Caravaggio

Hello, David here, welcome to Art Stories for English Learners, the place to improve your English with interesting stories about art and artists.

Around 1600, While Shakespeare was writing plays in England, another master of drama was working in Italy.

His name was Caravaggio, and he brought a new level of emotion and storytelling to painting.

He's more often described as the painter of darkness and light.
Not only for his style, but for the extremes in his personality.
He was at once a violent criminal, and a painter of holy miracles.

One critic even called him 'painting's Antichrist.'

In this episode, we'll look at:
how Caravaggio used his skill to make paintings that were shockingly real.
How he painted poor people in a radically new way.
And, we'll see how Caravaggio used light to tell a story.
Finally, we'll finish with his masterpiece: *The Calling of St Matthew.*

Before we begin, there are links to the paintings in the episode information.
There is also a link to the website with episode transcripts, so you can read along.

This is a two part episode. A two parter, It got a bit long. Let me know what you think. If you like it, please give a five star rating in your podcast app. It really motivates me to make these podcasts.

Alright, let's go!

In 1590, the great dome of St Peter's Basilica in Rome was finally completed.
It was the largest and tallest in the world, bringing the church close to the height of the Great Pyramid of Giza.

But the dome's architect, Michelangelo, wasn't around to see it. He had already been dead for twenty five years, and the classical spirit of the Renaissance was being forgotten.

Art had transformed into something weirder - into mannerism - a new style that valued elegance above all else. Figures got longer and weaker. Compositions got crowded and confused. Many people felt it was lightweight - that those long, elegant arms and legs couldn't support the weight of the human soul.

For the Catholic Church, this was a problem. Since the protestant reformation earlier in the century, Catholic Europe and Protestant Europe had been in a battle for dominance. It didn't need sophisticated paintings for the elite. It needed propaganda.

St Peter's Basilica was a display of power - an announcement to the world that Rome was home to the one true church and that the pope was its rightful leader.

But while stone buildings could inspire the people, painting could move them to devotion.

The common man or woman couldn't read the bible written in latin, nor understand the priests who spoke it. Their faith was mainly visual, revealed to them through paintings on church walls.

So to succeed in Rome, painters had to be storytellers. The leaders of the Church would award the big commissions to artists who could bring the suffering and salvation of the Christian story to life.

They poured into the city from every corner of Europe, competing to paint for the new churches. A number of them would give painting a new strength and emotional intensity, beginning an artistic extravaganza like the world had never seen before.

Together, they created a dramatic new style that we now call the Baroque.

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, known simply as Caravaggio, arrived in Rome around 1592. He was twenty one years old and had almost nothing.

Some say he had fled from the north of Italy, after injuring a policeman. But by all accounts, he was leaving behind a dark upbringing.

His childhood was a time of plague. For safety, his parents moved the family from Milan to the nearby town of Caravaggio, after which he took his name. But it didn't help. By age six, the plague had killed Caravaggio's father, grandfather and uncle. His mother died of the disease six years later.

The archbishop of Milan, Carlos Borremeo, deeply influenced the world Caravaggio grew up in. During the plague, he sold his possessions and stayed to care for the poor while other leaders fled. He led huge nighttime processions full of singing and crying to bring the people hope.

But he was feared for his strict faith. He punished sinners harshly and even tried to ban the city's beloved carnivals. He believed the purpose of art was to make people empathise with the suffering of Christ.

It was in this dark and devout time that Caravaggio's brother decided to become a priest. Carravaggio, meanwhile, was apprenticed to a local artist to learn the art of painting.

Progress was slow. His earliest paintings of boys peeling fruit look more like wooden puppets than flesh and blood, and it's likely he spent more time sword fighting with other young men than learning to paint.

Whether or not this led to stabbing a policeman on a night out and fleeing the city, we will never know for sure.

But he would need a capacity for violence. Rome was dangerous: a city full of conmen, assassins, prostitutes and beggars, not to mention jealous artists. Men fought and died over insults to their honour.

Public executions were a common sight, sometimes with criminals being cut to pieces in the streets. A few years previously, Pope Sixtus V had ordered their heads to be put on spikes along the banks of the river. It's said at one point there were more heads along the river Tiber than there were melons in the marketplace.

These dramatic displays were designed to send a message to the city's wild, mostly male inhabitants: behave.

Like many desperate new arrivals, Caravaggio needed to find work. He started a few different jobs before ending up in the workshop of Giuseppe Cesari, one of the most successful painters in Rome.

It was common for young painters to work and train in the workshops of established artists. They were a bit like painting factories where the trainee artists finished the less important parts of the master's paintings.

Cesari was a master of the elegant mannerist style which was still popular. But it was in the Cesari workshop that Caravaggio's genius began to blossom. And it revealed itself with an unlikely subject matter.

He was given the fruit and flowers to paint. At the time, they were seen as purely decorative subjects: not worth a master artist's time, and certainly not worth a painting of their own.

Yet Caravaggio believed that painting still life elements like fruit requires just as much skill as painting figures or portraits. He had probably seen early Dutch still lifes that had arrived in Milan but were still unknown in Rome.

The Dutch painters achieved astonishing levels of naturalism in their paintings of meat, flowers and fruit.

Naturalism is the careful reproduction of the visible world, especially the details that make something look real. For example: wrinkles on a face or the exact way light is reflected in glass.

The naturalistic tradition in Milan went back to Leonardo Da Vinci who studied human anatomy and the science of light to make more believable figures in his paintings.

Perhaps Caravaggio was encouraged to study from nature during his apprenticeship in Milan. Maybe he was just desperate for recognition, because he dedicated himself to mastering the art of still life.

Fruit also found its way into his own work. When he wasn't working on Cesari's commissions, he painted portraits.

One is of himself dressed as Bacchus, the Roman god of wine. In front of Bachus on a table, Caravaggio has painted two juicy apricots and some shiny black grapes. But the grapes in Bachus's hand are beginning to rot. He doesn't look too healthy either. They call this painting young, sick Bachus.

He also made a work called 'boy with a basket of fruit', a seductive portrait of his new Sicilian friend: the painter Mario Minniti. Mario's shirt is falling off his smooth shoulder, and his head is tilting back lazily. He holds a full basket of fruit, a symbol of temptation, but look closely and the vine leaves are turning yellow.

As was common for such paintings, the fruit delivers a moral message. Here it represents the empty promise of sexual pleasures. It's believed Caravaggio had relationships with men and women, but paintings such as these were risky. The punishment for homosexuality could be death.

After leaving Cesari's workshop, he continued to reach new heights of mastery. A few years later, he would paint his most extraordinary still life painting. It's a kind of manifesto for naturalism and one of the first pure still lifes in Italian art.

In 'Basket of Fruit', as it's known, Caravaggio achieves an incredible level of detail. We see a side view of the basket, which is sticking out over the edge of a table. Like the grapes that seem to spill over its edges, the effect is that it seems to come out of the painting and into our reality.

It's overflowing with sweet apples, pears and figs. The illusion is so strong that we might reach out to take one. The blank background invites us to look at them with the same hypnotic focus as the painter, and we become absorbed in the delicate rhythm of the basket weave.

It's naturalism of the highest level. We can even see where a worm has made a hole in the rosy red apple. Imperfections like these convince us even more that we are looking at something real.

Two hundred years before the first photographs: Caravaggio realised there is power in showing things as they really are.

Caravaggio's friends in Rome introduced him to influential art dealers. One friend, a hot-blooded young architect called Onorio Longhi, introduced him to the city's dark side. The two went out drinking, gambling and fighting together.

He was arrested at least 11 times in Rome, accused of beating a man with a stick, throwing stones at a policeman, attacking a waiter and forcing him to eat artichokes, attacking a man with a sword and so on.

An artist visiting the city complained that 'it is most awkward to get along with him': 'after a fortnight's work, he goes around for a month or two with a sword at his side… from one tennis court to another… ready to engage in a fight'

He was clearly a man of the street, the drinking taverns and the gambling tables - and apparently tennis courts. He wasn't swinging a tennis racket though, but rather a sword. Tennis courts were where men arranged illegal duels to settle disagreements.

This tough life trained Caravaggio in another art of observation: the study of human behaviour. Like many street smart criminals, he knew how to read a situation quickly. And this growing ability to notice subtle body language and expressions came through in his art.

It allowed him to give his figures personality. They would become like actors in a play who reveal their emotions with a quick smile or the tightening of their fist. By capturing these little moments, Caravaggio would be able to tell a story in a single image.

A year after he painted the sensual portrait of Mario Minniti, 'Boy with a Basket of Fruit', he made his first two masterpieces. For his first important figure paintings, he made a radical decision for the time. He didn't choose to paint the lives of the saints or some Greek myths. He chose to paint everyday scenes from the streets and the lower classes he lived among.

The first painting was called 'The Fortune Teller'. Some people believe a person's future is written in the lines on the palms of their hands. For a small fee, a fortune teller will tell you your future or fortune.

Our fortune teller is a Romani woman. Not to be confused with the Romans, the Romani ethnic group suffered a lot of prejudice at the time, and stereotypical characters were common in the Italian theatre.

But this woman isn't a cartoonish stereotype. She's depicted as a beautiful, dignified figure in her traditional dress. A biographer of Caravaggio's called her the 'most graceful and expressive' figure in all of art history.

She is a conwoman however. And she is using her beauty to steal from a wealthy young man who has stopped to have his fortune told.

The luxurious silk sleeves and the floppy feather in his hat reflect his superior attitude. But his fresh pink cheeks and dreamy expression make him look naive. The perfect target. He reaches out his hand for the fortune teller to read.

The fortune teller isn't looking at his palm however. She is looking into her victim's eyes. There is a slight smile on her face, but she also looks hesitant. Is she trying to seduce him, or is she checking that he hasn't noticed anything?

Because while her left hand holds his wrist, her right hand is delicately removing the ring on his finger.

Caravaggio has captured the scene at the most dramatic moment - as the crime is taking place and when the thief could be discovered.

There is so much information captured in this one instant. As our eyes follow the subtle gestures and expressions of the figures, we put together a story of what is happening.

Usually we feel sympathy for the victim of a crime. But the charming fortune teller has won us to her side. It's a study of naivety and street smarts. A victory of the poor over the rich.

The second painting was a more ambitious composition and a more dramatic piece of theatre. It's called 'The Cardsharps'. Cardsharps were people who cheat at card games to steal their victims' money.

Two young men are sitting at a table playing cards, but only one of them is playing fair. The victim this time is another dreamy, rich youth on the left. He's focusing on his cards instead of what's happening around him.

His opponent on the right, the cardsharp, is not worried about his own cards. Instead, he's looking up to a third older man in the background: his partner in crime.

As if there is any doubt that they are working together, Caravaggio has dressed them in matching black and yellow stripes. They are like two wasps about to steal some honey.

While the rich youth's face is calm and his hands are together in front of him, the two cardsharps are much more active. The older one is straining his neck to look over the youth's shoulder and see what cards he has. His eyes are open so wide they look like they are going to pop out.

He must have seen something though because he's giving a secret hand signal to his companion at the table. The young card sharp's mouth is open like he's concentrating hard. Or is he waiting for his opponent to lay a card?

We don't need to wait and see what happens. Because in the bottom right corner, we finally notice some hidden, extra cards tucked into the cardsharps belt. He is reaching behind his back and gently removing the one he needs.

Whichever card the victim chooses, he's going to lose.

Never before had the lives of the lower classes been painted in this way.

If poor people were in paintings, they were usually in the background, like objects in a landscape. This type of painting was called a 'genre scene': a scene of everyday life. The people either looked tired from work or they were drunk, red-faced and stupid.

In contrast, Caravaggio gave his Romans personality. They were individuals with their own thoughts and lives - even if they were criminals.

His naturalistic skill is also on display. Look at the delicate folds of the fortune teller's dress and the pattern of the tablecloth in the cardsharps. This level of detail was normal for portraits of the rich and powerful, not the poor. These two paintings seem to say that normal people, too, are a subject for the greatest art.

Caravaggio still needed wealthy people to buy his artworks. But the art-buyers didn't seem to mind seeing the rich characters beaten by clever tricksters. The paintings are just too entertaining.

One reason is how instantaneous they are. The scene is frozen in time. We are used to seeing moments captured by photographs, but for viewers at the time, these paintings must have seemed magical.

We feel right up close to the action, like we're standing in the street too.

But we are in a privileged position. Unlike the naive victims, we know what is happening. Caravaggio puts us on the side of the criminals.

Just as he studied real fruit for his still lifes, Carravaggio studied real people for his genre scenes.

He is reported to have said that 'the first Romani woman he saw on the street was a better subject for art than any classical sculpture.'

It doesn't seem strange to us for an artist to paint from real models instead of copying old sculptures. But at the time, it was seen by many as an attack on art itself.

Artists were expected to create an ideal version of beauty. Studying real life was just a starting point. They were supposed to transform it into an image of perfection.

It wasn't just a style. It was considered the job of the artist.

By painting models just as he saw them, Caravaggio was turning his back on society's definition of art. He didn't want perfection, he wanted realism.

Naturalism and realism are similar ideas. In daily life, we just say an image is realistic if it looks more like a photograph. But to understand the impact that Caravaggio had on painting, it helps to separate the two ideas.

Naturalism focuses on how something is painted: the level of detail. Realism, on the other hand, is about what the artist chooses to paint.

Every person and every society represents reality in a different way. They notice different things or give other things more importance.

A tourist might visit all the famous sights in your city and take lots of photos. But they often don't see the real city. They miss the less beautiful but more authentic places.

When we say that Caravaggio wanted realism, we mean he included things from his world, from the world of the poor, the dirty and the desperate.

While his naturalism was impressive, it still followed certain artistic traditions. His realism, on the other hand, was something entirely new.

By painting people from the street, like the Romani woman, he was including the common people in the story of art. He was giving them importance they had never had before.

For now, the fortune teller and the cardsharps attracted a lot of attention in Rome's artistic circles.

But Caravaggio was still so poor that he had to sell The Fortune Teller for almost nothing. That was about to change.

His talent had been noticed by someone who mattered: The Cardinal Del Monte.

As a Cardinal, Del Monte was an influential figure in the Church and a great patron of the arts and sciences.

He was well-connected with the powerful Medici family in Florence. He even introduced them to Galileo Galilei, who became their official astronomer and mathematician.

Chosen artists could paint for Del Monte and live with him in the Palazzo Madama, his huge house in the centre of Rome.

And this was the invitation Caravaggio received in 1595, three years after he first arrived in the city. You can imagine the relief and excitement that he felt as he entered the impressive Palazzo for the first time.

From now on, he would lead a life of luxury, safe in the walls of the Palazzo and surrounded by Rome's cultural and intellectual elite.

In some ways, Del Monte was like a father figure for Caravaggio, housing him, clothing him and introducing him to art dealers. Most of all, he gave him confidence. The years at the Palazzo were an oasis in Caravaggio's chaotic life.

He didn't quit drinking and fighting, however. In fact he became even more of a trouble-maker, safe in the knowledge that the Cardinal would protect him from the law.

But the cardinal was no angel either. Del Monte is recorded to have spent evenings gambling and in the company of prostitutes.

The Palazzo grew a reputation as a party house, with rumours spreading about what went on inside. Caravaggio's new paintings did little to stop them.

While he was there, he painted a number of erotic paintings of young men.

Caravaggio's friend and model, Mario Minniti, posed for several of the flirtatious figures. Most famous of them is another 'Bacchus'. This time, Bacchus is leaning back on a sofa. Reaching out with his left hand towards us, he is offering us a glass of the finest red wine.

Bacchus's face has a suggestive expression. It's hard to imagine he's a Roman God because he seems so human and lifelike.

Instead, we feel that it's Mario looking back at us, posing for his portrait. Caravaggio has created a tension between reality and representation.

And he had now mastered the combination of naturalism, realism and his understanding of psychology to make uniquely engaging images.

But alongside these paintings of pleasure, his art also developed in a new, violent direction. At the Palazzo, he made several of the brutal works that have captured the imagination of viewers for centuries.

They also secured his reputation as the painter of darkness and light.