

Paul Getty Museum) and Ottawa (National Gallery of Canada) 2008, pp.114–17, no.1.9; C. Avery: “‘Neptune and Triton’ in the Victoria and Albert Museum: ‘Reckoned Bernini’s greatest work’”, *Sculpture Journal* 19 (2010), pp.223–28; and A. Seidel: ‘Neptune’s Realm: the Context of Bernini’s First Fountain Sculpture in the Light of Newly Discovered Drawings’, *ibid.* 19 (2010), pp.157–72.

### Il Caravaggio di Palermo e l’Oratorio di San Lorenzo.

By Giovanni Mendola. 160 pp. incl. 15 col. + 38 b. & w. ills. (Kalós, Palermo, 2012), €18. ISBN 978–88–97077–44–2.

Reviewed by MICHELE CUPPONE

ARCHIVAL RESEARCH IS an indispensable element for a complex discipline such as art history, especially in respect of a figure such as Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, in that it can add to, and sometimes correct, biographical accounts of his life. Since the first discoveries at the end of the nineteenth century by Antonino Bertolotti, who fruitfully sifted through records of Roman trials of the era, certain contracts for works of art, letters by associates of the artist and other testimonies have slowly emerged. Each one adds another piece to the jigsaw of Caravaggio’s life so that an increasingly clear picture emerges, although there are still many lacunae. Fairly recently documents have been discovered which make it possible to add details to the circumstances of his birth and death, although these are not universally accepted. And accounts of his life in Rome, especially at the start of his career, have also emerged.

One fact that was once generally held to be true now appears dubious and leads us to review a particular moment in the painter’s life. Certain biographies contain a fleeting reference to Caravaggio’s purported visit to Palermo in 1609, and, although there was a complete lack of corroboration, Giovanni Pietro Bellori claimed that it was then that he painted the *Nativity with Sts Lawrence and Francis*, a masterpiece that was stolen from the Oratorio of S. Lorenzo in Palermo in 1969. Giovanni Mendola had the perseverance to scour the notarial archives of Palermo for around the year 1609 – and found nothing. But he then started to look at documents dating from around 1600, following a hypothesis that the altarpiece could be the one known to have been commissioned in 1600 by the merchant Fabio Nuti, who was living in Naples. This was first proposed by Alfred Moir in 1982, but until now has had little support.<sup>1</sup>

Mendola has added to the history of the Oratory of S. Lorenzo and of the Compagnia di San Francesco that supervised it. Of particular significance for Caravaggio’s altarpiece is the work undertaken in the Jubilee year of 1600 to make the Oratory ready to receive

such a picture: on 28th July payment for the gilding of a frame (*‘guarnicione’*) for the high altar was authorised, which was finished by the day of the Feast of St Lawrence on 10th August. And from a document of 8th March 1601 it emerges that Fabio Nuti in Naples was in correspondence with a member of the confraternity, Cesare da Avosta, in this little Oratory and that on 12th January 1601 Nuti authorised a payment to this friar, presumably in connection with the altarpiece. Mendola reconstructs a tight network of relations between Merisi, Rome, Sicily, Palermo and, naturally, the Oratory. It is still difficult to speculate as to who among the many characters involved might have acted as the go-between for the commission, Caravaggio being in Rome and his patron Nuti in Naples.

This slim volume contains a mass of new material as well as references to previous publications. Mendola smoothly argues his case to date the altarpiece to 1600, and in fact the later dating had always been questioned, especially on the grounds of the painting’s style, which is very different from the other paintings made in Sicily, and much closer to those in the chapels of the Contarelli and Cerasi in Rome. While some facts have not been checked in the sources, and there are a few oversights, this does not detract from the importance of Mendola’s archival research. The author remains cautious in his conclusions, but several pages of Caravaggio’s life already need to be rewritten, and his findings coincide with the work of other scholars (including Maurizio Calvesi and the present writer). Now the network of relationships uncovered in Palermo should also be looked for in Rome, with, almost certainly, equally interesting results.

<sup>1</sup> A Moir: *Caravaggio*, Milan 1982 (Italian edition), p.35.

**The Eye of the Connoisseur. Authenticating Paintings by Rembrandt and His Contemporaries.** By Anna Tummers. 350 pp. incl. 155 col. ills. (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2011), \$60. ISBN 978–1–60606–084–1.

Reviewed by CHRISTOPHER WHITE

ANNA TUMMERS HAS written an original and absorbing book on connoisseurship of seventeenth-century pictures, which, by contrasting the practice of today with the attitudes prevalent in the seventeenth century, does not so much provide answers as challenge our approach to the whole subject. The ‘today’ under discussion stretches from the crisis of confidence occasioned by the exposure of Van Meegeren’s Vermeer forgeries, beginning in 1945 – one might argue that the 1956 Rembrandt exhibition in Amsterdam and Rotterdam was no less a watershed – to the post-Rembrandt Research Project period of

present times, exemplified by the revisionism of Ernst van der Wetering, with whom the author is generally in agreement. The *donnée* of the book is Rembrandt painting connoisseurship, concentrating as one might expect on the work of the Rembrandt Research Project. Although often coming to different conclusions, Tummers pays tribute to the authors of the latter for the fullness of their explication, or, as a cynic might say, for offering so many hostages to fortune. Yet the scope of the book, by examining the whole range of activity during the century apart from just the case of Rembrandt, goes very much further than the simple question of whether or not a picture is by a certain artist. And her search for relevant thoughts and facts throws up a dazzling array of sources, including inventories, biographies, letters from artists and patrons, and, as she says, above all, curiously enough, theoretical writings. Unfortunately, much of the evidence is not as clear as one might hope, and is often contradictory. Thus such cases as the correspondence between Rubens and Sir Dudley Carleton, in which the artist sets out the precise range of authorship of the pictures on offer, and the Uylenburgh enquiry, when the attribution of a number of pictures sold by the latter to the Elector of Brandenburg was subjected to the scrutiny of a group of artists and connoisseurs, stand out by providing some reasonably clear answers. But as Tummers says, it is difficult to generalise even from these seemingly clear-cut examples.

There is a highly stimulating discussion about style, as something not to be considered in a straightforward progression from early to middle to late, but something which was much more subtly and deliberately varied by artists according to such factors as destination of the work in question, artistic variation, and commercial considerations according to the status of the patron or the amount of money on offer for a particular commission. In the seventeenth century Van Dyck’s first Antwerp period must surely rank as the *ne plus ultra* of stylistic transmogrification. But no less relevant to the discussion is the case of Rembrandt’s three early gold-ground paintings on copper, all executed about the same time, the *Laughing man in a gorget* (Mauritshuis, The Hague), the *Self-portrait* (Nationalmuseum, Stockholm) and the *Old woman praying* (Residenzgalerie, Salzburg), only one of which was accepted by the Rembrandt Research Project, while two were doubted because, although similar in technique, they are different in style. Less resolved by general consensus is the question of the two nearly identical versions of the early *Self-portrait with a gorget*, the neatly painted version in the Mauritshuis, The Hague, and the more freely executed version in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg: the latter is now accepted as the prime original, but is the former a repetition by the master to demonstrate his ability to paint in another style or is it only a copy by another hand?

There are a number of other themes which are explored in depth. Tummers, in what she