THE INDECOROUS ANGEL IN CARAVAGGIO'S

"INSPIRATION OF ST. MATTHEW"

by

KATIE SEEFELDT

Under the Direction of Shelley Zuraw

ABSTRACT

Caravaggio's paintings in San Luigi dei Francesi are important for understanding the development of the artist's style in regard to religious imagery. The rejection of his first altarpiece, the *Inspiration of St. Matthew*, has been generally understood as a result of its atypical composition and indecorous nature. Scholars find the figure of the angel to be feminized and eroticized and, therefore, partially responsible for the painting's rejection. Careful analysis of Caravaggio's altarpiece, however, suggests that the artist was basing his angel on an ancient model. In doing so, Caravaggio heightened the religious import of the painting.

INDEX WORDS: Caravaggio, San Luigi dei Francesi, Contarelli, evangelist, Matthew, angel, Muse Sarcophagi, Polyhymnia.

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Chapter One

Introduction

The general characterization of Caravaggio as a sacrilegious painter was already established in his own time. Seventeenth-century historians, such as Bellori and Baglione, unsympathetically attributed the rejection of his commissions to his unusual and profane treatment of religious subject matter.[1] Caravaggio's hyper-realistic style, for these writers, both pushed the boundaries of conventional imagery and seemed to reject time-honored artistic traditions in favor of an unorthodox approach. Bellori writes that Caravaggio had "no regard whatever, but rather disdain for, the superb marbles of the ancients and the paintings of Raphael which are so celebrated, he took nature alone as the subject of his brush."[2] This portrayal of Caravaggio—as an artist who shunned canonical precedent in pursuit of his idiosyncratic style—has governed interpretations of his oeuvre since the seventeenth century. On account of this indictment, many of Caravaggio's rejected paintings, like the *Inspiration of St. Matthew*, have continued to be viewed as sacrilegious in current literature.[3]

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[1] Seventeenth-century historians Bellori and Baglione have both criticized Caravaggio's naturalistic style and untraditional compositions. See Giovanni Pietro Bellori, *Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (Cambridge, Ma: Cambridge University Press, 2005),179-189 and Giovanni Baglione, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori et architetti dal pontificato di Gregorio XIII fino a tutto quello d'Urbano VIII* (Bologna: A. Forni, 1975-1976), 136-139. Howard Hibbard has published translations of the writings of several of Caravaggio's contemporary historians such as Karel Van Mander, Vincenzo Giustiniani and Giulio Mancini, as well as Bellori and Baglione. See Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 343-387.

[2] Bellori, *Lives*, 180.

[3] In the last twenty-five years, interest in Caravaggio studies has increased dramatically. Exhibitions and monographs on Caravaggio have been devoted to explaining Caravaggio's style, its origins, and its religious connotations. Despite this increased interest in Caravaggio and his paintings, problems still persist with regard to Caravaggio's first *Inspiration of St. Matthew*. See Metropolitan Museum of Art, *The Age of Caravaggio* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; Milan: Electa editrice, 1985); Franco Mormando, *Saints and Sinners: Caravaggio and the Baroque Image* (Chestnut Hill, MA: McMullen Museum of Art; University of Chicago Press, 1999); Andrea Bayer and Mina Gregori, *Painters of Reality: The Legacy of Leonardo and Caravaggio in Lombardy* (New York:

The *Death of the Virgin* (Fig. 1) is an example of Caravaggio's religious paintings being rejected due to their supposedly lewd and vulgar content. Caravaggio was commissioned to paint the *Death of the Virgin* for Santa Maria della Scala in 1601. His painting, however, was rejected shortly after its completion.[4] Contemporary historians shed light on the rejection: Giulio Mancini, writing in 1620, criticizes Caravaggio's portrayal of the Virgin, claiming that he modeled her after a known, and recognizable, prostitute whom he describes as "some filthy whore from the Ortaccio district."[5] Bellori suggests that Caravaggio's strict adherence to naturalism led to the rejection, stating that the Virgin "too closely imitated the bloated body of a dead woman."[6] Baglione further attributes the painting's rejection to Caravaggio's depiction of the Virgin, which featured "little decorum, swollen legs and bare feet."[7] According to his contemporaries, therefore, the painting's problems lay in Caravaggio's excessively realistic style and his treatment of the Virgin's body, both of which were seen to undermine the religiosity of the image.

In his portrayal of the Virgin, Caravaggio emphasized her humanity and refused to celestialize the event, rejecting the supernatural elements traditionally found in the scene.[8] The Virgin, therefore, has apparently experienced a bodily and final death without the signs of

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Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004); Denis Mahon, *Caravaggio: l'immagine del Divino* (Roma: RomArtificio, 2007).

[4] Catherine R. Puglisi, *Caravaggio* (London: Phaidon, 1998), 185-188.

[5] Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 346-351.

[6] Bellori, *Lives*, 185.

[7] Baglione, *Le vite de' pittori*, 138.

[8] Traditional depictions of the *Death of the Virgin* show the Virgin peacefully sleeping rather than dead as well as surrounded by signs of her imminent assent into heaven. See Saraceni's *Dormition of the Virgin* in Santa Maria della Scala which was commissioned to replace Caravaggio's rejected altarpiece. For a complete discussion of the rejection of Caravaggio's painting and the subsequent commission of Saraceni see Pamela Askew, *Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 50-83 and N. Randolph Parks, "Caravaggio's 'Dormition of the Virgin' and Its Setting," *Burlington Magazine* 127, no. 988 (Jul., 1985): 438-448.

spiritual transcendence; the apostles accordingly react with raw human emotion.[9] In order to emphasize the factuality of the event, Caravaggio did not idealize the Virgin's body, choosing instead to depict her limp limbs and sallow skin. The minimal appearance of her halo, along with her typical commoner's clothing, accentuate her utterly debased humanity. In his rejection of an overly mystical depiction of the Virgin's death, Caravaggio created an image of the Virgin that was misinterpreted as vulgar on account of her attire and the naturalistic representation of her body.

The emotional impact and religious significance of Caravaggio's painting eluded his contemporaries, who were perhaps preoccupied with his atypical composition and adherence to verisimilitude. Recent scholarship on the painting, however, has attended to the religious implications of Caravaggio's composition. Pamela Askew's book *Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin* illuminates the religiosity of the scene, suggesting that the painting has been consistently misinterpreted; she proffers an alternative interpretation of the altarpiece as both in accordance with Catholic doctrine and the popular Marian cult.[10] While Caravaggio's painting has been criticized for depicting the death of an unknown woman, modern scholars refute the belief that the painting is without spiritual content. They have interpreted the scene as one of sincere mourning, finding the *Death of the Virgin* to be Caravaggio's most emotionally powerful paintings.[11] Caravaggio humanized the Virgin and the apostles, and in so doing, created an image that elicited an intensely emotional response from his viewers.

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[9] According to the *Golden Legend*, all of the apostles were miraculously gathered to mourn the death of the Virgin. Helen Langdon, *Caravaggio: A Life* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 248.
[10] Pamela Askew's *Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin* is the most comprehensive monograph on the painting. She explains the religious implications of Caravaggio's depiction of the Virgin's body as well as the theological import of Caravaggio's painting.
[11] Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 202-204.

The belief that Caravaggio was a sacrilegious painter stems at least in part from the difficulty in recognizing the religious implications and traditional sources for his images. Of course, this characterization is compounded by the artist's frequent rejections. While the idiosyncrasies of his compositions are irrefutable, the belief that Caravaggio was uninterested in or unaware of the art of his predecessors is a fallacy.[12] In fact, many of his paintings have direct associations with ancient and Renaissance imagery, and were created with the intention of heightening the religious impact of the scene. It was Caravaggio's vital interest in the art of his predecessors that allowed him to use traditional sources in subtle ways; his knowledge of such sources enabled him to reinterpret these subjects to create a form that was appropriately subsumed into the whole composition. Yet because of his skillfully veiled use of antique and Renaissance models, Caravaggio's paintings were often interpreted as anti-traditional, illegible, and unprecedented, rather than the artfully complex elaborations on traditional imagery that they truly represented.

Like the *Death of the Virgin*, Caravaggio's initial attempt at the altarpiece depicting the *Inspiration of St. Matthew* was rejected upon its completion. Seventeenth-century historians again attributed the rejection of the *Inspiration of St. Matthew* to its sacrilegious and profane nature. This interpretation falls in line with the characterization of Caravaggio as a sacrilegious

[12] Caravaggio's style has long been associated with naturalism. His interest in the natural world, rather than the art of his predecessors, was not only recorded by his contemporaries but was also self-proclaimed. Bellori recounts a story of Caravaggio being shown sculptures by ancient masters to use as models. Rejecting them, Caravaggio responded with a "gesture toward a crowd of people, indicating that nature had provided him with masters enough." Bellori, *Lives*, 180. Recent scholarship on Caravaggio, however, has begun to suggest that the artist was aware of classical art and to identify the religious meanings in his paintings. See Joseph Chorpenning, "Another Look at Caravaggio and Religion," *Artibus et Historiae* 8, no. 16 (1987): 149-159; Avigdor Posèq, "Caravaggio and the Antique," *Artibus et Historiae* 11, no. 21 (1990): 147-167; Mina Gregori, "Caravaggio Today," in *The Rediscovery of Antiquity: The Role of the Artist*, edited by Jane Fejfer, Tobias Fischer-Hansen and Annette Rathje (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2003), 30-47; Stefania Macioce, "Caravaggio and the Role of Classical Models," in *The Rediscovery of Antiquity: The Role of the Artist*, edited by Jane Fejfer, Tobias Fischer-Hansen and Annette Rathje (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2003), 423-443.

painter who rejected ancient and Renaissance models. This paper, however, will strive to unmake this persistent assertion by illustrating that Caravaggio's *Inspiration of St. Matthew* was, in fact, based on specific and identifiable ancient sources.[13] Further, the use of such sources will demonstrate the artist's commitment to heightening the painting's religious significance, as opposed to debasing its spiritual meaning.

[13] Irving Lavin has pointed to classical sources for the *Inspiration of St. Matthew*. Lavin's article, however, focuses on the figure of the evangelist. This paper will attend to the classical references with regard to the angel. See Irving Lavin, "Divine Inspiration in Caravaggio's Two St. Matthews," *Art Bulletin* 56, no. 1 (1974): 59-81.

Figure 1.Caravaggio. The Death of the Virgin. Musée du Louvre, Paris. 1605-6.

Chapter Two

The History of the Contarelli Chapel

In the last year of the sixteenth century Caravaggio received his first public commission: to paint images of the life and martyrdom of Saint Matthew in the Contarelli chapel (Fig.2). At the age of twenty-eight, this was Caravaggio's first large-scale, religious commission and thus marked a significant moment in his career. The chapel had a tumultuous history already and Caravaggio's participation in the decoration would also prove to be problematic. Despite the complications he encountered during his work on the chapel, Caravaggio completed the requirements of the commission in 1602, establishing his reputation as a painter of emotionally powerful, yet unconventional, imagery.

The contract stipulated that Caravaggio paint scenes of Matthew's life to decorate the lateral walls of the chapel.[14] Although Caravaggio did not receive the commission until 1599, the decoration of the chapel had begun nearly forty years earlier, the process having been slowed by deaths, uncompleted contracts, and lawsuits.[15] Several artists had been involved in the chapel's

[14] Caravaggio's contract for the lateral walls is transcribed and discussed in Herwarth Röttgen, *Il Caravaggio: recherché e interpretazioni* (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 1974), 50-51.

[15] Jacob Hess and Denis Mahon both provide extensive chronologies of the Contarelli Chapel. They differ in regard to the date of Cesari d'Arpino's commission, Hess believing that the commission was made in 1585 and Mahon preferring the later date of 1591. Additionally, Hess does not mention Muziano's participation in the chapel design and Mahon mentions the artist only briefly in his Addenda. See Jacob Hess, "The Chronology of the Contarelli Chapel," *Burlington Magazine* 93, no. 579 (1951): 186-201; Denis Mahon, "Caravaggio's Chronology Again," *Burlington Magazine* 93, no. 582 (1951): 286-292 and Denis Mahon, "Addenda to Caravaggio," *Burlington Magazine* 94, no. 586 (1952): 3-23. In the appendix of his Addenda, Mahon has translated all contracts known by 1951. A transcribed version of the contract for Muziano, along with payments made in regard to frames, can be found in Walter Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 294-301. In 1965 Herwarth Röttgen published the contract with Cesari d'Arpino, assigning it to 1591, and thus resolved the conflict in dating. Herwarth Röttgen "Die stellung der Contarelli Kepelle in Caravaggios Werk," *Zeitschrift fur Kunstgreschichte* 28, (1965): 47-68. More recently both Röttgen and Cinotti have published comprehensive collections on the contracts

decoration and, while most of their contracts have been discovered, many of the important details regarding Caravaggio's role in the chapel decoration are still unknown. Acquiring an accurate timeline for Caravaggio's participation in the decorative scheme is nevertheless essential. Often viewed as the most important paintings in the artist's oeuvre, Caravaggio's paintings in the Contarelli chapel provide information about the development of his mature style, especially with regard to his conception of religious subject matter.

In 1565, Matteu Cointrel purchased a chapel in San Luigi dei Francesi, the French titular church in Rome. Cointrel, addressed in surviving documents by the Italianized version of his name, Contarelli, was a Frenchman living in Italy who, after fortuitously befriending Pope Gregory XIII, was appointed *datario* of San Luigi dei Francesi in 1565.[16] After dutifully serving as *datario* for nearly twenty years, Contarelli was made a cardinal in 1583, an honor he held for only two years before his death.[17] At Contarelli's death, Virgilio Crescenzi was made the executor of his will,[18] but rather than leave the decorative program up to Virgilio, Contarelli left a memorandum in his will detailing his wishes for the decoration of the chapel.[19]

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known today. See Röttgen, *Il Caravaggio: recherché e interpretazioni* and Mia Cinotti, *Michelangelo Merisi, ditto il Caravaggio, tutte le opera* (Bergamo: Poligrafiche Bolis, 1983), 233-248. Current literature on Caravaggio follows the chronology presented in Röttgen and Cinotti. See Langdon, *Caravaggio: A Life*; Puglisi, *Caravaggio*; Hibbard, *Caravaggio*; Irving Lavin, "Divine Inspiration in Caravaggio's Two St. Matthews," 59-81; Thomas Troy, "Expressive Aspects of Caravaggio's First Inspiration of Saint Matthew," *Art Bulletin* 64, no. 4 (1985): 636-652; Gilbert, *Caravaggio and His Two Cardinals,*159-189 ; and John T. Spike, *Caravaggio* (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2001).

[16] Hess relates that the two men met while Contarelli was traveling around Rome and prior to Gregory XIII pontificate. Hess, "The Chronology of the Contarelli Chapel," 189.

[17] Mahon provides a very definite date for Contarelli's death, Nov. 25, 1585. Mahon, "Addenda to Caravaggio,"13.

[18] It is interesting that Contarelli made Virgilio Crescenzi the executor of his will rather than his familial heirs but Hess suggests that this may have been done on account of the Crescenzi's reputation for having exceptional taste in artistic matters. Hess, "The Chronology of the Contarelli Chapel," 189.

[19] Antonio Bertolotti, *Artisti lombardi a Roma nei secoli XV, XVI, XVII; studi e ricerche negli archivi romani* (Bologna, Forni Editore, 1970), 119-120.

From its conception Contarelli intended the decorative scheme of the chapel to be extensive, the central theme being the life of St. Matthew, his patron saint. The saint's life was to be told through a series of six scenes lining the walls and vault of the chapel. On the lateral walls would be the *Calling of St. Matthew* and the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew*, each flanking one side of the altarpiece, the *Inspiration of St. Matthew*. The vault scenes were to depict the works of Matthew while in Ethiopia, with the primary scene being a miracle performed by the evangelist, who is said to have resurrected the daughter of Egippus, King of Ethiopia. Alongside the central image were to be scenes of secondary importance and, filling the four corners, images of the prophets.[20] Shortly after purchasing the chapel, Contarelli commissioned Girolamo Muziano to fresco the entire chapel, except the altarpiece which the artist was to do in oil. When Muziano died in 1592, however, he had yet to begin work on the chapel; thus, nearly thirty years after Contarelli purchased it, the chapel remained in its original, undecorated state.[21]

Giuseppe Cesari, a Roman artist, was commissioned to decorate the chapel in 1591.[22] In his youth Cesari was considered a child prodigy and was Pope Gregory XIII's favorite artist, [23] but at this point Cesari had not yet achieved the fame that would mark his later career. Due to Contarelli's close friendship with the Pope, it seems natural that he would have commissioned Cesari to complete the design established in the contract with Muziano. Karel Van Mander, a Flemish painter and contemporary of Caravaggio's and Cesari's, records that Cesari only

[20] The explanation of the vault's decorative program is based on Friedlaender's translation of Muziano's contract, which is dated to September 13, 1565. Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 295. It has been proposed that drawings Muziano made for the Contarelli chapel were later used by the artist in the Mattei Chapel in Santa Maria in Aracoeli. Johanna E. L Heideman, "Observations on Girolamo Muziano's Decoration of the Mattei Chapel in Santa Maria in Aracoeli in Rome," *Burlington Magazine* 119, no. 895 (1977): 686-694.
[21] Langdon, *Caravaggio: A Life*, 171.
[22] Cesari d'Arpino's contract and payment are transcribed in Röttgen, *Il Caravaggio: recherché e interpretazioni*, 17-18.
[23] Hess, "The Chronology of the Contarelli Chapel," 190.

managed to fresco the vault of the chapel before abandoning the project in 1593.[24] Van Mander's information has led art historians to conclude that Cesari's meteoric rise to fame shortly after gaining the commission for the chapel led him, overrun with papal and private commissions, to abandon the work at an early stage. Cesari's vault frescoes in the chapel remain in situ.

Although the detailed instructions stipulated by Contarelli in his contract with Muziano called for an altarpiece in oil depicting the *Inspiration of St. Matthew*, in 1587 a contract was signed with the sculptor Jacob Cobaert calling for a marble sculpture of the same subject to be placed on the altar. (Fig. 3) Cobaert, a Flemish artist, was given four years to complete the altarpiece.[25] Aside from the change in medium, the commission is also interesting because Cobaert was a relatively unknown and unskilled sculptor who was already advanced in age by 1587. Baglione unsympathetically records that Cobaert spent his entire life on the sculpture and was still working on it at the age of eighty, at which point he was too feeble to continue the strenuous act of carving.[26] Unfortunately, the sculptural group was not finished by Cobaert who, after fifteen arduous years of sculpting, only completed the figure of Matthew, which was placed inside the chapel in January 1602 but was rejected within a month.[27] The chapel's decorative scheme, therefore, was still unfinished in 1602.[28]

The numerous delays in the chapel's decoration led to legal problems which began as early as the year of Contarelli's death. In 1585 a lawsuit was brought against Virgilio Crescenzi

[24] Hess's "The Chronology of the Contarelli Chapel" cites Karel Van Mander, *Schilder-boeck (1604),* edited by Hessel Miedema. (Doornspijk: Davaco, 1994-1999), 114.
[25] Contractual details are published in Mahon, "Caravaggio's Chronology Again,"20. Cobaert signed a second contract for the sculpture in 1591, giving him five more years to work on it. For a translation of Cobaert's second contract see Röttgen, *Il Caravaggio: ricerche e interpretazioni*, 20-22.
[26] Cobaert is recorded in Baglione's *Lives* under the name Cope Fiammingo. Baglione says that the figure of Matthew was rejected by the clergymen of San Luigi dei Francesi who found it to be dull. See Baglione, *Le vite de' pittori,* 100.
[27] Troy, "Expressive Aspects of Caravaggio's First Inspiration of St. Matthew," 638.
[28] Baglione, *Le vite de' pittori,* 100.

which claimed that he was not properly carrying out the wishes of Contarelli's will and was intentionally slowing the chapel's progress in order to use Contarelli's money for personal gain. The lawsuit was still unsettled at the time of Virgilio's death in 1591 when his son, Giacomo, was made executor of the will and became embroiled in the lawsuit. Additional legal problems were brought about by the clergymen of San Luigi dei Francesi who, in 1594 and again in 1596, petitioned Pope Clement VIII to remove care of the chapel from the hands of the Crescenzi. In the 1596 petition, the clergymen claimed that the Crescenzi neglected to oversee work on the chapel[29] and that the chapel had been boarded up since Contarelli's death, which they felt resulted in "the soul of the deceased to be cheated of its masses and the church of San Luigi similarly cheated."[30] In 1597, Clement VIII responded by removing the authority of the chapel from the Crescenzi family and placing it in the hands of the *Fabbrica di San Pietro*, the governing body of the works of St. Peter's. It was likely under the *Fabbrica* that Caravaggio was given the commission to complete the chapel decoration.[31]

[29] A translated version of the 1596 petition from the clergymen to Pope Clement VIII can be found in Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 296. Mahon discusses the relevant content of both the 1594 and the 1596 petitions in the appendix of his article. Mahon, "Addenda to Caravaggio," 3-23.

[30] This quote comes from the petition written by the clergy to Pope Clement VIII which is translated in Friedlaender. The petition also states that the only work done in the chapel between 1585 and 1596 is the placement of an inscription by Virgilio Crescenzi, in 1590, which states 'Virgilio Crescenzi, heir by testament, has placed [this inscription] to Matteo Contarelli, Priest of the sacred Roman Church, titular cardinal of St. Stephen, founder of this chapel." Friedlaender transcribes and translates the pavement inscription. For the transcription and translation see Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 296-297.

[31] How Caravaggio became involved in the chapel's decoration still remains unclear. Baglione records that the *Fabbrica* commissioned Caravaggio at the recommendation of Cardinal del Monte, the head of the *Fabbrica*. He implies that it was Caravaggio's association with del Monte, not his artistic skill, that got him the contract. Baglione, *Le vite de' pittori*, 136. Caravaggio is known to have lived in del Monte's house around 1600. Hess, "The Chronology of the Contarelli Chapel," 193. Bellori suggests an alternate theory, stating that Caravaggio met and befriended Marino, a poet, while both men were hospitalized. Marino's patron was Melchiorre Crescenzi. Bellori proposes that it was through Melchiorre that Caravaggio met Virgilio Crescenzi, who then hired him to work on the chapel. Bellori, *Lives*, 181. Bellori also records that Caravaggio, during his first few years in Rome, worked as an apprentice for Cesari. It has been suggested that he may have started his apprenticeship while Cesari was working on the chapel in 1593, thus providing a possible link between the chapel and Caravaggio. Although the exact date of Caravaggio's arrival in Rome is debated, Mancini states that the artist moved there, "around the age of twenty." See Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 93 and 346; and Mina Gregori, "Caravaggio Today," 30-47.

Caravaggio's first contract for the decoration of the chapel was signed on 23 July, 1599.[32] It called for the artist to paint the *Calling of St. Matthew* and the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* for the two lateral walls of the chapel. Caravaggio was expected to adhere to the stipulations left by Contarelli in his memorandum.[33] The contact, made in July, stated that the paintings were to be completed within the year, giving Caravaggio six months to complete them both. Caravaggio began working on the scene with the most comprehensive set of instructions, the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* (Fig. 4).[34]

Contarelli wanted the *Martyrdom* to follow the tradition of history painting, a request that was perhaps unsettling to Caravaggio who, up to this point, had only worked within the realm of half-length figures and genre scenes.[35] Contarelli specifically requested:

> …the upper part, an isolated altar raised up above three, four , or five steps, at which Saint Matthew, dressed in liturgical vestments, is celebrating the Mass… and it would be more artful to depict him being killed, having received some wounds, and let him be already fallen or in the act of falling but not yet dead. And in that temple should be a large number of all sorts of men and women, old, young, and babies, mostly praying, and dressed befitting their station and nobility...[36]

[32] Röttgen, "Die Stellung der Contarelli Kapelle in Caravaggios Werk," 47-48.
[33] Gilbert, *Caravaggio and His Two Cardinals*, 164. Gilbert cites Röttgen, *Il Caravaggio: ricerche e interpretazioni*, 50. On account of the contract's stipulation that Caravaggio adhere to the Contarelli's memorandum, one can assume that Contarelli's instructions were known to Caravaggio and the memorandum was likely attached to his contract.
[34] Langdon, *Caravaggio: A Life*, 179. Caravaggio's commission called for the paintings to be finished for the Jubilee of 1600.
[35] The contract does not state that the painting should follow the traditions of history painting, but Langdon interprets the description of the painting to suggest as much. She thinks that the subject matter, the desire for a large architectural backdrop, and a variety of human poses suggests that Contarelli wanted a history painting. Langdon, *Caravaggio: A Life*, 170-172.
[36] Gilbert, *Caravaggio and His Two Cardinals*, 163.

X-ray images of the canvas suggest that the young Caravaggio was somewhat unsure of how to approach the work compositionally[37] and painted two earlier versions of the scene before settling on the final version.[38] Given his inexperience with large-scale, religious imagery it is not surprising that in the first version of the *Martyrdom* (Fig. 5) Caravaggio adhered closely to Contarelli's wishes, using the contract's specifications as the foundation of his composition.

Caravaggio's first version of the image fit into the tradition of history painting in that it showed relatively small figures amidst a large architectural background, unusual in Caravaggio's oeuvre before this point. X-rays indicate that Caravaggio modified the composition a second time, and seems to have attended to the stipulations of Contarelli's will again (Fig. 6), adding several figures to the image that react to the murder in various ways. It was not until the third version of the scene that Caravaggio broke from the traditions of history painting and the stipulations of his contract, drawing inspiration from his earlier works. For example, the young boy at the right of the painting who, reacting to the murder, screams and flees the scene has an expression similar to the screaming face of the *Medusa* (Fig. 7). Also recognizable is the boy on the left of the painting who wears contemporary clothing and a plumed hat, resembling a figure in *The Cardsharps* (Fig. 8).[39] Caravaggio created a scene of maximum human emotion. Some figures in the scene flee in terror while others turn to watch the drama unfold. The chaos created by the witnesses' varying reactions heightens the emotional impact of the murder. Rather than

[37] Denis Mahon examined the X-rays of the canvas in 1953. It was the discovery of the earlier versions of the painting under the extant image that led scholars to theorize that Caravaggio began work in the chapel with this painting, rather than the altarpiece, which was traditionally thought to have been the first painting made by Caravaggio. Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 95.

[38] Due to the discrepancy in figure sizes and architectonic nature of the background, scholars have suggested that Caravaggio attempted either two previous paintings below the extant image or only one, which he then altered. See Puglisi, *Caravaggio*, 369-373; Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 110-114; Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 102-117 and Langdon, *Caravaggio: A life*, 174.

[39] Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 106.

showing the saint at the altar with his back to the viewer,[40] Caravaggio placed Matthew in the center of painting, sprawled on the floor, face-to-face with his murderer, and struggling for his life. The result was an image that typifies Caravaggio's mature style: large figures dominate the canvas, filling the space with their exaggerated gestures and yet inhabiting an undefined location. Caravaggio abandoned a conventional representation of the event in favor of a composition that would enhance the emotional impact of the scene. [41]

After completing the *Martyrdom*, Caravaggio began the *Calling of St. Matthew* (Fig. 9) with more confidence in his ability.[42] Disregarding most of Contarelli's wishes, Caravaggio created a scene that is set in an unspecified location, either within a tax collectors shop, as described in the biblical text, or the streets of Rome. The scene allowed Caravaggio to use figures and techniques with which he was familiar. Caravaggio's composition called for half-length figures, cut at the mid-section by the tax collector's table, which afforded him the opportunity to incorporate figures from his earlier genre paintings, like the *Cardsharps* (Fig. 8) and *Fortune Teller* (Fig. 10).[43] Although traditional depictions of the *Calling of St. Matthew* typically highlight Matthew's unwavering acceptance of Christ's invitation,[44] Caravaggio has

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[40] According to the *Golden Legend*, Matthew was praying at the altar when he was stabbed in the back. Popular Roman images of the scene, however, had begun to alter this part of the scene, depicting Matthew and the swordsmen in varying positions. Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 102-104.

[41] Heideman discusses the similarities between Caravaggio's paintings in the Contarelli chapel and Muziano's depictions of the same subject matter in the Mattei chapel in Santa Maria in Aracoeli, suggesting that Caravaggio studied the Mattei chapel in order to prepare for the Contarelli chapel. Speaking specifically about the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew*, Heideman points out that, although Caravaggio's painting is more concerned with the emotional content of the scene, there are some formal similarities between the two paintings which suggests Caravaggio's study of the Muziano's work. Heideman, "Observations on Girolamo Muziano's Decoration of the Mattei Chapel," 686-694. Hibbard states that Caravaggio's decision to make Matthew and his murderer face one another was based on his knowledge of Muziano's *Martyrdom of St. Matthew*.

[42] Langdon describes Caravaggio as approaching the *Calling* with "a sense of relief and renewed certainty." Langdon, *Caravaggio: A Life*, 174.

[43] Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 96.

[44] Matthew 9:9 says "Jesus saw a man called Matthew at his seat in the custom house, and said to him, "Follow me," and Matthew rose and followed him." Contarelli's memorandum says that Matthew should be shown "rising with

chosen to illustrate Matthew's hesitance to react to Christ. Matthew's gesture of awe and confusion emphasizes his humanity as well as the moment of his religious transformation, which is further accentuated by Caravaggio's dramatic use of tenebrism. It was with this newfound compositional maturity that Caravaggio approached the altarpiece, *The Inspiration of St. Matthew*.

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the wish to come to our Lord." A translated version of Contarelli's memorandum can be found in Gilbert, *Caravaggio and His Two Cardinals*, 163, who cites Röttgen, *Il Caravaggio: recherché e interpretazioni*, 20-22.

Figure 2. Contarelli Chapel. S. Luigi dei Francesi, Rome.

Figure 3. Jacob Cobaert. Inspiration of St. Matthew. Santa Trinita de' Pelligrini, Rome. Figure of the Angel by Pompeo Ferrucci. 1602.

Figure 4. Caravaggio. Martyrdom of Saint Matthew. Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome. 1599.

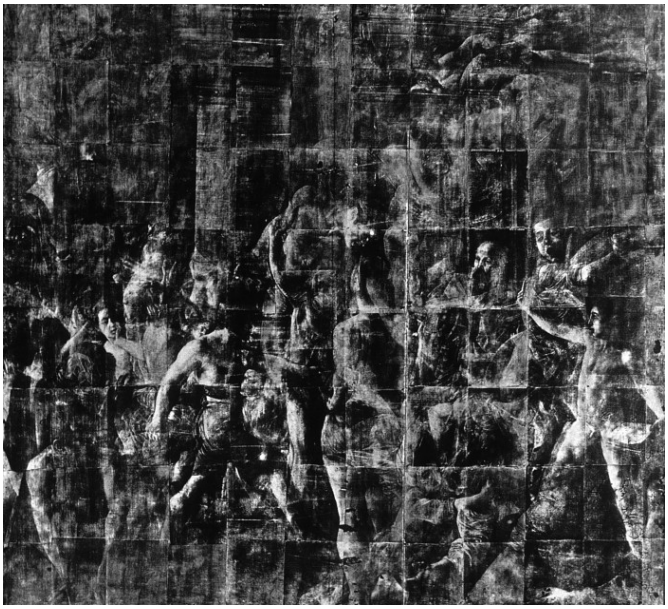

Figure 5. Caravaggio. First Version of Caravaggio's Martyrdom. X-Ray. Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome. 1599.

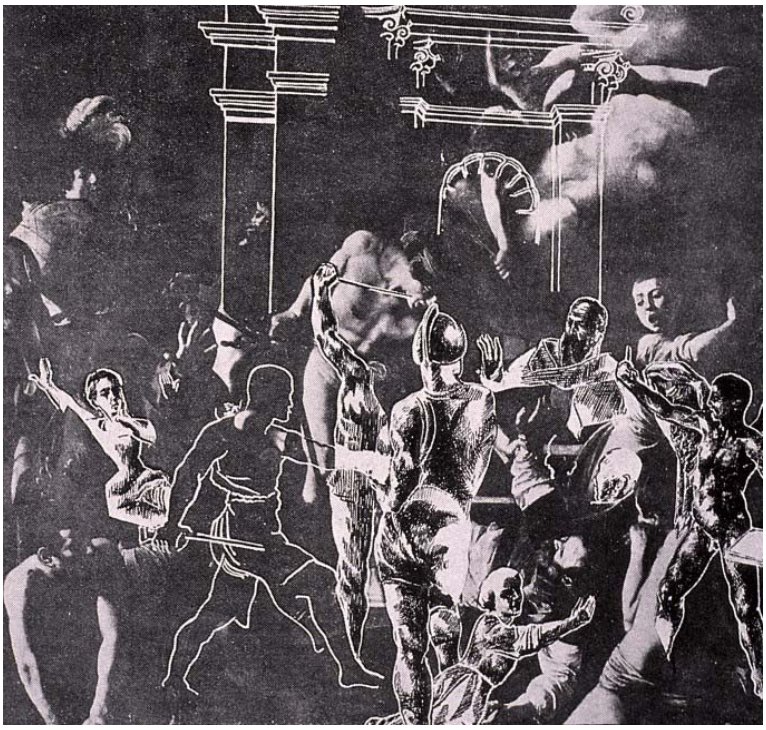

Figure 6. Caravaggio. Second Version of Caravaggio's Martyrdom. Diagram. Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome. 1599.

Figure 7. Caravaggio. Medusa. Uffizi, Florence. 1598.

Figure 8. Caravaggio. The Cardsharps. Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth. 1595.

Figure 9. Caravaggio. The Calling of St. Matthew. San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome. 1599.

Figure 10. Caravaggio. The Fortune Teller. Musée du Louvre, Paris. 1595.

Chapter Three

Caravaggio's Two Altarpieces

One week after the rejection of Cobaert's sculpture in January 1602, the commission for the Contarelli Chapel's altarpiece was given to Caravaggio, who had just completed two paintings for the Cerasi chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo. Caravaggio's contract for the altarpiece was signed on February 7, 1602 and by September of that year Caravaggio was given his final payment for the work.[45] By September, however, Caravaggio had actually completed two versions of the altarpiece; the first depiction of the *Inspiration of St. Matthew* (Fig. 11) having been rejected by the clergymen of San Luigi dei Francesi. It is with the altarpiece, therefore, that Caravaggio's commission, like the chapel itself, met with difficulties.

While a seventeenth-century document detailing the rejection of Caravaggio's first altarpiece is not extant, contemporary accounts shed some light on the problematic features of the painting which may have led to its rejection. Baglione, Caravaggio's artistic foe,[46] was quick to record that Caravaggio's altarpiece was rejected because it had simply "pleased no one."[47] Bellori's account is slightly more informative: "After he had finished the central picture of St. Matthew and installed it on the altar the priests took it down, saying that the figure with its legs crossed and its feet rudely exposed to the public had neither the decorum nor the appearance of a

[45] Röttgen, *Il Caravaggio: ricerche e interpretazioni*, 61. Röttgen transcribes the contract made with Caravaggio in February 1602.
[46] Baglione and Caravaggio were both eager to receive the commission for a painting of the *Resurrection of Christ* that was to be placed in Il Gesù. The commission was given to Baglione and when it was unveiled on Easter Sunday 1603, malicious verses about Baglione and his artistic ability began to circle Rome. Baglione believed the perpetrator was Caravaggio, who was angry with Baglione for attempting to imitate his style of painting. Baglione sued Caravaggio for libel and the latter was imprisoned in September 1603. Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 160-161; Bellori, *Lives*, 183.
[47] Baglione, *Le vite de' pittori*, 137.

saint."[48] Scholars have interpreted Bellori's statement to imply that the depiction of the evangelist was considered crude and that Caravaggio's contemporaries found the painting to be more than just a problem of aesthetics, it was viewed as a breach of doctrine.[49] Although unmentioned in seventeenth-century documents, the angel in *The Inspiration of St. Matthew* has become a figure of interest to twentieth-century historians who propose that the angel played a large role in the rejection of the painting. Like Matthew, the angel's appearance has been criticized as a transgression of both aesthetic and doctrinal standards.

While the focus of this paper is on the figure of the angel, a discussion of Matthew is pertinent and necessary because the angel is inextricably tied to the evangelist. A brief outline of the recent arguments in regard to the evangelist, therefore, sets the stage for the discussion of the angel. Caravaggio's portrayal of the evangelist was unquestionably atypical in Rome as it did not adhere to the Counter-Reformation's strict standards for idealization in religious imagery.[50] Caravaggio's representation of Matthew did not visually emphasize the evangelist's pious nature. Not merely unidealized, Caravaggio's depiction of Matthew has been interpreted as a degradation of the evangelist. He portrayed Matthew as a portly plebeian whose bare head was prominently displayed thanks to Caravaggio's characteristic use of tenebrism. Light reflects off the round surface of the evangelist's scalp, drawing the viewer's eyes to his wrinkled brow,

[48] Bellori, *Lives*, 183.
[49] Puglisi, *Caravaggio*, 179. Friedlaender points out, however, that democratizing images of evangelists were part of a Lombard tradition with which Caravaggio was likely familiar. Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 97-98.
[50] The Council of Trent decreed: " that our redemption portrayed in paintings and other representations of people are instructed and confirmed in articles of faith, which ought to be born in mind and constantly reflected upon…because through the saints the miracles of God and salutary examples are set before the eyes of the faithful, so that they may give God thanks for those things and may fashion their life and conduct in imitation of the saints and be moved to adore and love God and cultivate piety. But if any abuses shall have found their way into these holy and salutary observances, the holy council desires earnestly that they be completely removed…nothing may appear that is disorderly or unbecoming and confusedly arranged, nothing that is profane, nothing disrespectful, since holiness becometh the house of God…that nothing new or anything that has not hitherto been in use in the Church shall be decided upon." Rev. H. J. Schroeder, *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1978), 215-217.

which suggests that Matthew is baffled at the sight of his gospel. Although the first altarpiece is no longer extant,[51] Bellori's description of the evangelist's feet as dirty has led scholars to believe that evangelist was portrayed with the florid skin common to Caravaggio's work, and that this naturalistic depiction of his skin led, in some degree, to the rejection of the painting. Thomas Troy argues that the evangelist's skin gave him an overtly humble appearance, and states that Caravaggio had gone to greater lengths than any other artists in emphasizing the realism of the evangelist, pushing the limits of decorum.[52]

Further negating any visual indication of Matthew's ecclesiastical import is his short, simple cloak and, more importantly, the absence of a halo. The position of Matthew's body has also been criticized in contemporary scholarship as encouraging a debased interpretation of the figure: Irving Lavin argues that Caravaggio's contemporaries would have inferred that the figure of Matthew was illiterate.[53] Matthew is shown laboriously leaning over his book with a look of both trepidation and wonderment. Scholars have regarded this gaze as a visual contradiction to the evangelist's supposed erudition,[54] interpreting Matthew's arched back and rigid position as physical reactions to his apprehension about the task of writing his gospel. Lavin suggests that Matthew seems altogether unfamiliar with writing, clumsily holding the pen and allowing his bulky fingers to drag along the page. Lavin is emphatic in his belief that seventeenth-century Romans would have equated Matthew with an illiterate plebeian: he describes Matthew as "a

[51] The first altarpiece was destroyed in World War II.
[52] Troy, "Expressive Aspects of Caravaggio's First Inspiration of Saint Matthew," 645.
[53] Lavin, "Divine Inspiration in Caravaggio's Two St. Matthews," 59-81. Most of the major monographs on Caravaggio agree with Lavin's interpretation of the evangelist except Gilbert, who disagrees with the theory that the first altarpiece was rejected due to the style or composition and cites different reasons for the removal of the painting from the altar. Gilbert, *Caravaggio and his Two Cardinals*, 159-189.
[54] Troy states that Matthew had a reputation as being a well-educated man. While Troy believes that Matthew appears unlearned in Caravaggio's first altarpiece, he suggests that the evangelist's appearance should be understood as emphasizing his dependence on divine intervention to write the gospel. Troy, "Expressive Aspects of Caravaggio's First Inspiration of Saint Matthew," 640.

homely individual…gross and vulgar."[55] He further condemns the evangelist's facial expression as crass and problematic, believing that Matthew's shocked expression negates the idea that he authored the gospel himself. Friedlaender's theory that seventeenth-century Romans would have found Matthew's appearance disrespectful and impious coincides with Lavin's. While acknowledging the illiterate and undignified interpretation of Matthew that is available in Caravaggio's first altarpiece, Friedlaender points out that this lowly portrayal of the evangelist was part of a Lombard tradition which emphasized the simplicity of the early Christian writers. He discusses the similarities between Caravaggio's depiction and Romanino's *St. Matthew* (Fig. 12), from 1521, which shows the evangelist as a barefoot, heavily bearded man writing his gospel by candle light. Romanino's Matthew is also defined by a burly, masculine frame and located within an ambiguous space. While the similarities are striking, Romanino's Matthew is the autonomous author of the text; holding both the pen and the book, he composes his gospel in the presence of his evangelical symbol. Caravaggio, by making this process less autonomous, has, therefore, emphasized the lowly and uneducated nature of Matthew to a greater extent than his Lombard predecessors. Friedlaender suggests that Romans, with their central Italian conservatism, would have had difficulty gleaning any religious significance from Matthew's humble portrayal and would not have been able to reconcile the illiterate plebeian with the author of the Christian text.[56] It is here that Caravaggio's image of the evangelist became problematic;

[55] Lavin, "Divine Inspiration in Caravaggio's Two St. Matthews," 61-79.
[56] Friedlaender, *Caravaggio*, 96-100. Friedlaender also points out the similarities between Caravaggio's first altarpiece and Raphael's *Jupiter Kissing Cupid* in the Villa Farnesina. He suggests that Caravaggio's knowledge of Raphael's fresco may have influenced his composition, accounting for the proximity between the figures and the suggestion of an intimate relationship.

to imply that Matthew did not, or was unable to, write the text himself was to defy Catholic doctrine.[57]

Seemingly at odds with the insistence on the negative interpretation of the evangelist, Irving Lavin also proposes that Caravaggio was modeling the figure on antique depictions of Socrates. Lavin correlates the depiction of Matthew as a rustic, bald man sitting cross-legged to the standard iconographic portrayal of Socrates. In replicating the figure and his pose, Caravaggio was aligning the humble gospel writer with the wisest man in antiquity and the precursor to the Christian faith (Fig. 13). Lavin goes on to say that, despite Bellori's criticism of the evangelist's appearance, Caravaggio's humble depiction of Matthew is not drastically different than those found on illuminated manuscripts. Such texts, he suggests, may have been inspired by early Christian sources, like Muse sarcophagi upon which the deceased was shown seated in a similar fashion and with comparable features (Fig. 14).[58] In discovering a formal comparison between the figure of the evangelist and antique models, Lavin has resolved the problems with regard to the evangelist, proving that Caravaggio's lowly depiction of Matthew was neither atypical nor sacrilegious. The same, however, cannot be said for the angel, whose appearance has not been justified and who is still deemed untraditional and erotic by recent Caravaggio scholars.

[57] John 14: 26 reads: "The Holy Spirit will bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." Concerning New Testament scripture, members of the Council of Trent decreed: "We are agreed on this, that the doctrine of the New Testament…is what Christ in the time of His flesh during His ministry proclaimed with His own mouth, and what the apostles, once they had been led by the Holy Spirit into all truth, preached to every creature in the world. This also is certain, that this doctrine which during the first few years was preached and proclaimed both by Christ and later by the apostles unwritten and orally was afterward written down by the apostles." Martin Cemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent: Part One* (Saint Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 77.
[58] Lavin, "Divine Inspiration in Caravaggio's Two St. Matthews," 61-79.

Twentieth-century historians assert that the angel in Caravaggio's first version of the *Inspiration of St. Matthew* was largely responsible for the painting's rejection. While they have been unable to adequately explain Caravaggio's atypical portrayal of the angel, scholars have agreed that its representation is theologically problematic. Scholars see two main problems with the angel: the first being its dominant role in the creation of the gospel and the second, its feminized and eroticized appearance.[59]

According to the Gospel of John, divine inspiration appeared to the gospel writers as God's intercessor on earth to aid them in matters of memory.[60] Caravaggio, however, has been accused by modern scholars of depicting the angel as the author and originator of the text and, therefore, entering into conflict with Catholic doctrine which states that the evangelists wrote their gospels themselves.[61] The crux of the problem revolves around the proximity of the two figures, which affords the angel the opportunity to aid Matthew physically by anchoring the evangelist's hand with its own and guiding the construction of each letter. This active participation on the part of the angel creates the appearance that Matthew is not writing the gospel autonomously.[62]

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[59] Some scholars are hesitant to discuss the angel's eroticism or feminization forthrightly but allude to it throughout their text. All of the following discuss the angel's sexual and gendered appearance as either a problem in the first version of the altarpiece or as notably and intentionally absent from the extant altarpiece. Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies* , 976-100 and 115; Langdon, *Caravaggio: A Life*, 240; Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 138-146; and Puglisi, *Caravaggio*, 179-180.

[60] See note 57.

[61] Concerning New Testament scripture, the Council of Trent decreed: "We are agreed on this, that the doctrine of the New Testament…is what was preached and proclaimed both by Christ… and was afterward written down by the apostles." Cemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent: Part One*, 77.

[62] While Hibbard believes that the angel's proximity to the evangelist and physical role in the creation of the gospel illustrate a direct verbal inspiration that would have been appreciated, he concedes that there is a difference between showing Matthew as transcribing the word of God and showing him as physically unable to write the gospel. Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 142-144.

Despite the fact that Hebrews 1:14 states that angels are spiritual rather than corporeal beings,[63] scholars believe that Caravaggio has portrayed a notably humanized, and more importantly, feminine, angel in the first altarpiece. Caravaggio has certainly humanized the angel by placing it next to the evangelist, denying its hierarchical superiority.[64] Other factors, like the transparent drapery of the angel's gown, which clings to its fleshy thighs and abdomen, have been viewed as indicating a womanly form. Friedlaender, for example, has no qualms about the sex of the angel and consistently refers to it as a girl in his monograph on Caravaggio.[65] In fact, of all Caravaggio scholars only Thomas Troy finds the angel's gender to be ambiguous. The angel lacks the muscular definition that Caravaggio gives to some of his young, androgynous figures and exhibits instead a fleshy, plump body, which feminizes the figure. With the left hand delicately placed beneath the chin, the angel tilts its head toward the evangelist and lightly brushes his shoulder and forearm as it reaches across Matthew's body, a "girlish" pose that scholars interpret as having a flirtatious air. Langdon believes that the half-lidded eyes and parted lips of the angel are suggestive of a lascivious moment, as if the angel is whispering "sweet nothings" into the evangelist's ear rather than recounting the monumental event of the salvation of mankind.[66] The interpretation of the angel in the first altarpiece as erotic has led to the theory that the angel's appearance, to the same extent as the evangelist's, resulted in the rejection of the altarpiece.

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[63] Hebrews 1:14 refers to angels as spirits, which suggests that they do not have corporeal bodies. In Luke 24:39 Jesus states that spirits have neither flesh nor bones.
[64] Hebrews 2:5-7 discusses the superiority of the angels over humans.
[65] In his article, Thomas Troy describes the angel in the first altarpiece as androgynous, not feminine. He does not, however, deny that the angel has been eroticized. Troy, "Expressive Aspects of Caravaggio's First Inspiration of Saint Matthew," 636. While Friedlaender is the only author who explicitly refers to the angel as a girl, many art historians also mention the feminine and erotic nature of the angel. See Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 976-100 and 115; Langdon, *Caravaggio: A Life*, 240; Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 138-146; and Puglisi, *Caravaggio*, 179-180.
[66] Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 97-101.
[66] Langdon, *Caravaggio: A Life*, 239.

Bellori records that Caravaggio was "in despair over the rejection" of his first altarpiece and that Vincenzo Giustiniani, "in order to support [Caravaggio] and deliver him from his distress,"[67] bought the rejected painting for his private collection, affording Caravaggio the opportunity to paint a second *Inspiration of St. Matthew* (Fig. 15) for the altar, which was accepted by the church officials and remains in situ. The approval of the second altarpiece has led scholars to believe that the painting was decorous in the eyes of Caravaggio's contemporaries and the clergymen of San Luigi dei Francesi. They have, therefore, analyzed the elements which they believe to be of religious import. Hibbard, for example, states that the extant altarpiece follows the "age-old formula whereby Matthew writes and the angel dictates."[68] Where the original altarpiece showed a burly, lowbrow evangelist, in the second altarpiece Matthew is now depicted as a thin, agile man whose old age speaks to his wisdom. The evangelist's slender frame can be understood as a product of his ascetic lifestyle; thus, his depiction has been changed in order to emphasize his piety.[69] Puglisi believes that Matthew's posture no longer indicates his incapacity but instead interprets his position as one of poise, demonstrating that Matthew is ready, and able, to write his gospel. Turning over his left shoulder to glance at the angel, Matthew's gesture speaks to the immediacy that accompanies a fleeting idea. Puglisi interprets the evangelist's haste, further emphasized by the stool which is knocked off balance and teeters at the edge of the picture plane, as indicative of his fervor and enlightenment.[70]

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[67] Bellori, *Lives*, 181.
[68] Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 146.
[69] Opher Mansour, "Prince and Pontiff: Secular and Spiritual Authority in Papal State Portraiture between Raphael's Julius II and the Portraits of Pius V and Clement VIII," in *Art and Identity in Early Modern Rome*, edited by Jill Burke and Michael Bury, 209-228. (Burlington, VT : Ashgate, 2008). Clement of Alexander records that Matthew practiced strict food asceticism, never ate meat and would go for weeks without eating. Derek Krueger, *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 41.
[70] Puglisi, *Caravaggio*, 179.

Scholars, however, have been unable to agree on an interpretation of the second painting. Creighton Gilbert, for example, disagrees with those who find the second altarpiece more suitable or religiously accurate than the first. He postulates that the position of the evangelist could be understood as haphazard, that the evangelist is not approaching the task with the amount of care and precision it deserves. Furthermore, Gilbert describes Matthew's position as "flamboyantly centrifugal," which he believes makes Matthew more dependent on the angel than the first Matthew, who physically turned inward for inspiration rather than relying on a secondary figure.[71] Hibbard, contradicting his proposition that the second altarpiece is without the problems that plagued the first painting, describes Matthew's position as "odd and transitory,"[72] pointing out that the evangelist's pose counteracts his ability to write. Despite its acceptance and the general belief by modern scholars that it is without theological problems, there are discrepancies about the decorous nature of the second altarpiece. These issues revolve around the evangelist's authorship of the text which is inextricably tied to the role of the angel. Outlining modern interpretations of the angel in the second altarpiece suggests that Caravaggio's second version is no more decorous than the first.

The angel in the second altarpiece is, however, drastically different from the angel in the first altarpiece. This change has led scholars to assume that the apparitional figure as more in accordance with traditional religious images. Arguments have, therefore, been made for the decorousness of the angel, despite some of the obvious problematic features of the figure. Floating above the evangelist, the angel has hierarchical precedence over Matthew, a position which allows it to conform to the appropriate celestial rank of an angel. On account of its

[71] Gilbert, *Caravaggio and His Two Cardinals*, 185-187.
[72] Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 146.

apparitional nature, the angel has been interpreted as an inspirational figure that aids Matthew's memory rather than engages in the physical act of writing.[73] In opposition to this idea, however, is the interaction that takes place between the two figures. Lavin describes the angel as dictating the lineage of Christ with a clear gesture of enumeration and proposes that Matthew looks up, eagerly anticipating the angel's next words. The angel lists Christ's earthly ancestors with a tick of its figures.[74] Troy describes Matthew as "receiving instructions" and Hibbard, despite his belief that the second altarpiece is traditional and appropriate, also describes the angel as dictating. [75] Suggesting that the angel delivers the words of the gospel to Matthew allows its role in the composition to exceed Matthew's. The angel in the second altarpiece, like its counterpart in the first painting, is perceived as originator of the text, denying the evangelist full autonomy over the gospel. Despite claims to the contrary, the second altarpiece again shows the angel as the dominant figure in the creation of the gospel.[76]

Contradictions exist in the interpretation of the iconography and nature of the angel in both versions of the altarpiece. Despite these problems, Caravaggio's second version of the altarpiece was accepted by the clergymen of San Luigi dei Francesi, suggesting that they understood it to be an acceptable depiction of the *Inspiration of St. Matthew.* In light of its rejection, scholars have focused their interested on the atypical composition of the first

[73] See Langdon, *Caravaggio: A Life,* 171-180 and 236-240; Puglisi, *Caravaggio*, 179-185; Hibbard, *Caravaggio,* 138-147; Lavin, "Divine Inspiration in Caravaggio's Two St. Matthews," 75-79; Troy "Expressive Aspects of Caravaggio's First Inspiration of Saint Matthew," 640.
[74] Lavin points out that the angel begins counting with his thumb, as Italians do today. The angel's hand indicates that it has gotten to the second point. Lavin, "Divine Inspiration in Caravaggio's Two St. Matthews," 81.
[75]Troy, "Expressive Aspects of Caravaggio's First Inspiration of Saint Matthew," 648; Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 146.
[76] That Caravaggio intended the angel to be dictating to the evangelist is understood through the angel's gesture, which suggests it is ticking off points of interest while it speaks to the gospel writer. Interestingly, this gesture can be found in a painting by a follower of Caravaggio entitled *The Geographer*, in the Norton Simon Museum, in which the figure is portrayed dictating. The geographer appears to be giving a lecture, his hand gesture imitating exactly the gesture of the angel in the second altarpiece.

altarpiece. Their arguments for its justification, however, have been dependent on the figure of the evangelist. Scholars have been unable to adequately explain Caravaggio's depiction of the angel.[77] I would like to propose that Caravaggio's angel for the first *Inspiration of St. Matthew* was based on a very specific ancient model. Further, I hope to illustrate that in his reference to this antique source, Caravaggio was heightening the religious import of the scene by creating an image that was biblically accurate. In order to understand it as such, it is necessary to return to the first *Inspiration of St. Matthew* and reexamine its relationships to classical imagery and the religious connotations available in the scene. Identifying Caravaggio's antique model for the figure of the angel will undo its characterization as overtly and unnecessarily sexual and bring to light the poignancy of Caravaggio's first *Inspiration of St. Matthew*.

[77] Friedlaender points out that Lombard artists, like Romanino, Figino, and Peterzano, depicted the inspiration of St. Matthew in a similar fashion to Caravaggio's. He states that Northern Italy traditionally emphasized the simplicity of the early Christian writers but goes on to say that Roman viewers, with their central Italian conservatism, would likely have found these types of images inappropriate. Friedlaender, *Caravaggio*, 96-100

Figure 11. Caravaggio. Inspiration of St. Matthew. Destroyed. 1602.

Figure 12. Romanino. St. Matthew. Brescia, San Giovanni Evangelista. 1521.

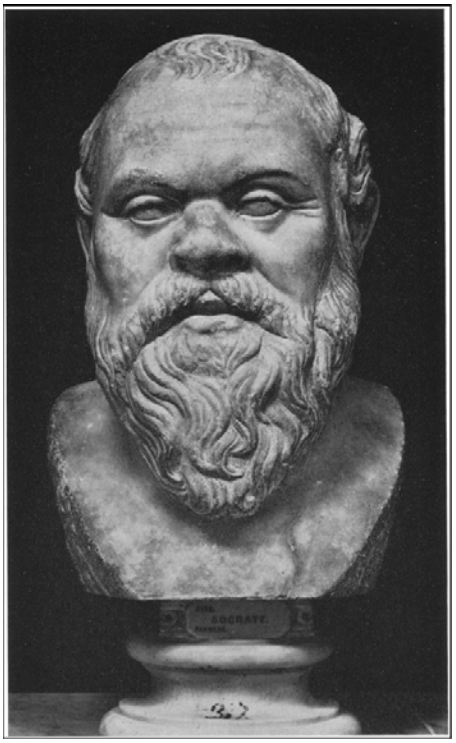
Figure 13. Bust of Socrates. Museo Nazionale, Naples.


Figure 14. Relief from marble sarcophagus of Publius Peregrinus. Museo Torlonia, Rome. 280 AD.

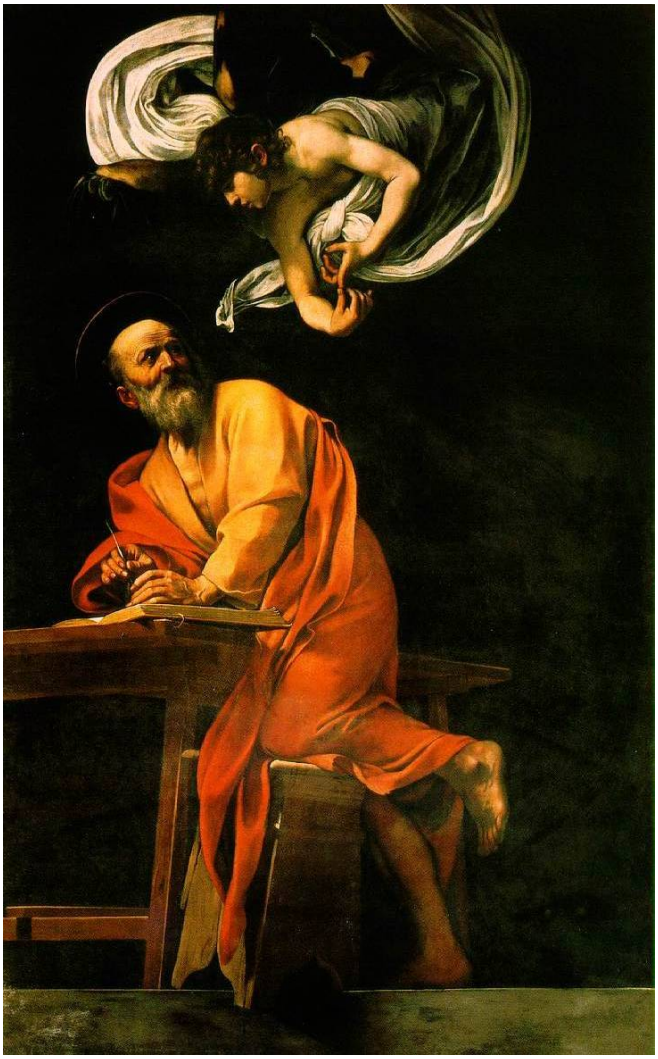

Figure 15. Caravaggio. Inspiration of St. Matthew. Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome. 1602.

Chapter Four

Ancient and Renaissance Sources

Bellori records Caravaggio's disregard for his antique and Renaissance predecessors, and his negative characterization of Caravaggio stained the artist's reputation. Subsequently, the idiosyncrasies of Caravaggio's compositions were interpreted as immoral, the result of Caravaggio's brazen, impious and defiant character. It was not until the middle of the twentieth century that Caravaggio scholars began to discover evidence of his interest in antiquity and regard for the objectives of the Counter-Reformation. In his article *Caravaggio and the Antique*, Avigdor Posèq proposes that Caravaggio turned to antique and Renaissance sources for the compositions of many of his paintings and illustrates how the sacrilegious or sexual overtones found in Caravaggio's work are often the result of the sources he studied, not the artist's perverse character.[78] Caravaggio's atypical compositions, therefore, have begun to be reinterpreted as the product of his desire to create emotionally powerful paintings that were based on the narrative's traditional representations and its ancient models.

Caravaggio's angels, however, have yet to be studied for their connection to ancient and Renaissance models and are still criticized as appearing worldly and erotic. A generalized condemnation of Caravaggio's angels may be due to the fact that each angel is different. As the two Contarelli altarpieces illustrate, Caravaggio did not establish a standard iconographic portrayal for his angels but instead conceived of every angel in an idiosyncratic manner, giving each a form that was the most appropriate for the narrative in which it appeared. Caravaggio's two altarpieces for the Contarelli Chapel in San Luigi dei Francesi have incited the most

[78] Posèq, "Caravaggio and the Antique," 147-167.

scholarly interest with regard to his angelic depictions, likely because of the vast changes Caravaggio made to the figure of the angel between the first and second versions. These changes that are even more perplexing when one takes into account the short span of time that lapsed between the two paintings.[79] In a matter of a few months Caravaggio transformed his basic conception of the angel in the *Inspiration of St. Matthew* which has naturally led to the belief that the angel in the first altarpiece was problematic. Furthering this idea is the fact that the figure has not been fully explained and has continued to be viewed as profane and sacrilegious in current literature on the altarpiece.

This paper proposes that an antique parallel to Caravaggio's angel in the first *Inspiration of St. Matthew* does exist. As previously mentioned Irving Lavin outlines the evolution of depictions of the evangelists and suggests that the proletariat appearance of Matthew may have been based on early Christian sarcophagi which showed scholars seated in a similar fashion (Fig. 14). Lavin justifies Caravaggio's lowly portrayal of Matthew by connecting it to images of Socrates or scholars on Muse sarcophagi. [80] While he points out that these scholars are often paired with a Muse, Lavin does not expound on the compositional similarities between the Muses and Caravaggio's angel. This paper, as an outgrowth of Lavin's article, attempts to solve the problem of Caravaggio's angel in the first altarpiece by proposing a formal comparison between the angel and the Muses, as well as to suggest that Caravaggio's emulation of the Muses was religiously motivated.

The feminine and corporeal qualities of the angel in the first altarpiece could certainly be interpreted as indicative of Caravaggio's heretical intentions, if it was not apparent that

[79] Röttgen, *Il Caravaggio: ricerche e interpretazioni* , 61.
[80] Lavin, "Divine Inspiration in Caravaggio's Two St. Matthews," 59-81.

Caravaggio based this figure on a common classical type. For the painting, Caravaggio turned to a composition that had its roots in classical art, modeling his image on ancient Muse sarcophagi that were prevalent in Rome (Fig. 16). The compositional similarities between Caravaggio's first altarpiece for the Contarelli chapel and Muse sarcophagi are irrefutable and suggest that Caravaggio intentionally chose to base his painting on these common antique models, finding in the appropriation of a classical Muse sarcophagus the opportunity to adequately represent the role of divine inspiration in the construction of the written word (Fig. 17).[81]

The narrative found on Muse sarcophagi carried specific connotations about the scholar and the Muse, which Caravaggio expected his viewers to acknowledge and apply to the figures of Matthew and his evangelical symbol in the altarpiece. Typically used to identify the deceased as erudite,[82] Muse sarcophagi portray the departed as a seated male figure, often shown in the act of studying or writing on parchment and with a bulky frame, balding head and a simple tunic (Fig. 18). Caravaggio may have felt that in recalling this figure he was endowing the evangelist with an erudite nature that his seventeenth-century viewers would recognize.[83] The Muses, the nine daughters of Zeus,[84] are associated with the ability to inspire. Typically a Muse is shown as

[81] There is a diptych in the Louvre which shows Muses in the act of inspiring ancient scholars. The third panel, which depicted Polyhymnia, is missing. The compositional similarities to Caravaggio's painting, however, are still evident. Cécile Giroire and Daniel Roger, *Roman Art from the Louvre* (New York, NY: American Federation of Arts in association with Hudson Hills Press, 2007), 196. For more information on this diptych see George M. A. Hanfmann, " The Continuity of Classical Art: Culture, Myth, and Faith," in *Age of Spirituality: A Symposium*, ed. by Kurt Weitzmann (New York, NY: Metropolitan Museum of Art in association with Princeton University Press, 1980), 76-79.

[82] The seated male figure is often shown in the act of writing or reading which suggests that he is learned. Discussions about Muse sarcophagi refer to the seated figure in various terms such as literati, scholar, poet, or philosopher, all terms that suggest his erudition. See Lavin, "Divine Inspiration in Caravaggio's Two Saint Matthew's," 59-81; and Emma Stafford and Judith Herrin, *Personification in the Greek World: From Antiquity to Byzantium* (Burlington, VT : Ashgate, 2005), 153.

[83] See note 58.

[84] Hesiod's *Theogony* no. 75 discusses the Muses, calling them the daughters of Zeus the Kronion. It goes on to address all nine Muses by name. C.J. Rowe *Essential Hesiod: Theogony 1-232, 453-733; Works and days 1-307* (Bristol, England: Bristol Classical Press, 1978), 25 and 114.

a full-length, corporeal woman who stands in close proximity to the scholar. Portrayed in a similar fashion, Caravaggio's angel appears as a corporeal female who stands in the same physical and hierarchical plane as the evangelist. Aligning the representation of Matthew's symbol with the standard iconography of a Muse allows the viewer to associate the evangelical symbol with the capacity to inspire. Caravaggio's imitation of Muse sarcophagi is not only indicative of his knowledge of antiquity but also his concern for the accurate representation of doctrinal issues. He used the ancient model to create a new iconographic portrayal of the *Inspiration of St. Matthew*.

An even greater testament to Caravaggio's sophistication of design is revealed when one discovers that he was not loosely basing his composition on Muse sarcophagi as a whole, which showed all nine Muses, but aligned his depiction of Matthew's evangelical symbol with a specific Muse, Polyhymnia. Depictions of the Muses became ubiquitous in the sixth century BCE. It was during the Hellenistic period that each Muse was given authority over a particular realm of inspiration and an iconographic portrayal befitting her function. [85] Each of Muses was individually distinguished by a gesture, pose or attribute that suggested her ability to inspire a type of music, poetry, or other sacred text. It is Polyhymnia who inspired sacred poetry, sacred hymn, religious chant and eloquence in men. She is thought to bring fame to men by inspiring their writing and aiding their memory.[86] The role of Polyhymnia parallels that of the evangelical symbol in the story of the inspiration of the evangelist, thereby rendering Caravaggio's reference

[85] Emma Stafford and Judith Herrin, *Personification in the Greek World*, 153. While the Muses were associated with the liberal arts and the ability to inspire and aid a person's memory, their specific functions of inspiration were often loosely associated with their person. Polyhymnia, therefore, is associated with sacred song, religious chant, and hymns but also with agriculture and geometry.

[86] Stephen Stallcup, "With the 'Poynte of Remembraunce': Re-Viewing the Complaint in Anelida and Arcite," in *Representations of the Feminine in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Bonnie Wheeler. (Dallas, Texas: Academia, 1993), 43-68.

to the Muse appropriate. In order to visually associate the two, Caravaggio's portrayed the angel in the first altarpiece in a similar fashion to ancient portrayals of Polyhymnia.

Polyhymnia can be recognized by her tight-fitting drapery, which wraps around her body, delineating her form, her thoughtful countenance, and by her characteristic pose, in which she rests her chin in her hand. While she is often shown holding a stylus or a scroll, elements which refer to her ability to inspire the written word, Polyhymnia is also frequently depicted without any attributes, suggesting that her pose, demeanor, and drapery are sufficient to distinguish her from her sisters.[87] For example, a Roman statue of Polyhymnia (Fig. 19) found in the twentieth century on the Esquiline Hill,[88] shows a figure that is similar to Caravaggio's first angel in that she holds no identifying attributes, but can still be recognized as Polyhymnia due to her drapery and pose. Leaning on a tree trunk, resting her chin in her right hand and enveloped in drapery, this figure of Polyhymnia appears lost in thought. The tightness of her drapery allows the viewer to see her right arm and hand, despite the fact that they are wrapped in her clothing. The compositional similarities between this standard portrayal of Polyhymnia and Caravaggio's angel are so great that the artist's intentional emulation of the figure is virtually undeniable.

Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, published in 1593, indicates that late Renaissance and Baroque artists were aware of the Muses and their particular iconographic representations.[89] In this text, Ripa includes a discussion of each of the nine Muses, establishing their idiosyncratic representations in art, as known in the sixteenth century. Ripa's discussion of Polyhymnia is of

[87] Arthur Fairbanks, *The Mythology of Greece and Rome* (New York, Appleton, 1907), 80- 83.
[88] Carlo Pietrangeli, "Capitoline Museum," in *Traveler's Guide to Art in Rome* (New York: Charles Scribner's sons, 1972), 14.
[89] Cesare Ripa's original Italian description of Polyhymnia can be found in Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia* (Venetia, N. Pezzana, 1669), 428. English versions of Ripa's *Iconologia* were used in the research. See Yassu Okayama, *The Ripa Index: Personifications and their Attributes in Five Editions of the Iconologia* (Doornspijk: Davaco Publishers, 1992).

particular interest in that it outlines an archetypal depiction of the Muse that parallels Caravaggio's angel in striking ways.

To begin, Ripa refers to Polyhmnia's white dress and maiden-like form, addressing the feminine allure inherent to her iconography.[90] He goes on to identify Polyhymnia by her principal accessories, a pen and a scroll, which symbolize her ability to inspire eloquent writing and bring fame to authors and poets. Ripa records that Polyhymnia's portrayal showed her in the act of "discoursing, the voice represented as breath emanating from the mouth."[91] This is strikingly similar to Troy's explanation of the angel in the first *Inspiration of St. Matthew* which he describes as having, "soft breath which must caress [Matthew's] face."[92] When portrayed without an identifying attribute, Polyhymnia can be recognized by her hand gesture, in which her chin rests on her hand as a sign of contemplation,[93] a fact that Ripa addresses when he records that she was often depicted with a "raised hand" (Fig. 20).[94] In his discussion of the Muses, Ausonius, a classical Roman poet known and praised during the Renaissance, further characterized Polyhymnia as the Muse who "expresses all things with her hands and speaks by gesture."[95] It is Polyhymnia's hand gesture that endows her portrayal with a pensive spirit appropriate for religious chant and sacred hymns and thus the gesture that, when applied to Caravaggio's angel, is most indicative of her celestial nature and religious intent.

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[90] Yassu Okayama compiled the five translations of Ripa's book published since 1593, compared them to one another and published a comprehensive index of his iconographic descriptions. Okayama describes three different iconographic representations of Polyhymnia that parallel Caravaggio's angel. Each description begins by addressing Polyhymnia as a maiden, solidifying the iconographic importance of the Muse's feminine nature. Okayama, *The Ripa Index,* 189-190.
[91] Okayama, *The Ripa Index,* 190.
[92] Troy, "Expressive Aspects of Caravaggio's First Inspiration of St. Matthew," 636.
[93]Bruce Merry, *Encyclopedia of Modern Greek Literature* (Westport, Conn. : Greenwood Press, 2004), 342.
[94] Okayama, *The Ripa Index,* 189-190.
[95] Decimus Magnus Ausonius and Hugh Gerard Evelyn-White, *Ausonius* (London: William Heinemann, 1921), 281.

Caravaggio represented the angel of Matthew with the two dominant traits of Polyhymnia, her tight-fitting drapery and hand gesture, attempting to provide an easily recognizable association between the two figures. The angel's tangible and feminine form generally associates it with all Muses, which immediately implies its ability to inspire and aid men when their memories fail. However, it is the drapery and pose that specifically and unequivocally associate the angel with Polyhymnia and, therefore, with the ability to inspire the written word. While the description of Polyhymnia in Ripa's text makes a compelling comparison between Caravaggio's angel and the Muse, portrayals of Polyhymnia on ancient sarcophagi illustrate the striking similarities between the two figures, strengthening the argument that Caravaggio intentionally portrayed the angel with Polyhymnia's iconography in order to suggest an association between the two figures.

A sarcophagus fragment, now in Woburn Abbey, portrays a figure of Polyhymnia[96] whose formal similarities to Caravaggio's angel are remarkable. The parallels between this figure and Caravaggio's angel make a compelling case for Caravaggio's knowledge and emulation of the Muse. Following the iconographic tradition known from Ripa, Polyhymnia is shrouded in drapery and carries a scroll in one hand (Fig. 21). Unlike the other Muses represented on the sarcophagus (Fig. 22), who are clothed in heavy drapery that obscures their figures, Polyhymnia's drapery clings to her abdomen, thighs, and knees to reveal her feminine form. Although the drapery of the Muse does not split at the leg to display a bare thigh in the same manner as the drapery of Caravaggio's angel, the marble is incised between Polyhymnia's

[96] Max Wegner, *Die Musensarkophage: Mit 151 Lichtdrucktafeln, 5 Kunstdrucktafeln Und 3 Textabbildungen* (Berlin: Mann, 1966), 90. Wegner identifies this sarcophagus as originally located in Rome. Its presence in Rome during the seventeenth century is verified by its presence in the Codex Coburgensis.

thighs to clearly delineate her fleshy, supple form and draw attention to her femininity. The most significant aspect of this portrayal of Polyhymnia is the gesture she makes with her right hand, which she tucks beneath her chin, allowing it to rest on her hand. Speaking to Polyhymnia's contemplative nature, the gesture is replicated almost exactly in Caravaggio's depiction of the angel. While it has been mistaken by some to insinuate a flirtatious relationship between the angel and the evangelist,[97] it was likely meant to endow the angel, appropriately, with Polyhymnia's pensive nature.

Polyhymnia is shown in this same manner on a Muse sarcophagus from Santa Maria del Priorato, Rome (Fig. 23), which attests to the standardization of the Muse's iconography and its popular use on Roman sarcophagi.[98] The last figure on the left, Polyhymnia (Fig. 24) is similar to both the Muse from the Woburn sarcophagus and Caravaggio's angel. Standing with her feet crossed at the ankles,[99] in a feminine yet casual manner, Polyhymnia and the Muse next to her look to one another as if engaged in conversation. Her left arm crosses her torso as she leans on a pillar, stabilizing her right arm so that her chin can rest on her right palm. In her left hand she holds a scroll. The tautness of her drapery is emphasized in relation to the other Muses, whose gowns billow below the breasts, hiding the goddesses' bodies rather than revealing them, like Polyhymnia's. In her pose and drapery, as well as the suggestion of an intimate discussion with another figure, Polyhymnia's portrayal on the Priorato sarcophagus resembles Caravaggio's depiction of the angel in the first altarpiece.

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[97] Troy, "Expressive Aspects of Caravaggio's First Inspiration of Saint Matthew," 636 and Langdon, *Caravaggio: A Life*, 239.
[98] Wegner, *Die Musensarkophage*, 71-72, tav. 36a.
[99] Polyhymnia's pose, standing with her feet crossed at the ankles, is identified by Friederichs as specific to Polyhymnia. Friederichs, *The Handbook of Greek and Roman Sculpture*, 203.

Another formal comparison can also be made with the figure of Polyhymnia on a sarcophagus now in the Museo Nazionale Romano (Fig. 25). This comparison is perhaps more compelling than the others because the short side of the sarcophagus depicts a Muse in the guise of Polyhymnia, separated from the other eight Muses, interacting with the scholar in a more intimate setting (Fig. 26).[100] The two figures are shown turning toward one another as if conversing. The depictions of both the figures parallel Caravaggio's painting in ways that can explain the artist's compositional choices. On the sarcophagus, the scholar's plebeian nature and old age are emphasized. Not only does the man steady himself on a cane in order to stand but his advanced age is further emphasized by the rigid position of his stance, which contrasts with the agile, flexible positions of the young figures flanking him and his bald head. The Muse, like Caravaggio's angel, is shown in the standard portrayal of Polyhymnia. Standing with her legs crossed, bending at the waist and resting her elbow on a pillar, she holds her chin in her palm and makes direct eye contact with the scholar. This self-confident gesture illustrates the significant and substantial role she played in the scholar's fame and parallels the prominent role that Caravaggio's angel has in the creation of the gospel. This depiction is not only icongraphically similar to Caravaggio's angel but may provide further insight into Caravaggio's decision to show the angel as actively involved in the scene.

The ubiquitous nature of the iconographic portrayal of Polyhymnia in Rome is indicated by the number of Muse sarcophagi catalogued by Wegner in which he is able to distinguish her from the other Muses. Based on her drapery and pose, Wegner has identified Polyhymnia on the

[100] The Museo Nazionale sarcophagus is identified by Nicholas Penny and Roger Jones as the sarcophagus studied by Raphael for his fresco of Mount Parnassus in the Stanza della Segnatura. This proves that Renaissance artists were aware that there were nine Muses and that each Muse was associated with a specific liberal art. In his probable study of the sarcophagus, therefore, Caravaggio not only addressed his ancient predecessors but also Raphael, the very artist that Bellori explicitly states Caravaggio rejected. See Roger Jones and Nicholas Penny, *Raphael* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 74 and Bellori, *Lives*, 181.

Villa Mattei sarcophagus[101] (Fig. 16) and the Callisto sarcophagus (Fig. 20), as well as several others. This attests to the popularity and standardization of her portrayal, strengthening the theory that Caravaggio was familiar with the Muse and her iconography.

A sarcophagus, today preserved in the Palazzo Farnese (Fig. 27), shows Polyhymnia in this same iconographic portrayal but devoid of any attributes (Fig. 28).[102] The bent position of this figure is more pronounced than many of the other depictions of Polyhymnia mentioned thus far; however, her posture parallels more closely the marble statue of Polyhymnia found on the Esquiline Hill (Fig. 19) and may have influenced Caravaggio's decision to show the angel leaning toward the evangelist. The Farnese Polyhymnia is also unique because of her drapery, which does not envelope her entire body or delineate her curves in the same manner as the fragment from Woburn Abbey.[103] In this case, Polyhymnia's drapery appears voluptuous around her neck and shoulders but is arranged tightly around the chest, containing her hands and arms and emphasizing her characteristic pose. Despite the excess of drapery, Polyhymnia's thigh and calf are outlined and her cross-legged stance is clearly visible. The statue of Polyhymnia from the Esquiline Hill also exhibits this type of mantle. These minute variations in the depiction of

[101] It should be noted that two of the sarcophagi mentioned, as well as an additional sarcophagus discussed in Wegner's book, were originally part of the Mattei collection, which is interesting in regard to Caravaggio's association with the Mattei, who began collecting his work around 1600. Caravaggio's paintings recorded as having been part of the Mattei collection are the *Betrayal of Christ*, *Supper at Emmaus*, and the *Saint John*. Caravaggio, therefore, may have been familiar with these specific sarcophagi as he was thought to have resided with the Mattei in the first years of the seventeenth century. Puglisi states that Caravaggio was a member of the Mattei household in October 1601 and that his professional association with the family lasted until at least January 1603. Gilbert suggests that Cardinal Girolamo Mattei was not only a collector of Caravaggio's work, but that he played a large role in the iconography of many of Caravaggio's religious paintings. While she doubts the veracity of Gilbert's theory, Langdon does state that the Mattei were patrons of the most radical artists in Rome during the early seventeenth century and were particularly interested in Caravaggio and the Caravaggisti. See Gilbert, "A Religious Cardinal Host: Mattei," in *Caravaggio and His Two Cardinals*, 135-158; Helen Langdon, "Review of Caravaggio and His Two Cardinals," *Burlington Magazine* 137, no. 1110 (Sept., 1995): 621-622; Puglisi, *Caravaggio*, 208 and Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 69 and 151-152.

[102] Wegner, *Die Musensarkophage*, 64.

[103] Karl Friederichs, *The Handbook of Greek and Roman Sculpture*, 203. Friederichs discusses Polyhymnia's iconography. He states that she is often shown wearing a large mantle that "folds about her" and covers both of her arms.

Polyhymnia strengthen the argument that Caravaggio's angel would have been easily associated with Polyhymnia despite any minor differences between her appearance and Polyhymnia's.

The connection proposed between the composition of Caravaggio's first altarpiece and Polyhymnia suggests that Caravaggio's first *Inspiration of St. Matthew*, although atypical, was not sacrilegious or eroticized. Aligning the first altarpiece with the ideas associated with Muse sarcophagi allows one to read the angel as an inspirational figure. The angel's feminized nature, corporeal presence, proximity to the evangelist, and appropriation of the pen are directly related to the iconographic portrayal of Polyhymnia and used to specifically associate the angel with the ability to inspire writing. While the angel's gesture had a negative impact on the reception of Caravaggio's altarpiece, causing modern scholars to view it as a scene of lofty flirtation between the angel and the evangelist, its appearance in the painting was intended by Caravaggio to endow the evangelical symbol with a contemplative nature, like that of Polyhymnia.

Further attesting to Caravaggio's informed use of Muse sarcophagi is the fact that depictions of scholars and their Muses are complicated by the same problem found in depictions of Matthew writing his gospel namely, who should be recognized as the true author of written word? In her book *Personifications in the Greek World*, Emma Stafford asks: "Since the poet's power derives from the Muse, is she who is ultimately in control?"[104] The overarching problem, therefore, revolves around identifying the essence of a Muse. What is a Muse exactly, how does she inspire, and how should her ability to inspire be portrayed? This is the same problem artists faced when depicting the evangelists and their divine inspiration, especially with regard to the *Inspiration of St. Matthew*. The role of divine inspiration, like that of the Muse, remains vague.

[104] Stafford, *Personification in the Greek World*, 154-156.

When understood correctly, Caravaggio's emulation of Polyhymnia addresses the problem of the ambiguous role of divine inspiration. Aligning the figure of Matthew's angel with Polyhymnia allows the angel's function to be purely inspirational, thus it adheres to the biblical text.

That Caravaggio modeled his angel on Polyhymnia is evident because of the striking similarities between the two figures. Caravaggio used the ancient source as the Counter-Reformation desired, to heighten the biblical accuracy of an image. Rather than understanding the angel's corporeal and feminine nature as indicative of its divinity and ability to inspire the written word, Caravaggio's contemporaries, and modern scholars alike, were blinded by its atypical form and misinterpreted the figure to be lewd and erotic rather than an intentional and knowledgeable reinterpretation of an antique source.

Figure 16. Palazzo Mattei sarcophagus, Rome. No 168, pg. 66, tav 150b.

Figure 17. Short side, Callisto sarcophagus. Rome. Wegner no. 87, pg. 41-42, tav. 138d.

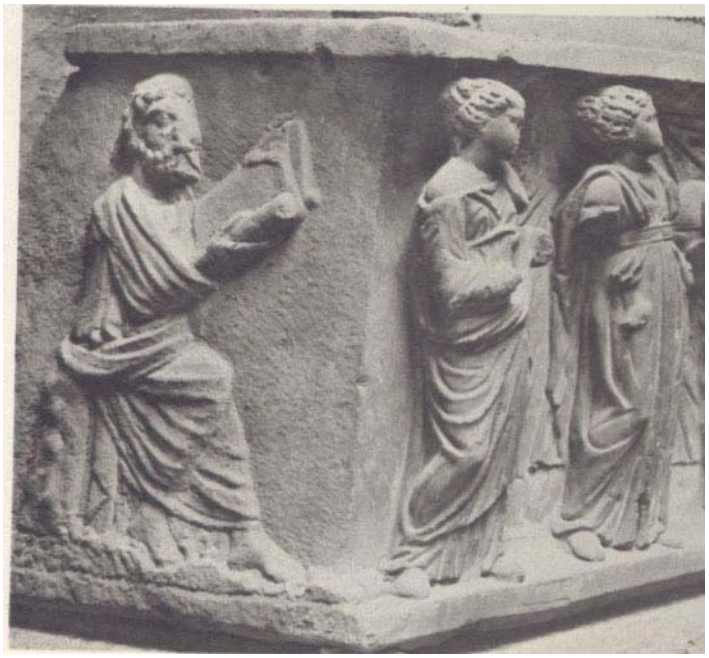

Figure 18. Short Side, Palazzo Farnese sarcophagus. Rome. Wegner no. 164, pg. 64, tav. 138f.

Figure 19. Roman Statue of Polyhymnia. Discovered on Esquiline Hill. Copy of Greek Original. Capitoline Museum, Rome.

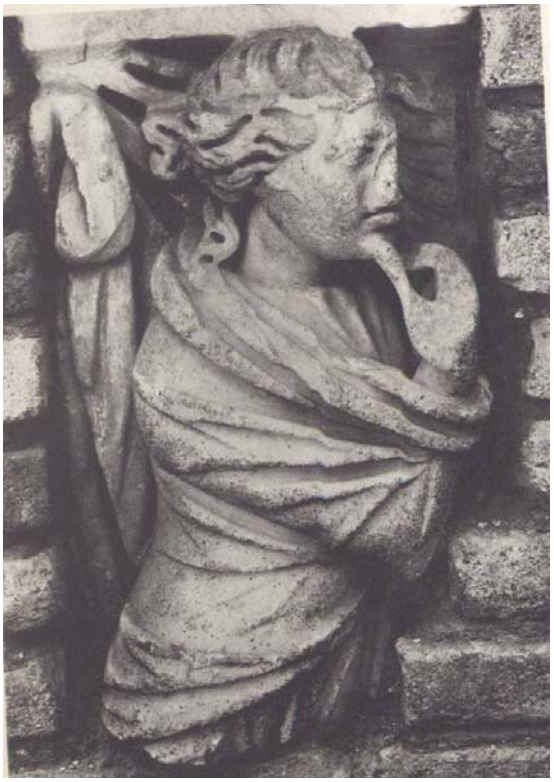

Figure 20. Detail. Polyhymnia, Callisto sarcophagus. Rome. Wegner no. 87, pg. 41-42, tav. 44a.

Figure 21. Polyhymnia Fragment from Woburn Abbey. Wegner no. 208 pg. 79-80, tav, 33a.

Figure 22. Muse Sarcophagus. Villa Doria Pamfilj. Wegner No. 208 pg. 79-80, tav, 34a.

Figure 23. Muse Sarcophagus from Santa Maria del Priorato. Rome. Wegner no. 183, pg. 71-72, tav.36a.

Figure 24. Detail. Polyhymnia. Santa Maria del Priorato sarcophagus. Rome. Wegner no. 183, pg. 71-72, tav, 49b.

Figure 25. Museo Nazionale sarcophagus. Rome. Formerly in the Mattei Collection. Wegner no, 128, pg. 51-52, tav. 84

Figure 26. Short side of Museo Nazionale sarcophagus. Rome. Formerly in the Mattei Collection. Wegner no, 128, pg. 51-52, tav. 84.

Figure 27. Palazzo Farnese sarcophagus, Rome. Wegner no. 164, pg. 64, tav. 103.

Figure 28. Detail. Polyhymnia. Palazzo Farnese sarcophagus. Rome. Wegner no. 164, pg. 64, tav, 105d.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

Despite many arguments to the contrary, it can be asserted that Caravaggio was the quintessential Counter-Reformation painter, modeling his paintings on traditional compositions, antique sources, his Renaissance predecessors and biblical texts. Caravaggio's paintings were highly emotive and called his viewers to piety as the Counter-Reformation demanded. He has, however, been denied recognition among seventeenth-century painters of religious narratives on account of the difficulty of identifying any religious import from his paintings and the proclivity of contemporary historians and modern scholars to judge his work as a reflection of his immoral behavior. Caravaggio's paintings were often portrayals of common biblical narratives but the idiosyncrasies of his compositions obscured the traditional sources upon which they were founded, creating compositions that were atypical in seventeenth-century Rome. Caravaggio's contemporaries Bellori and Baglione created a negative characterization of the painter by recording his vehement denunciation of antique models as well as the various rejections of his works. Despite the few words written in praise of his style, Caravaggio was ultimately deemed a degenerate artist whose work contaminated the minds of future painters. It was this characterization of the artist that has colored the way his paintings have been perceived since the seventeenth century.[105] Caravaggio's ingenious use of antique and Renaissance models rendered his paintings both highly emotive and controversial. The Counter-Reformation decreed that paintings should not be "disorderly or unbecoming and confusedly arranged…new or anything

[105] See Baglione, *Le vite de' pittori*, 100; Bellori, *Lives*, 179-189.

that has not hitherto been in use in the Church."[106] On account of his veiled use of traditional models and hyper-naturalistic style, Caravaggio's paintings were seen as unconventional at best, but often as erotic and vulgar. The angelic figures in Caravaggio's oeuvre best illustrate his sophistication of design, as they change forms in order to fit the biblical account more accurately. The angel in Caravaggio's first *Inspiration of St. Matthew* is the perfect example of how his idiosyncratic compositions and portrayals of angels led his contemporaries to misinterpret his first altarpiece.

The angel in Caravaggio's first altarpiece took its feminine and corporeal form in part from Caravaggio's study of Muse sarcophagi. Caravaggio's turn to ancient sarcophagi for the composition was intended to equate the angel with the ability to inspire. Atypically for his time, Caravaggio disguised his antique reference, reinventing the pose and uniting it with his naturalistic style rather than appropriating the figure in an easily recognizable state.[107] Aligning the painting with the ideas associated with Muse sarcophagi allows one to interpret the angel's tangible and feminine form as connoting the figure's ability to inspire, disassociating it from an angel and adhering to the Gospel of John. The sophistication of this artistic decision is extraordinary; it touches on the very problem that surrounds depictions of Matthew's evangelical symbol, the conflation of divinity and corporeality.

The explicit reference to Polyhymnia, notable through the formal parallels, allowed Caravaggio to endow the angel with the ability to inspire the written word, proving both Caravaggio's knowledge of antiquity and his endeavor to heighten the religious import of the figure. Polyhymnia's pose and drapery led Caravaggio's contemporaries to view the angel as

[106] Schroeder, *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, 215-217.
[107] Gregori, "Caravaggio Today," 43.

erotic and its role in the construction of the gospel to be excessive. The close proximity of the figures to one another and the angel's physical interaction with the writing itself, were an attempt to evoke the figure of Polyhymnia explicitly. In the same vein, the translucent and clinging garment the angel wears was a prominent feature of Polyhymnia's iconography, often the very element that identifies her when shown among the other Muses. The hand gesture specific to portrayals of Polyhymnia further consolidates this association between the Matthew's angel and the mythological Muse: she rests her chin in her palm, signifying her meditative nature. This same gesture, when employed by Caravaggio to suggest that the angel had a pensive nature, was misunderstood as one of seduction or flirtation, thus further eroticizing the angel in the eyes of Caravaggio's contemporaries.[108] Indeed, the problems with Caravaggio's angel are directly related to the angel's appropriation of the iconography of Polyhymnia, which, when understood correctly, would have heightened the religiosity of the painting and added clarity to the narrative.

Caravaggio understood that the Muse composition addressed the same theological problem as the narrative of the *Inspiration of St. Matthew*, namely authorship. Is it the human figure that physically composes the text or the inspirational provider from whom the words derive? Caravaggio found a new iconographic portrayal of the figure that would clarify its nature in the narrative context. Caravaggio's composition addressed the figure's inspirational nature while allowing it to retain its human qualities.

In stressing the materialization of Matthew's symbol, Caravaggio was also creating a model for Christian life by illustrating the personal and tangible relationship that Matthew had

[108] Troy, "Expressive Aspects of Caravaggio's First Inspiration of Saint Matthew," 636; Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 976-100 and 115.; Langdon, *Caravaggio: A Life*, 240; Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 138-146 and Puglisi, *Caravaggio*, 179-180.

with the divine as a result of his piety. Caravaggio's genius of design, therefore, is emphasized in regard to the figure of Matthew as well: what figure represents a more appropriate example for Christian life and the salvation of the soul through faith than Matthew, a humble tax-collector, penitent sinner, and martyr.[109]

The first altarpiece that Caravaggio painted for the Contarelli chapel exemplified his interest in heightening the personal drama and religious connotations of the scene, as well as his knowledge of antique and Renaissance traditions of pictorial representation. While typically understood as irreverent and unorthodox, Caravaggio's first altarpiece is actually indicative of the artist's adherence to Counter-Reformation values. Caravaggio turned to classical and Renaissance models as well as theological principles in order to create an image that was legible, emotive, biblically accurate, and presented the viewer with a tangible and personal religious experience.

[109] Krueger, *Writing and Holiness,* 39-40.

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