

The Taking of Christ: Caravaggio as the Lantern-Bearer



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Taking of Christ*, 1602, Oil on canvas. 133.5 x 169.5cm, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.

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The Taking of Christ (1602) is an oil painting on canvas by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, which currently resides in the National Gallery of Ireland.¹ The painting was a private commission from one of Caravaggio's lead patrons, Ciriaco Mattei, and depicts the greeting of Christ by Judas as the soldiers arrive to arrest him for his crucifixion.² On the right side of the painting, standing among the soldiers, is a man holding a lantern. This lantern-bearer has been identified as a self-portrait of Caravaggio.³ The inclusion of a self-portrait in a biblical painting, and particularly the nature of this self-portrait in relation to dress, gesture, expression, composition, and lighting, is extremely curious. Regarding Caravaggio's self-portraiture, Michael Fried states that "the 'presence' of the artist within the depicted scene is the outcome of forces far more complex and conflictual than a desire for self-representation."⁴ Thus, the inclusion of Caravaggio's own likeness is more than a mere novelty. Prior depictions of Caravaggio in his violent biblical scenes, in combination with historical documents such as police and death records, point to his self-portraiture as an expression of his spiritual distance. In this essay, I will be discussing the significance of Caravaggio's self-portrait as the lantern-bearer in *The Taking of Christ*, particularly with respect to his relationship with religion. Caravaggio's role as the lantern-bearer reflects a cognitive dissonance in regard to his faith, a desire to believe that is wrought by both obstacles and conflict.

Scholars describe the figure of Caravaggio in *The Taking* as a witness to the events depicted in the painting.⁵ Letizia Treves regards Caravaggio as a witness to a momentous event and notes his richly coloured clothing, which may highlight his importance in this role.⁶ In contrast, John Varriano suggests that the self-portrait does not denote the importance of the artist but rather the significance of the act of witnessing.⁷ Varriano sees Caravaggio as an unwitting witness, arguing that his contemporary clothes do not side visually nor metaphorically with either the soldiers' armour or Jesus's robes.⁸ This choice of dress gives Caravaggio significance but makes him neutral in morality.⁹ On the other hand, Fried proposes that Caravaggio's self-portrait indicates the artist's importance. He suggests that Caravaggio's presence emphasizes the significance of the act of witnessing, specifically the deliberate attempt of Caravaggio to observe Christ's arrest.¹⁰ Fried also writes that Caravaggio's figure is an instigator of the scene. His entrance on the right causes the biblical characters to act, as shown by their collective movement towards the left side of the canvas.¹¹ Caravaggio mirrors this action in reality by instigating the scene as the painter;¹² he brings the scene to life on canvas by means of his paintbrush. While Varriano's emphasis on the act of witnessing and the dismissal of Caravaggio's importance is interesting, I believe that Caravaggio's history of violent self-portraiture aligns with the arguments of Treves and Fried. His appearance as the lantern-bearer holds significance, and the atmosphere of the painting would change if the lantern-bearer bore the likeness of someone else.

The Taking portrays the arrest of Christ in the garden of Gethsemane. This is a scene from the Passion of Christ, a series of events from the last days of Christ's life.¹³ *The Taking* follows Christ's entry into Jerusalem, the Last Supper, and Christ's agony in the Garden, preceding his trials and his crucifixion, death, and burial. The arrest spurs the latter half of the Passion in that one of its players, the disciple Judas, prompts the events of Christ's suffering by betraying him in exchange for silver. Caravaggio does not show the climax of this moment and instead shows Judas about to kiss or having just kissed Christ to identify him to the armoured soldiers on the right. The soldier in

the foreground reaches around Judas with a gauntleted hand, grasping Jesus's robe, and the soldier in the middle ground grasps the robes of the man on the left, who flees the scene with a panicked cry. Christ wears a tortured expression, his body leaning to the left as his hands—outstretched either in prayer or for arrest—are presented to the soldiers, showing resistance yet compliance. To the far right in front of the third soldier, Caravaggio peers over the heads of the characters, holding a lantern to illuminate the scene before him. Curiously, Caravaggio's expression does not hint at a sense of admiration or faith, or even a sense of excitement. His body language arguably shows interest, almost as if he is about to stand on the tips of his toes, but his face exhibits little reaction to the tumultuous scene of Christ's arrest before him. His face and mouth are slack, and his eyes are half-lidded. Though his brow looks knitted in concentration, the lines on his forehead are barely evident. In contrast, the folds and creases of Christ's and Judas's face are deep and twisting with emotion. For the intensity of their expressions, it is strange that Caravaggio does not appear to be moved by the events of the Passion.

Before we analyze further the visual aspects of *The Taking*, let us discuss Caravaggio's relationship with religion. There is some basis for Caravaggio's distance from spirituality in the existing literature. Though Caravaggio engaged in religious activities such as receiving the Eucharist, a traditionally important act of consuming bread in commemoration of Christ's sacrifice, he left behind no religious belongings after his death.¹⁴ It also seems that his disposition was far from that of a devout Catholic. Giovanni Bellori, a seventeenth-century writer and biographer of contemporary artists reports that Caravaggio had a temper,¹⁵ and there are extensive police records of his violent and reckless behaviour.¹⁶ However, in analyzing historical texts, we should remember that the lack of biographical material on Caravaggio's spirituality does not indicate he was non-religious. It may simply be the case that biographers of Caravaggio's time did not find it necessary to write on the religiosity of the artist.¹⁷ Similarly, we should also note the bias of the biographer. Bellori showed clear distaste for Caravaggio's style; he did not believe that it was appropriate to his contemporaries

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nor for the purposes of the Catholic Church and argued that it lacked both beauty and decorum.¹⁸ Rudolf Wittkower states that seventeenth-century religious artworks were expected to adhere to this decorum. It was crucial that images depicted the correct age, sex, type, expression, gesture, and dress to inspire faith or appeal to the pious.¹⁹ Caravaggio intentionally defied these expectations and was criticized for his sense of “darkness” and secular thinking, which may have reflected his apathy towards ideas of faith and piety.

Caravaggio’s spirituality should also be considered in respect to his history of self-portraiture, particularly those portraits included in his religious paintings. In many of these self-portraits, he takes on a biblical character, but these likenesses seem largely self-deprecating. Caravaggio depicts himself as maimed and slaughtered biblical adversaries, most notably as the severed head of Goliath held by the youthful David, and the mutilated figure of Holofernes decapitated by Judith.²⁰ It is important to remember how villains in the Bible are often portrayed: as enemies of God who align completely and utterly with evil, consistently vanquished directly or indirectly by God’s hand. To paint himself as a villain in such a carnal scene could easily be an acknowledgement of Caravaggio’s history with violence and misbehaviour, or even as an act of self-deprecation and damnation. As time progressed, Caravaggio began to depict a different kind of likeness

in four more religious paintings: *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* (1600), *The Taking of Christ* (1602), *The Raising of Lazarus* (1609), and *The Martyrdom of St. Ursula* (1610).²¹ *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* is of particular interest in this paper, as it signals a shift in Caravaggio’s self-portraiture.²² He no longer plays a violent central role as a biblical character, but stands in the background of the painting and takes on a lesser, more passive role as a witness. Instead of taking part in the story, Caravaggio stands on the periphery of divine events.²³ In *The Martyrdom*, Caravaggio’s features seem grim, as if his high esteem for St. Matthew is corrupted by the violent act of death before him. Any sense of connection or admiration Caravaggio has is sabotaged by conflict, just as we see in *The Taking*. His self-portrait as the lantern-bearer demonstrates a shift from his hostile relationship with religion, consequently reflecting his lack of faith.

With the context of Caravaggio’s existing self-portraiture and absence from religion, let us consider one of the more prominent elements of *The Taking*: lighting. Varriano notes that the light of the lantern does not illuminate any of the biblical characters.²⁴ They are lit by a source from above, while the lantern shines upon Caravaggio alone. Light in Caravaggio’s artworks is not solely an indicator of the significance of a subject, as suggested by Fried. Rudolf Wittkower argues that Caravaggio uses illumination as an indirect rather than

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an explicit type of religious symbology.²⁵ Caravaggio's face is also brightly lit, but this does not necessarily give him divine status. It should be noted that *The Taking* is one of the only paintings where he depicts an artificial light source: a lantern.²⁶ This suggests that the depiction of the lantern bears importance. As stated, the light of Caravaggio's lantern does not touch the biblical figures in the painting.²⁷ The figures are lit only by the divine light from above. Just as the artificial light does not touch them, the divine light, in turn, does not touch Caravaggio. It is the artificial light of the lantern alone that illuminates Caravaggio's face and shines into his eyes. The presence of the lantern not only separates him from the divine but also blinds him. It makes him an outsider. The portrayal of Caravaggio as the lantern-bearer serves as a visual depiction of his inability to access spirituality, despite it being within arm's reach. As in *The Martyrdom* where Caravaggio lingers in the background, Caravaggio in *The Taking* exists on the periphery, perhaps indicating a conflicted and futile longing for religious connection.

The juxtaposition of divine and artificial light may also serve to emphasize the distance between Caravaggio and Christ, who are respectively at the far right and the far left of the painting. Christ does not take a central position to indicate his importance. Instead, Judas and the soldiers occupy the centre of the painting and subsequently push Christ and Caravaggio apart. Nonetheless, Christ and Caravaggio are the two brightest points in the painting. The brightest light on the left shines over Christ's face and dims as the viewer's eye reaches the soldiers on the right. These shadows are interrupted by the unusually illuminated face of Caravaggio. This causes the viewer's eye to move back and forth between the two brightest points that are the faces of Christ and Caravaggio, which emphasize the vast space between them. The space is metaphorical as well as physical. It reinforces the notion that he cannot reach a sense of faith, and that there is a distance from the spiritual that he can never close despite his attempts to, which are echoed in his slack and uncomprehending expression.

As mentioned above, Christ and Caravaggio are separated not only by distance but also by the bodies of Judas and two armoured soldiers. Fried, Varriano,

and Treves explicitly describe Caravaggio as a witness; however, I propose that Caravaggio is unable to see Christ at all. He certainly looks in the direction of Christ, craning his head to see his face, yet it is possible that Judas's body obstructs his view. Although Caravaggio appears to be taller than the soldiers, Judas is situated at the same height as Christ. If we were to stand where Caravaggio is standing, we should be able to see only Christ's left cheek. The rest of his face should be obstructed by the back of Judas's head. Through his attempts to see Jesus, the human manifestation of God, he is able to see only Judas. It is possible that this reflects obstacles to Caravaggio's faith in real life: his attempts to connect with religion may have been blocked by evil, whether through misfortune, like Christ's arrest, or treachery in others, as embodied by Judas. If we consider Caravaggio's self-deprecating portraiture with his history of violent behaviour, his inability to see Christ is recognition of his own corruptness—his evil qualities. Thus, this obstruction could also come from himself.

With Caravaggio's history of aggression in mind, Fried argues that there is a sense of causality in *The Taking*.²⁸ As Caravaggio enters the painting on the right, the robed individual on the left flees, suggesting that there is room in the painting for only one of them.²⁹ Caravaggio's arrival pushes the fleeing individual from the painting, thus putting him in a position of aggression or assertion. When considering their relationship in the scene, we should also consider their opposing roles. The one who flees to the left is already a witness. In contrast to Caravaggio, he is a participant in the scene and likely a follower of Christ as indicated by his biblical robes;³⁰ Treves identifies him as St. John, a member of the twelve apostles.³¹ St. John is thought to have a close relationship with Christ, commonly identified as the disciple "whom Jesus loved."³² Notably, both St. John and Caravaggio's likenesses are cut off by the edges of the canvas, exiting and entering respectively. The "beloved" St. John already believes in Christ and is integral to the narrative but is unwilling to stay. Conversely, Caravaggio arrives, wishing to become part of the scene. However, his emotional, spiritual, and physical distance renders him unable to participate.

The Taking also presents a third witness: the viewer. As Caravaggio cranes his head and the robed individual runs off the edge of the canvas, the audience alone is privy to the entirety of the scene. We mirror him in that we attempt to take part in the same role, viewing the events of the Passion before us, but we are the only party that is successful. Viewers can see the unsuccessful witness and the unwilling witness; Caravaggio gifts us with the privilege of being spectators. As spectators, we can see, engage with, and to use Christian vernacular, “receive” Christ. Because we can see him and there are no other barriers between us, we can have an experience of faith. Our ability to access Christ and religion is juxtaposed by Caravaggio, who is trapped where he stands. His faith is impeded by external obstacles, which are depicted by physical distance and the bodies between him and Christ. He is also impeded by internal obstacles. Caravaggio is effectively blinded by a tool used for seeing: the lantern that he brought for himself. He is eternally frozen in paint and perpetually distant from the divine, existing in an exile that is both externally caused and self-imposed. As viewers who are unable to intervene, we experience a sense of frustration with these physical and metaphorical barriers that may have mirrored his own.

Varriano suggests that there is a relationship between Caravaggio’s distance from spirituality and his existence as an artist. His detachment from religiosity and his secular way of thinking were related to his desire to paint from nature.³³ Concerning painting, Caravaggio appeared to be preoccupied with the earthly rather than the spiritual.³⁴ He uses *The Taking* to mirror his struggle with faith. This is demonstrated in the depiction of raw emotion on Christ’s face, which suggests conflict and turmoil. This expression echoes Caravaggio’s torturous lack of access to Christ by physical obstacles and literal distance. His attempts to connect with the spiritual are thwarted by both external forces and his own hand, physically manifested as the lantern he holds before his face. Even if he could close the distance, step past the obstacles, lower his hand, and see Christ, he might be disappointed with what he finds. Christ’s face is one of uncertainty and unrest, rather than serenity and faith. In this way, Caravaggio uses the role of the lantern-bearer as a metaphor. He, as expected of a

painter in the seventeenth century, is depicting a biblical scene that appeals to the faith of the audience. However, through the nuances of gesture, expression, composition, and lighting, he also uses the lantern-bearer to show his skepticism of and uncertainty about the “truth” he has painted. He reveals the irony of his profession: painting religious artworks that conflict with his personal beliefs. As lantern-bearer, Caravaggio illuminates unthinkable doubt and the taboo of spiritual absence in a time of turmoil for the Catholic Church, allowing viewers to join him in questioning his sense and their own sense of belief. ■

EDITORS

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NOTES

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| 1. Fried, 221. | 13. Cross and Livingstone, "Passion, the." | 25. Wittkower, 26. |
| 2. Fried, 210. | 14. Varriano, 191. | 26. Varriano, 202. |
| 3. Fried, 211. | 15. Enggass and Brown, 5. | 27. Varriano, 202. |
| 4. Fried, 217. | 16. Varriano, 191. | 28. Varriano, 214. |
| 5. Fried, 211; Varriano, 202; Treves, 69. | 17. Varriano, 198. | 29. Varriano, 214. |
| 6. Treves, 69. | 18. Enggass and Brown, 75–76. | 30. Friedlaender, 173. |
| 7. Varriano, 202. | 19. Wittkower, 1. | 31. Treves, 69. |
| 8. Varriano, 202. | 20. Soussloff; Marin, 34. | 32. Cross and Livingstone, "John, St." |
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| 12. Fried, 217. | 24. Varriano, 202. | |

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