

Mar 19th, 2:15 PM - 3:15 PM

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Berbert, Louis, "Caravaggio's Faith and Good Works: A New Interpretation of Saint Jerome Writing, and Its Implications About the Artist" (2022). *Undergraduate Research Symposium*. 7.
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Caravaggio's Faith and Good Works:

A New Interpretation of *Saint Jerome Writing*, and its Implications About the Artist

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ARTH411

Dr. Anne Muraoka

Over the past one-hundred years, much effort has been given to the analysis and interpretation of the many paintings produced by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio during his short lifetime. Unfortunately, many of the artist's works have gone vastly understudied, such as his *Saint Jerome Writing* (Fig. 1), completed in 1606. Several scholars have touched on the painting briefly over the years, such as Howard Hibbard, who suggests in his 1985 monograph, *Caravaggio*, that the piece touches on the transiency of life, as well as Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, who adds in her 2009 book, *Caravaggio: The Artist and His Work*, that the painting appears to be unfinished.¹ John T. Spike has also argued in his revised, 2010 monograph, *Caravaggio*, that *Saint Jerome Writing* marks a significant shift in style for Caravaggio, noting a looseness to the brushstrokes that was not present in the artist's previous artworks.² Individually, each of these assertions do not amount to much, however, like many of Caravaggio's other paintings, deeper intimations can often be divulged. This paper, through the use of previous scholarship, formal analysis, biographical content about the artist, and information regarding the painting's conception, serves to put forth the notion that *Saint Jerome Writing* is not as straightforward as art historians currently seem to believe. In fact, this paper argues that Caravaggio's *Saint Jerome Writing* is meant to not only promote Counter-Reformation ideas surrounding faith and good works, but to take viewers on a journey into the mind of the artist, revealing his deep identification with Jerome.

Caravaggio was born Michelangelo Merisi on September 29, 1571, but would later be referred to only as Caravaggio, after the small town from which he hailed.³ After completing an apprenticeship in Milan, the young artist moved to Rome where his early works would soon attract loyal patrons, such as Francesco Maria del Monte.⁴ Caravaggio would soon begin his ascension to fame, and his influence would spread, along with his less than exemplary

reputation. Caravaggio's life was marred by several violent incidents and generally crude behavior, a saga that would reach its climax when the artist killed Ranuccio Tommasoni over a wager on a tennis match, a course of action which caused the Pope to issue him a death sentence, forcing him to flee Rome.⁵ It is largely because of these incidents that many scholars attest that Caravaggio having been religious is impossible. Although this is a widely accepted notion, some evidence suggests otherwise, such as the stunning scriptural accuracy in his work. Caravaggio's rendition of Jerome is even specifically mentioned as being more in line with what is said about the saint in *The Golden Legend* than other paintings at the time of the same subject, something that will be touched on further, shortly.⁶

Caravaggio's *Saint Jerome Writing* features Jerome, known as the patron saint of scholars, sitting at his desk, presumably in the act of translating the Hebrew Bible into Latin for the Catholic Vulgate; his most famed accomplishment.⁷ Jerome was a popular subject for artists of Caravaggio's time, as his deep devotion to the Catholic faith, as well as his fierce opposition of heresy, made him an important icon during the Counter-Reformation.⁸ Returning to the painting itself, the composition is rather claustrophobic, with Jerome hunched over to the right of the canvas, his eyes fixated on the open book resting on a small table in front of him. The saint's right arm extends across the center of the image, as he dips his pen in an inkwell, directing the viewers' attention to a single human skull placed on top of a stack of books. The colors Caravaggio chose to work with are rather muted, save for a bright white cloth clinging to the corner of the table, along with Jerome's deep red cloak which is loosely draped over his body.

The trademark features of Caravaggio's other works are once again present, such as the dramatic chiaroscuro and hyper-realism. That being said, the loose brushstrokes which were previously touched on, as well as the expressiveness of the colors, suggest that Caravaggio may

have begun to focus less on precisely replicating nature, and instead decided to add some level of emotion and expressiveness to his work; a trend that would seemingly continue for the rest of his career.⁹ It is also intriguing to note that Caravaggio's interpretation of Jerome differs significantly from both his contemporaries' work, as well as the artists' who came before him.¹⁰ While these artists often portrayed Jerome as vigorous and heroic, such as in the case of Alessandro Bonvicini's *Saint Jerome*, which depicts the saint with an overtly muscular physique, Caravaggio's Jerome is frail and somber, his bald head creating an ominous parallel with the human skull resting just a few feet away.¹¹ While this iconography within the piece does tell us a great deal about Caravaggio's intended interpretation of *Saint Jerome Writing*, it is first important to discuss the circumstances surrounding the work's conception, as well as to establish more fully the stylistic differences in Caravaggio's work prior to *Saint Jerome Writing*.

Caravaggio painted *Saint Jerome Writing* during a tumultuous time, not only in the artist's own life, but generally speaking in Rome. Although Caravaggio almost certainly had not killed Ranuccio Tommasoni yet by the time he painted *Saint Jerome Writing*, he still carried the weight of several arrests, legal disputes, and episodes of violence, which had already occurred.¹² Meanwhile, Europe at large was still experiencing extreme division as a result of the Protestant Reformation, started by Martin Luther in 1517, which openly shunned the Catholic concept of "faith and good works" as being a legitimate means of entry into heaven, instead professing that admittance into heaven is achieved through faith and faith alone.¹³ For decades, the Papacy would fight back against these detractors, attempting to establish the Catholic doctrine as absolute in various ways, including the promotion of religious artworks and devotional images, which the Protestants' detested.¹⁴ There appears to be no mistaking, at least outwardly, which side of the conflict Caravaggio stood on, as he often painted Catholic saints for Catholic

officials, to say nothing of the various elements seen within Caravaggio's canvases, such as the cardinal red cloak in *Saint Jerome Writing*, which have often been viewed as blatantly anti-Lutheran.¹⁵ When given this context, it becomes more comprehensible as to why Caravaggio would have chosen Jerome, a prime example of a devout Catholic saint who dedicated his life to, and stressed the importance of doing good works, as the subject for this canvas.

As for the stylistic differences in Caravaggio's work prior to painting *Saint Jerome Writing*, they are better understood given the following context. When Caravaggio first arrived in Rome and began his career, it would have been pervasively apparent that his attention was fixed on painting with absolute realism, not only because he painted still lifes and worked from models, but because his style completely contradicted the Mannerist approach, which prevailed at the time.¹⁶ Mannerism painting is characterized by a heightened level of stylization, with idealized figures, vivid colors, and unnatural proportions; all key attributes that can be seen in works such as Pontormo's *Descent from the Cross* (Fig. 2), completed around 1525.¹⁷ Caravaggio's work up to 1606, by comparison, is characterized by photo-like realism. This effect is especially apparent in the artists' early, secular works, such as his *Bacchus* (Fig. 3), which features lifelike texture and colors, and such attention to detail that even some of the fruit placed in a bowl before the painting's subject appears to be rotting.¹⁸ Caravaggio himself is even quoted by both Bellori and Karel Van Mander as saying that he imitated his models so closely that his brushstrokes are not his own, rather they belong to nature.¹⁹ This level of focus on the natural, however, seems to have begun to wane for Caravaggio, beginning with *Saint Jerome Writing*, and continuing throughout the rest of his career. While Caravaggio continued to paint his figures with naturalism in mind, his brushstrokes now become loose and wispy, and his canvases begin to evoke a level of moodiness and expressiveness not previously present.²⁰ Other such works

which this stylistic shift are apparent include the artist's *Saint Francis in Prayer* (Fig. 4), completed in 1608, as well as his *David with the Head of Goliath* (Fig. 5), completed in 1610. Unfortunately, while the general historical context of the painting, as well as Caravaggio's stylistic shift, are well documented, the more specific details surrounding the work's creation are less concrete.

Bellori is the first art historian to have mentioned the *Saint Jerome Writing*, which he does in his book, *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, first published in 1672.²¹ Bellori claims that Cardinal Scipione Borghese commissioned the painting directly, however, this is not undisputable, considering the painting is not mentioned in a 1613 poem by Scipione Francucci, which described Cardinal Borghese's collection of works by Caravaggio.²² This also would not be the first time a discrepancy can be found in Bellori's writings on Caravaggio, as he also incorrectly labeled Asdrubale Mattei as the original owner of the artist's *Taking of Christ*, when in fact it was painted for his brother, Ciriaco.²³ In more recent history, it has been more commonly suggested that Caravaggio gifted *Saint Jerome Writing* to Borghese in gratitude for his aid in settling a legal dispute stemming from an incident wherein the artist apparently attacked a man.²⁴ The fact that the painting appears unfinished, which was mentioned previously, also lends credibility to this theory, as it potentially indicates that Caravaggio rushed the work along, given the circumstances. What this suggests is that if Scipione Borghese did not commission the painting directly, and thereby did not choose the subject of the piece, then it is possible that Caravaggio himself chose the subject of the painting. This, coupled with the fact that the artist painted Jerome several times throughout his career, gives credibility to the idea that he may have enjoyed painting Jerome, and that he may have felt a special connection to the saint, which will be important to this paper's argument later on.²⁵ Now that the broader, as well as the

more nuanced circumstances surrounding the painting's conception have been established, the greater significance of *Saint Jerome Writing* can more easily be understood.

Circling back to the idea of a broader stylistic shift in Caravaggio's work, such a turn could have broader implications regarding the artist's stance on religion. If the accounts presented earlier, which seemingly confirm Caravaggio's committal to realism in his work, are to be believed, then for Caravaggio to, beginning with *Saint Jerome Writing*, suddenly go about painting in such a way that replicating nature was no longer his only, singular focus, suggests that the artist had settled on a new, more grandiose purpose for his artwork, such as furthering the Catholic mission. This would also not be the first instance a Caravaggio painting has been used to suggest the artist as being religious, as this is also a primary focus of Anthony Apesos' 2010 article, "The Painter as Evangelist in Caravaggio's *Taking of Christ*," which suggests Caravaggio may have been wrestling with his role in cultivating the Catholic faith during the time of *The Taking of Christ*'s conception, four years prior to *Saint Jerome Writing*, in 1602.²⁶ This potentially insinuates that by 1606, he had fully come to faith, and was now unequivocally professing this faith in his artwork, expressed by the aforementioned changes in style.

As far as what is contained within the actual image of *Saint Jerome Writing*, there is no abundance of symbolic iconography found within the scene, save for the human skull, which scholars, for many years, have identified as a *memento mori*; a reminder of the inevitability of death.²⁷ As previously noted, Howard Hibbard also adds that Jerome's feeble state and specifically his bald head, creates a parallel with this skull, suggesting that the penitent saint's death is impending.²⁸ What these previous scholars neglect to touch on, however, is Jerome's response to his approaching demise. He is clearly unfazed, completely preoccupied by his laborious project, unconcerned with death, as well as the ominous object reminding him of it.

Even as he reaches his arm across the cluttered table to dip his pen in the inkwell, he refuses to even glance up slightly, in which case the skull would surely be within eyesight. This is because Jerome understood the Catholic-appointed truth, that through his good works, in this case his translation of the Bible, along with his faith, he secures his place with God where he will live eternally, and therefore he need not fear death, or bother preoccupying himself with the concept, for that matter. This message would have been particularly moving to dutiful Catholics, such as Cardinal Borghese, and incredibly upsetting for Protestants, but the message may have been one that Caravaggio understood on a more personal level as well, which supplies evidence in favor of Caravaggio having had some level of particular interest in Jerome.

To understand Caravaggio's personal connection to the painting's implications and to Jerome, some biblical knowledge is necessary regarding the concepts of death, sin, and Satan. Throughout the biblical texts, death is referred to as an effect of sin, and the devil is said to be its ultimate cause, a sentiment that is neatly and fully displayed in Hebrews 2:14, which states "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil," in reference to Jesus. When death and sin are viewed in this analogous fashion, Caravaggio's relationship to the thematic approach of *Saint Jerome Writing* becomes clear. Whether or not Caravaggio was a righteous man or not is incredibly subjective, but what is clear, at the very least, is that he was a troubled man. From writing lewd poetry aimed at his contemporaries, to instigating brawls and sword duels, Caravaggio's life was permeated by sin for most of his adult life.²⁹ Much like Jerome, however, Caravaggio knew he need not fear, for through his own faith and good works, in his case, the numerous religious works he conceived throughout his career, he too was furthering the Catholic church's principle mission, and therefore was ultimately exempt from the

clutches of death and his own sins. Not only does this make his giving *Saint Jerome Writing* to Cardinal Borghese, who essentially saved him from another one of his many sins, all the more genius, but the biblical metaphor contained within the skull may have been an ode to Jerome himself, who was said to favor a more symbolic and spiritual reading of the Bible.³⁰

So far throughout this paper three assertions have been put forward. First, that the broad stylistic shift in Caravaggio's work potentially suggests his dedication to the Catholic faith. Secondly, that *Saint Jerome Writing* emphasizes both faith and good works as being important to the Catholic faith. And finally, that Caravaggio identified with Jerome and the theme which he bestowed upon *Saint Jerome Writing*. What is important to note is that, while it may seem like the latter two proclamations hinge on the first one being wholly true, this is not entirely the case. This is because even if Caravaggio was not a man of faith, this by no means indicates that he could not have taken a particular interest in a certain subject, nor does it designate that the artist, when given some freedom of subject, would not choose a theme that particularly resonated with him, whether he was convinced of its truth or otherwise.

Unfortunately, Caravaggio will never again live to offer conclusive evidence of his faith, or the intended purposes and messaging behind his work, but as previously evidenced in this paper, many clues are often within reach. By using various, tried-and-true methods of study and analysis, in this case the social-historical examination, as well as the observation of formal and aesthetic qualities within the work, indications of the artist's intentions are often revealed, and in many cases, can be connected. In the case of *Saint Jerome Writing*, not only have these methodologies been used to form a fresh interpretation surrounding faith and good works, but new revelations regarding Caravaggio's own personal feelings on faith and religion have been brought forward, as well. It would seem that for all of this great artist's struggles, he at least

knew of the importance of his own work, not only to those fortunate enough to have viewed it, but for his own, ultimate salvation.

¹ Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 194; and Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Caravaggio: The Artist and His Work* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2009), 184.

² John T. Spike, *Caravaggio* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2010), 163-164.

³ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 1.

⁴ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 14–29.

⁵ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 206.

⁶ Catherine Puglisi, *Caravaggio* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1998), 242.

⁷ Puglisi, *Caravaggio*, 238.

⁸ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 193.

⁹ Spike, *Caravaggio*, 163.

¹⁰ Puglisi, *Caravaggio*, 238-242.

¹¹ Puglisi, *Caravaggio*, 238.

¹² Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 194-196.

¹³ Robert Neuman, *Baroque and Rococo Art and Architecture* (New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2013), 34-36.

¹⁴ Neuman, *Baroque and Rococo Art and Architecture*, 36-37.

¹⁵ Rossella Vodret, *Caravaggio: The Complete Works* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2010), 146

¹⁶ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 10.

¹⁷ Neuman, *Baroque and Rococo Art and Architecture*, 54.

¹⁸ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 39-40.

¹⁹ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 343-344; and Bellori, *Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, 184.

²⁰ Spike, *Caravaggio*, 164.

²¹ Giovanni Pietro Bellori, *Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, trans. Alice Sedgwick Wohl (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 182.

²² Creighton Gilbert, *Caravaggio and His Two Cardinals* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1995), 107.

²³ Sergio Benedetti, "Caravaggio's 'Taking of Christ', a Masterpiece Rediscovered," *Burlington Magazine* 135, no. 1088 (1993): 741.

²⁴ Vodret, *Caravaggio: The Complete Works*, 146.

²⁵ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 193.

²⁶ Anthony Apesos, "The Painter as Evangelist in Caravaggio's Taking of Christ," *Aurora: The Journal of the History of Art*, 11 (2010): 21–56.

²⁷ Vodret, *Caravaggio: The Complete Works*, 146.

²⁸ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 194.

²⁹ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 160-161, 194-197.

³⁰ Spike, *Caravaggio*, 164.

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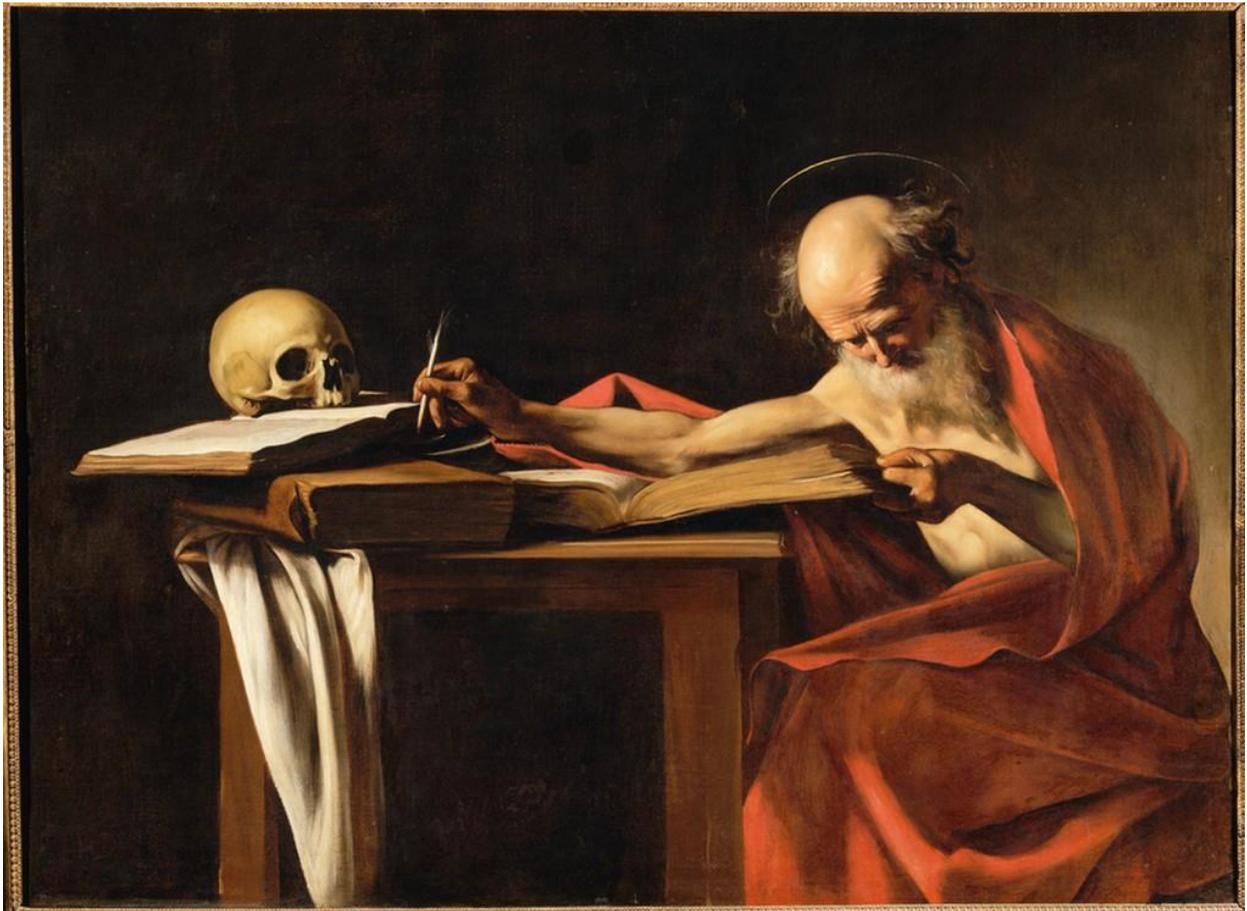


Fig. 1. Caravaggio, *Saint Jerome Writing*, 1606. Oil on canvas, 112 cm × 157 cm. Galleria Borghese, Rome.



Fig. 2. Pontormo, *Descent from the Cross*, 1525. Oil on panel, 312 cm x 193 cm. Capponi Chapel, Santa Felicita, Florence.



Fig. 3. Caravaggio, *Bacchus*, 1597. Oil on canvas, 95 cm x 85 cm. Ufizi, Florence.



Fig. 4. Caravaggio, *Saint Francis in Meditation*, c. 1608. Oil on canvas, 130 cm x 90 cm. Museo Civico, Cremona.

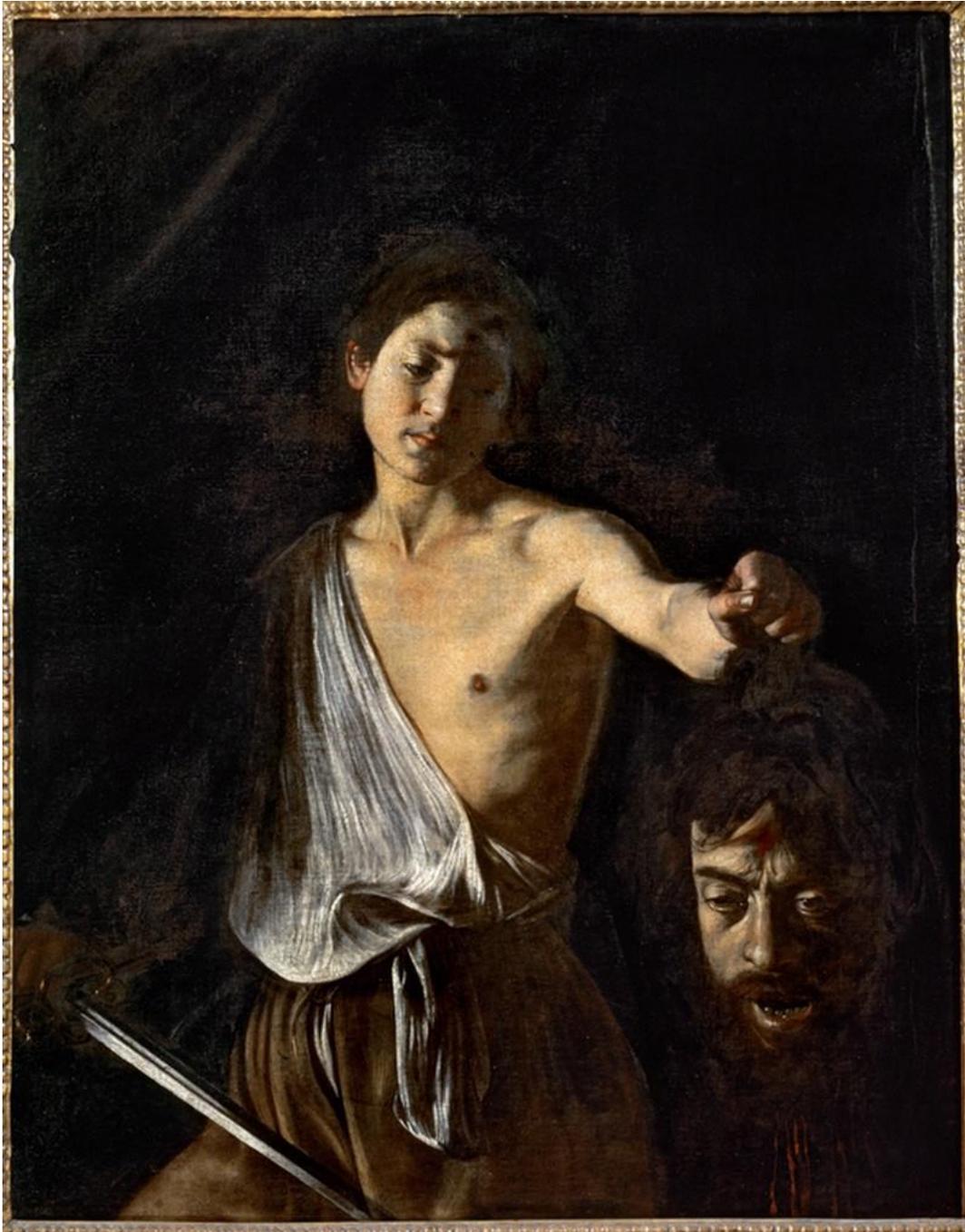


Fig. 5. Caravaggio, *David with the Head of Goliath*, 1610. Oil on canvas, 125 cm x 101 cm. Galleria Borghese, Rome.