caravaggio's art, his religious concepts are likened to, and tentatively connected with, the teachings of that "Christian Socrates" Saint Filippo Neri, a man of similar straightforwardness and non-sectarian broad-mindedness, who may well have made a deep impression on the fiery and honest young painter.

These penetrating studies—which are just that and do not claim to add up to a definite monograph—are supplemented by a very useful "Catalogue Raisonné" and by the text of all documents and early biographies concerning Caravaggio, in the original language as well as in new, reliable English translations. Sixty-six plates illustrate his oeuvre, and a host of smaller illustrations of paintings used for comparative purposes are inserted in the text. While great care has been bestowed upon assembling this essential part of the book, this reviewer cannot help voicing his disappointment at the somewhat sooty appearance of the collotypes (which, in any case, could never have been as successful as good half-tones), and also at the unfortunate effect of the "bleeding" used in the reproduction of details. As to some of the more puzzling recent attributions, which have been all readily accepted by some other writers of great renown, the author's eloquent silence can well be applauded, even though one may miss his taking a stand on some other problems of this kind.

A fruit of Professor Friedlaender's long career as a greatly beloved teacher and most distinguished scholar, this book will take its place among the truly indispensable tools of instruction and research.



**THE AUTHOR:** In the opinion of art scholars who have known him for the last two decades, or ever since he fled Nazi Germany, Dr. Walter Friedlaender, a short, portly, convivial Professor Emeritus at NYU's Institute of Fine Arts, is "one of the world's outstanding art historians," "a kind of epicurean on the scholarly level," and "a man with a merry twinkle in his eye who is extraordinarily spry for his age." He is eighty-two. Dr. Friedlaender wasn't around the other day to comment on all that; an incorrigible tourist, he had left for Europe in January to reexamine a few *chefs-d'oeuvre*. "Caravaggio, Poussin, and the others—they probably shudder in their graves every time old Friedlaender roves his supercritical eye over their work," a colleague of his says. In the years before he studied art Dr. Friedlaender's eye roved over Sanskrit, the field in which he got his Ph.D. at the University of Berlin around 1900. However, Italy then beckoned, and he went. Art began taking up more and more of his time, and philology fell by the wayside. He was a professor in the history of art at Freiburg University at the start of World War I, and he stayed on, writing and amassing honors, until Hitler goose-stepped into history. Dr. Friedlaender left. He arrived in the U.S. at an age when most men take it easy, but he plunged deeper and deeper into his work, roaming the nooks and crannies of the last few centuries of art. One of his greatest achievements was defining the positive aspects of a style of art that had been largely misunderstood, the style in the period after the High Renaissance, between 1520 and 1580, that is now known as Mannerism. When he is not busy with scholars who beat a path to his office he is busy with his students, all of whom are invariably smitten by him. No great shakes as a lecturer, he teaches by muttering an odd amalgam of English, German, and Italian that attains a kind of eloquence by osmosis. To his students he is often a father-confessor; they discuss not only their scholastic but their personal problems with him. They call him "Papa."

—B. K.



Detail from "Judith and Holofernes."

—Illustrations from the book.