

E. H. Gombrich, Review of R. Hinks and B. Berenson on Caravaggio, *The Listener*, Vol. 50, 1953, pp.1134 [Trapp no.1953C.1]

Caravaggio: Naturalism Re-examined

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio: His Life, His Legend. His Works. By Roger Hinks. Faber.

Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin. By Roger Hinks. Oxford.

Caravaggio, His Incongruity and his Fame. By Bernard Berenson. Chapman and Hall.

By E. H. GOMBRICH

To the nineteenth century Caravaggio was something of a bogeyman; he owed this sinister reputation to his early biographers who presented this violent genius as a dangerous subversive who cocked a snook at the ideals of Great Art. Such an aura of rebellion could not but commend the painter to our own age and so Caravaggio's fame as the anti-academic underdog has been mounting among art lovers till the new estimate of his stature led to the great one-man show at Milan in 1951. This exhibition, in its turn, stimulated much fruitful research (notably by Mr. Denis Mahon) among the pictures and documents. Roger Hinks' scholarly monograph, the first of its kind in English, sets out the results of this research with admirable clarity and contributes its share to the discussion among specialists which is likely to remain in flux for many years to come. Yet it is not only a book for the expert. Thanks to a neat separation into text and catalogue the layman will find it a useful introduction to an exciting and problematic artist. If life comes to Caravaggio for the first time he will perhaps feel a certain surprise as he looks through the ninety-six carefully printed plates: pictures of coquettish Roman urchins holding grapes or playing the lute, gypsies reading their fortunes to fops, card-players with a winking stage villain signalling to his accomplice how to cheat the pretty dupe, bearded saints with wrinkled brows, and dark, large canvases with gesticulating hangmen - all these seem strangely out of keeping with the tenets of modern criticism to which anecdote is taboo and 'photographic' and 'theatrical' are terms of abuse. Might Caravaggio owe some of his recent popularity to the fact that he allows a surreptitious enjoyment of these forbidden pleasures? Mr. Hinks would seem to suspect as much. 'It is only now, with the experience of cubism, expressionism, and surrealism behind us' (he writes) 'that we can begin to understand what realism is - and (still more important) what it is not. It is only now that we can see the work of a Caravaggio with detachment'.

To many readers this striving after detachment will appear the strength but also the weakness of Mr. Hinks' introduction. It serves him well where he has to recount the turbulent career of the painter-criminal; and his determination to disentangle fact from fiction results in a perfectly balanced section on the sources and growth of the Caravaggio 'legend'. He is perhaps less successful in his attempt to free himself of that legend when looking at the pictures. Sometimes his distrust of the artist's own naturalistic pronouncements tempts him to overshoot the mark; thus he is anxious to demonstrate that far from being a 'photographic' realist Caravaggio dressed up his models in Giorgionesque fancy costume - an idea that has meanwhile been disproved by S. M. Pearce (in the *Magazine of Art*). And while it is refreshing to find a critic who can point out faults of draughtsmanship and construction, may not some of the 'equivocations' to which he draws attention be due to that very programme of naturalism? After all a snapshot also surprises us often with arms and legs sticking out from unexpected corners. However, it is in his treatment of what he rightly recognises to be a central problem of Caravaggio's art, of his religious outlook, that even Mr. Hinks allows the legend to colour

his judgment. He says of Caravaggio's middle period that 'now and then he pulls himself together and paints those great theological machines which an unperceptive world has decided to call his masterpieces'. He even suggests that the large Madonna del Rosario was painted by the master with his tongue in his cheek. In his lecture on the Death of the Virgin he makes amends for this lapse by sketching in the religious background more carefully, but this makes it even clearer how much our understanding of this great religious painter would gain from a renewed investigation of the ecclesiastic affiliations and opinions of his patrons, friends, and opponents.

Whether Mr. Bernard Berenson would approve of such an investigation it is hard to say. He has harsh words to say against those who use works of art merely as a springboard - but in the preface to this essay (of which an Italian translation came out three years ago) he announces disarmingly that 'about these paintings I shall allow myself to say anything that comes into my head'. One reminds him of a Japanese woodcut, others of Hebbel's Judith, Cocteau's Jocasta or 'an exquisitely satisfying liqueur'. But despite much qualified approval Caravaggio appears to him as a sensationalist cynic and the 'incongruities' of subject and form jar on his nerves. Perhaps this is the reason why he allowed the essay to culminate in (or should one say deteriorate into?) an ill-tempered outburst against a strange assortment of pet aversions. It may be salutary for a master of criticism to warn his weaker brethren of certain pitfalls such as the confusion of an artist's empirical person with his work, or of his historical importance with his artistic greatness. What is less salutary is that Mr. Berenson clouds the issue by an appeal to nationalist prejudice. He has invented the epithet of 'German-minded' authors 'perhaps more numerous now in Anglo-Saxonia than in Germany' - for critics who see Caravaggio (or the world) in a light he disapproves of. The pity is that Mr. Berenson could have made a much more telling attack if he had troubled to formulate his criticism in terms of method. What he objects to is that Hegelian type of historical collectivism, as frequent in Italy and France as elsewhere, that elevates periods into entities and creates such figments as Baroque Man. Mr. Berenson is on safe ground when he ridicules this scholastic jargon, but he fails to see that it is he who inflates the importance of labels with his fulminations against the mere terms 'Baroque' and 'Mannerism'. Surely we cannot appeal to dictionaries to find out what they 'really' mean? For what about 'Gothic', or, for that matter, 'German-minded'? Let, then, scholastics worry about the question whether Caravaggio's Naturalism is baroque. For such cases are better settled in the good old Brains Trust fashion: 'It all depends what you mean by ...'.



The 'Madonna del Rosario', by Caravaggio From 'Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio', by Roger Hinks