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Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1573-1610), INSPIRATION OF ST. MATTHEW (1602). Oil on canvas, 9' 8 1/2" x 6' 2 1/2". Contarelli Chapel, S. Luigi dei Francesi, Rome, Italy. Photo: © Alinari / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

The Urgency of Inspiration

BY HEIDI J. HORNİK

The mature period of Caravaggio's religious painting begins with four images commissioned for the decoration of the Contarelli chapel.¹ The chapel had been purchased by Matthieu Cointrel in 1565 and completed before his death in 1585. The French cardinal, who Italianized his name to Contarelli, left instructions that the paintings should portray scenes from the life of Matthew, his patron saint. Caravaggio painted *Calling of Saint Matthew* and *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* on the left and right sidewalls of the chapel, respectively.²

The altarpiece in the center depicts the *Inspiration of St. Matthew*. Caravaggio painted two versions in 1602, after the sidewalls were completed.³ Perhaps Caravaggio rejected the first and preferred the second version that we see here for several reasons. This figure of Matthew, being more similar to that depicted in the other paintings, makes a more consistent narrative. Caravaggio probably knew precedents for the visual theme of Matthew composing his Gospel: here he returns to medieval versions of an apparition emerging from heaven at a distance above and behind the evangelist.⁴ Matthew, like the other Evangelists, is represented in the visual tradition by one of the four living creatures of Revelation 4:7. Matthew's symbol is the winged man or angel.⁵

Caravaggio conveys urgency in Matthew, who is not seated as a scribe deep in thought, but is rushing back to the table to write down the inspiration sent from God via the angel. Matthew becomes an example of the faithful reader of Scripture: captured by the immediacy of the experience and intent on remembering that moment of inspiration.

NOTES

1 G. A. Dell'Aqua and M. Cinotti, *Il Caravaggio e le sue grandi opere da San Luigi dei Francesi* (Milan, 1971), 105ff.

2 For a discussion of Caravaggio's *Calling of St. Matthew*, see Heidi J. Hornik, "Not the Righteous, But Sinners," *Vocation, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics*, 10 (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2004), 44-46, www.baylor.edu/ifl/christianreflection/Vocationart-Caravaggio.pdf (accessed June 16, 2014).

3 Irving Lavin, "Divine Inspiration in Caravaggio's Two St. Matthew's," *The Art Bulletin*, 56.1 (March 1974), 59-81, here citing 59.

4 *Ibid.*, 79. The first version portrayed the angel as a collaborator alongside Matthew. This was a fusion of the intellectual and supernatural "angel" popular in the Renaissance.

5 On the establishment on symbols for the Four Evangelists by St. Jerome, see Heidi J. Hornik, "Inspired Translator," *Scripture, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics* 52 (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2014), 66-69.