





WORKS

## Sick Bacchus

1593–1594

*Oil on canvas, 67 x 53 cm*  
Galleria Borghese, Rome

This unusual image of the god of wine as young and sickly was originally owned by the Cavalier d'Arpino, a late Mannerist painter for whom Caravaggio worked during his first stay in Rome. In 1607, when the Cavalier's assets were confiscated by the tax authorities, the painting was sold to Cardinal Scipione Borghese, which explains why today it is in the collection of the Galleria Borghese.

As no paintings from Caravaggio's time in Milan are known to have survived, this Bacchus counts as one of his earliest surviving works. Because of the unhealthy color of his face, many see the figure of Bacchus as a self-portrait by Caravaggio when he was in hospital with a fever. As his early biographer Giovanni Baglione reported, at that time Caravaggio painted "several small pictures in front of the mirror and the first of these was a Bacchus with various types of grapes. These were painted with great care, albeit in a dry manner." Caravaggio's Bacchus does not have the usual crown of vines; instead, as a sign of everlasting youth, he is crowned with ivy. The pale skin, the thin almost gaunt body, and the strange withdrawn stance also differentiate him from other portrayals of the voluptuous god of wine. The Caravaggio authority Mina Gregori has pointed out that the silvery color of the face, the twisted body position, and the ancient belted garment worn by the young god reflect the influence of Caravaggio's teacher in Milan, Simone Peterzano.



## Boy with a Basket of Fruit

1593–1594

Oil on canvas, 70 x 67 cm  
Galleria Borghese, Rome

The naturalism expressed in Caravaggio's early Roman pictures is demonstrated with particular clarity by his very precise depictions of the objects of everyday life. Many of his works from this period show blossoming fruit, flowers, and boys. However, there are also hints of decay and the transiency of beauty, such as the beam of light that illuminates the room behind the boy, a reminder of the fleetingness of the moment. And among the fruits and leaves in the generously filled basket that the young man appears to offer the viewer, objects painted with an almost photographic brilliance, some leaves have already wilted. The similarities between this painting and his *Still Life with a Basket of Fruit*, one of the very early examples of the genre of independent still life that was just emerging at the beginning of the seventeenth century, are obvious. However, the picture of the boy unmistakably belongs to Caravaggio's early works, which feature the ordinary people of Rome. Genre scenes depicting figures with generously presented arrangements of fruit and flowers were very popular with royal collectors of the early seventeenth century; painters such as Peter Paul Rubens and Jacob Jordaens also included the subject in their repertoire. Like other early works by Caravaggio, his *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* entered the collection of Cardinal Borghese when the assets of the Cavalier d'Arpino were confiscated by the papal tax authorities.



# The Fortune Teller

1593–1594

*Oil on canvas, 115 x 150 cm*  
*Musei Capitolini, Rome*

This early work clearly shows Caravaggio's artistic indebtedness to the Lombardy School of the sixteenth century. It depicts an event from daily life: besotted with the charms of an elegantly dressed young gypsy woman, a callow youth wearing a fine doublet, feathered hat, and sword lets the smiling fortune teller read his palm without noticing that she has stolen the ring from his finger.

This painting, with its clear moral reminder not to be tricked by attractive seeming deceptions, quickly became popular and was often copied. In his observations about the painting, the seventeenth-century writer Giulio Mancini acknowledged that the picture had "much grace and feeling," though in principle he rejected such scenes from everyday life, which were without a dignified subject from history or religion.

As a detailed examination of the painting has shown, Caravaggio used a canvas that had already been painted in parts. Unsurprisingly for a painter at the start of his career, it also showed traces of numerous corrections made during its execution. Caravaggio did not rely on preparatory studies here. Instead, he painted directly on to the canvas and drew only a few rough compositional lines with the handle of his brush.

The picture was painted as a commission from a Monsignor Petrucci, with whom Caravaggio was living at the time, and was later purchased by Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte. A second version of the painting, which he created several years later, can today be found in the Louvre.





# The Cardsharps

c. 1594

Oil on canvas, 94.2 x 130.9 cm  
Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth

For a long time this picture, which was purchased from Caravaggio by Cardinal Francesco Maria Del Monte in 1597, was known only through copies. The subject was extraordinarily popular with copyists, Caravaggio's followers (*Caravaggisti*), and art collectors across Europe, and numerous replicas were in circulation. It was this situation that made the identification of the painting as an authentic work by Caravaggio so difficult.

Here Caravaggio combines subjects from the art of his north Italian hometown with a closely observed realism. The structure is typical of his early works: each figure is carefully posed and skillfully placed in the intricately structured and sharply illuminated composition, creating the impression of a *tableau vivant*. The figure at the back signaling to his partner, who is drawing a hidden card from his belt, and the dupe on the left, whose expression is one of guileless innocence, make it clear what game is being played here. Vividly recorded details, such as the holes in the glove of the figure in the middle and the pink feather worn by the figure on the right, create a vivid impression of reality. The correct perspective of the games board with dice and cup demonstrates Caravaggio's mastery as a still-life painter.



# The Penitent Magdalene

1594–1595

Oil on canvas, 122.5 x 98.5 cm  
Galleria Doria Pamphilj, Rome

In the eyes of Giovanni Pietro Bellori, a contemporary artist and biographer who rejected Caravaggio's realism in favor of traditional classicism, this painting was proof of the painter's tendency to portray "common people without grace or dignity." Bellori describes it with the following words in his *Lives of the Artists*, which was published in 1672: "A young girl in her room on a chair, her hands resting on her lap while her hair dries. However, by adding an ointment vessel and precious stones spread on the ground, he has turned her into a penitent Mary Magdalene." What Bellori saw as a weakness in fact defines the real attraction of the picture. Bellori's comment on the subsequent transformation of a secular theme into a biblical one has been shown to be true, for X-rays of the paintings have revealed that the attributes of the penitent sinner were added later.

Caravaggio created an atmosphere of great intimacy here from just a few elements. The slumped figure of the young woman in her heavy damask dress is emphasized. As the background remains almost in darkness, it is the geometric pattern of the monochrome floor tiles that gives the room an illusion of depth.



## The Concert

c. 1595

Oil on canvas, 92.1 x 118.4 cm  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Most research suggests that this picture was the first work painted by Caravaggio after he moved to the Palazzo Madama, the residence of his new patron, Cardinal Francesco Maria Del Monte. The highly educated Del Monte was a keen music lover and he clearly inspired the young artist to paint several pictures featuring musical instruments or on musical themes.

Through the centuries, the surface of the painting has suffered considerable damage. This does not, however, diminish the ambiguous fascination of the image, which has given rise to the most diverse interpretations, including those that identify homosexual themes.

In all interpretations, it is the winged figure of the winged cupid in the background, who pulls a handful of grapes from a vine, that plays a key role.

The poor condition of the painting has raised doubts concerning its authenticity. A picture by Caravaggio with the same subject, that of *musica di alcuni giovani* (music played by young men), was mentioned by Giovanni Baglione in 1642. Numerous copies existed from an early date.

The young musicians dressed in old-fashioned robes are obviously still in rehearsal. They are tuning their instruments or studying the music, which gives the scene a special immediacy, as though they have been caught unposed. The lines of the lute's neck, which seems to jut out beyond the picture plane into our space, has the effect of drawing us into the scene and of beginning a circular movement from left to right that ends with the open page of the music book held by the boy with his back to us. The sense of space is also enhanced by the open book of music in the foreground, with its subtle shadows, and the bow protruding over the sound box of the violin, in effect a small still life.



## Boy Bitten by a Lizard

1595–1596

Oil on canvas, 65.8 x 52.3 cm  
Fondazione Longhi, Florence

A lizard sits hidden within ripe, sweet fruits and bites the finger of the boy who has stretched out his hand to them. He flinches and his face contorts with pain and alarm. As with many pictures from his early period in Rome, Caravaggio painted this subject twice. In the matching work, which is in the National Gallery in London, the colors are brighter and clearer, while the paint application in this Florentine version is thicker and more opaque. The appeal of this scene lies in the vibrant contrast between the expression of sudden shock on the face of the boy and the detailed depiction of the objects set out before the viewer. Clearly modeled by a bright, clear light, the fruit, flowers, and water-filled glass vase, which clearly reflects the shape of a window, create the impression of a still life. A moral message is hidden in the confrontation between youth and the unexpected pain that at times lurks in the desirable goods of this world.

From a stylistic point of view, this early Roman picture also reflects Caravaggio's Lombardian origins. The efforts to portray human emotional reactions, by contrast, go back to Leonardo da Vinci, and also to Caravaggio's Milanese teacher, Simone Peterzano. More specifically, the expression of fright on the features of the boy is reminiscent of a drawing by the artist Sofonisba Anguissola from Cremona, which shows a boy pinched on the finger by a crayfish (c. 1557; *Asdrubale Bitten by a Crayfish*, Museo di Capodimonte, Naples).





# Rest on the Flight into Egypt

1595–1596

*Oil on canvas, 135.5 x 166.5 cm*  
*Galleria Doria Pamphilj, Rome*

This enchanting small masterpiece is one of the few pictures by Caravaggio that includes the open countryside, the scene being bathed in the gentle light of evening. A winged angel plays the violin with his back to the viewer, while St. Joseph holds a book of music for him. With a white cloth draped over his youthful body and his naturalistic wings, Caravaggio's angel becomes a tangible earthly form. Similarly, the maternal gentleness of the Madonna, with her exhausted head resting on the small head of the Infant Jesus, appears deeply human.

In this painting, his first complex interpretation of a biblical subject, Caravaggio continues the forms, colors, and detailed realism of his secular paintings. The art historian Giulio Carlo Argan has noted that, by detaching himself from the influential style of Mannerism and from official Roman ecclesiastical art, Caravaggio made an artistic statement in favor of the realism nurtured in northern Italy. The gentle light, the landscape in the background, and the elegant figure of the heavenly musician create a rural idyll that is also reminiscent of Caravaggio's artistic roots in the north, in this case notable Venice.

The detailed figure of the young mother is based on a drawing by Caravaggio's employer at this time, the Cavalier d'Arpino, without, however, adopting his Mannerist tendencies.





