Self-Reference in Caravaggio’s *Calling of St. Matthew*

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ABSTRACT

MATTHEW CULLER: Self-Reference in Caravaggio’s Calling of St. Matthew
(Under the direction of Mary Pardo)

Among Caravaggio’s most critically successful commissions, the Contarelli Chapel’s Calling of St. Matthew was also his first major, public, religious historia, and a turning point in the artist’s stylistic progression. Caravaggio’s Calling of St. Matthew is a highly self-referential painting, a demonstration piece in the fullest sense, and yet, scholarship has not considered the canvas as a statement about “painting,” aside from noting its explicit reference to Michelangelo’s Sistine Creation of Adam. This paper interprets the Calling as a painting about “painting,” drawing attention to the prominent window, Caravaggio’s use of light and color, and other formal aspects. It situates the Calling’s self-reference in relation to contemporary criticism and biographies of the artist, positing the painting as an “artist-in-his-studio” picture and exploring the Calling’s interaction with its facing pendant, the Martyrdom of St. Matthew.
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I. Introduction: An Origin of Painting

Seventeenth-century German painter, writer, and biographer of Caravaggio, Joachim von Sandrart includes an engraving of Pliny’s story of Dibutades in his *Academia nobilizzimae artis pictoriae* of 1683 (fig.1).¹ Executed by Joachim’s son, Johann Jacob, the engraving is a slight variant on Joachim’s earlier illustration from his *Teutsche Academie* (1675, fig.2).² Set in a dark interior vault, the scene features a putto, in the upper right, who raises a lantern which throws a bright triangle of light across the shadowy space, illuminating Dibutades’s lover’s body and casting his silhouette on the left wall. A further distance back in space and to the left of her centrally-placed lover, Dibutades extends her left hand to trace his projected shadow.³ A depiction of one of the ancient stories on the origins of painting, the engraving is a picture about “picturing.” It illustrates the creation of a picture in simple, fundamental form, the separation and juxtaposition of light and dark, and yet it also quickly becomes a self-referential statement about Sandrart’s own “picturing.” Without illusionistic modeling, the painted

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³Her own silhouette overlaps with his, and her brush touches a point in which they both converge on blank wall-space, suggesting, in accord with the narrative, that the painting will not only immortalize her lover’s presence but their union as well.
silhouette is explicitly two-dimensional, a fact underscored by the next moment in the narrative: Dibutades’s father, the potter Butades, models her painting into relief, setting up a comparison of sculpture and painting on the criterion of relief. Sandrart’s engraving juxtaposes Dibutades’s painting with Sandrart’s own ability to create voluminous bodies in black and white; the viewer is encouraged to compare formally the flat silhouette to the statuesque central figure of the lover, set in illusionistic relief by dramatic chiaroscuro.

It is tempting to compare the composition of the engraving to that of Caravaggio’s *Calling of St. Matthew* (1599, fig. 3) from the Contarelli Chapel in San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome. Both painting and engraving deploy figures in shallow, dark spaces along emphatic horizontals. More important, both works feature diagonal beams of light entering the scene from the upper right, catching the figures’ drapery in chiaroscuro patterns, and proceeding longitudinally across the picture’s horizontal axis. Like the central figure of Sandrart’s engraving, that of the *Calling*, though seated, also turns to face the light source, light playing down his billowing sleeve. In both works, the contrapposto of light and dark becomes the scene’s prime mover as it either provides the means and model for the creation of art or prompts and illustrates the effects of conversion.⁴

Joachim Sandrart’s 1675 composition and its 1683 variant could well have been inspired by Caravaggio’s painting. During his time in Rome (1632-5), Sandrart lived in home of Vincenzo Giustiniani, Caravaggio’s first major Roman patron, looked after Giustiniani’s art collection, and designed engravings for the publication of his ancient

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Giustiniani was instrumental in attaining Caravaggio’s Contarelli commission, and Sandrart visited San Luigi dei Francesi, located a block or so away from the Palazzo.  

I take the connection between the Calling and Sandrart’s Dibutades seriously, not because Sandrart was quoting in 1675 the Caravaggio he had seen some forty years earlier (this is unlikely), but because it reveals a thematic confluence between the two works. Sandrart’s engraving is a window for reading the Calling as a picture about “picturing,” a painting about “painting,” and as a scene of the creation of the image in dramatic contrasts between light and dark. This reading is guided by the painting itself, near contemporary, and later, Seicento criticism of Caravaggio’s style and working methods and his biographies. It targets seemingly extraneous painted elements of the Calling—its large window and prop-like furniture—often dismissed as merely in the service of Caravaggio’s naturalism, as symbolic indicators of the artist’s studio. It identifies insistent critical and biographical accounts of his lighting as indexes of his unique alterations to standard studio lighting conditions. And, it considers the meaning of such self-referential elements in relation to the painting which the Calling faces, The Martyrdom of St. Matthew (fig.4).

With the Martyrdom, the Calling comprised Caravaggio’s first public debut in Rome. Coinciding with the Jubilee year of 1600, it drew many viewers, artists and general public alike. Caravaggio had signed a contract with the priests at San Luigi dei

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Francesi for the chapel’s two lateral scenes in 1599, which were installed in July of 1600.\(^7\) The *Calling* and the *Martyrdom* seem to have been worked on simultaneously, the *Martyrdom* undergoing extensive revision at an advanced stage. The *Calling* exhibits minimal revision: the figure of Peter was added at a later date and Christ’s more traditional Italian beckoning gesture, with a more arched-wrist and palm facedown, changed to quote Michelangelo’s Adam from the Sistine *Creation*. The painting’s composition seems to have been deliberate from the start. Christ and Peter enter a dark, tavern-like setting from the right while Matthew and his company sit around a table occupying the lower-left quadrant of the canvas. The plume-hatted figure with his back to the viewer sits along the painting’s central vertical axis, which is delineated by the left edge of his stool and that of the window shutter hovering above and between him and the other plume-hatted youth. These two figures form a counter-positioned pair at the center of the composition, a point located just above the vertical red stripe on the shoulder of the plume-hatted figure facing the viewer. Christ’s hand floats just outside the gap between these figures, directly in line with the central support of the large, oilskin-covered window. Passing through the gap between Christ’s hand and the window frame, the painting’s most dramatic visual element: a harsh diagonal of light and dark disappears into a plumed hat, its vector bouncing into the plume's highlight. The source of this diagonal, the sheet of light raking against the back wall, is channeled by the window’s

\(^7\)The chronology of the chapel is complex and still under debate as new documents surface. However, the lion’s share of the literature concurs with the above. Much of the debate concerns Caravaggio’s altarpiece for the chapel, the *Inspiration of Matthew* which was rejected and a second version negotiated. The current consensus is that the original altarpiece was commissioned in 1602, a good two years after the lateral panels, on the occasion of the rejection of a sculpture group of similar subject by Flemish sculptor Jacques Cobeart that was originally commissioned for the altar. That commission for the original *Inspiration* postdates the laterals is significant for this argument as it limits Caravaggio’s debut to the *Calling* and the *Martyrdom*, which interact in a way that does not include the original altarpiece. For discussion of chapel chronology in relation to the laterals, see below p.9.
projecting shutter onto the table-top group, marks the edge of the background wall, and
dissipates into the left-side void. The shutter itself casts a deep shadow on the
background wall, which is compositionally linked to the pool of shadows underneath the
window in a bowtie pattern. This pattern is mirrored by the lit patches of the work—the
upper left and the lower right—which form an opposite bowtie. Both bowties contribute to
a chiastic relationship of light and shadow governing the composition as a whole.

As all of the current literature stresses, the *Calling* was a milestone for
Caravaggio’s career. It is one of his first paintings to showcase the tenebrism
characteristic of his mature style, and aside from being part of his first public
commission, it was his first *historia*. Indeed, the *Calling* serves as a coincidental
illustration of his transition from the table-top and half-length portrait types to full-figure
painting. As much as these descriptions imply a certain artistic foresight, they stop short
of considering Caravaggio’s awareness of the gravity of the commission. I take such a
self-awareness to be an integral part of the painting and one that motivates and informs a
reading of the *Calling* as a painting about “painting.” The *Calling* is a demonstration
piece in the fullest sense: it exhibits the artist's technical prowess, the painter’s ability to
paint full-figure *historia* in a style, at this point, all his own in Rome. It affirms that his
ability to color well, with an attention to the surface verisimilitude characteristic of still-
life and half-length portraits, can be translated into the most prestigious pictorial genre. It
also exemplifies these demonstrations: in scripting Matthew’s vocation as an artist-in-the-

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8While many scholars note the differences between the figural groups in clothing, citing precedents in
Caravaggio’s oeuvre for the table-group and antecedents for Christ and Peter (Friedlaender, 105; Howard
Realism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006): 119, are exemplary), it is possible
that they could amount to more than a shocking mixture of “high” and “low” genres; the *Calling* could be a
premonition of future success in more prestigious commissions or, better, an illustration of an artist’s
promotion.
studio picture, as Caravaggio mobilized the gospel narrative to show the studio arrangement that made his lighting style so formally distinct. This scripting—along with a suggestive quote from the Sistine ceiling—imbricates the scene of conversion with one of artistic creation. As conversion mixes with creation, the Calling stands in a mirrored relationship with the Martyrdom, its facing pendant, which has been recently shown to exhibit a contrary mixing of martyrdom and artistic destruction, iconoclasm.

The Calling itself is an oddity. The narrative has few precedents on Italian soil, all of which are different from Caravaggio’s version. In fact, most of the Italian examples are late fourteenth-century or early fifteenth-century, and, obviously, completely different in style.⁹ They also differ in the way that the scene is conceived. None shows any hint of Caravaggio’s dark, tavern-like setting, and while one late fourteenth-century example features a sitting Matthew, all others depict Matthew rising, drawn magnetically from the custom-house to Christ. Part of the reason for such iconographic flexibility, and indeed, the lack of many iconographic elements, may rest in the terseness of the biblical text: “And when Jesus passed on from hence, he saw a man sitting in the custom-house, named Matthew; and he saith to him: Follow me. And he rose up and followed him.”¹⁰ Caravaggio’s version of the story owes more to Flemish depictions of the scene (fig. 5-6), but even here, he mainly borrows an emphasis on hands as compositional and narrative movers and the extremely elegant, contemporary costumes of Matthew’s company. While the Calling shares the spectacled figures, symbolic of avarice, of many Northern

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⁹Niccolo di Pietro Gerini, 1392, Prato; Jacopo di Cione, 1369, Uffizi; Carpaccio, Oratorio degli Schiavoni, 1503; all illustrated in Friedlaender, 106-110.

¹⁰Vulgate (Matt. 9:9); “Et cum transiret inde Iesus vidit hominem sedentem in teloneo Mattheum nomine et ait illi sequere me et surgens secutus est eum.”
examples, it neither echoes their anti-Semitic portrayals, nor adopts the cluttered, crowded interiors of Flemish versions of the scene associated with polemics against the sale of indulgences.  

If Matthew’s foppishly-dressed cronies in the Calling are more closely related to Flemish versions of the narrative than to the few Italian examples, more than anything they belong with the gamblers and sword-carrying youths of the artist’s previous half-length and table-top portraits, such as the Cardsharps (1596, fig.7) and the Fortune-Teller (1596, fig.8).

Caravaggio’s Calling differs from all precedents, Flemish and Italian, in its employment of the contraposition of light and dark as the narrative’s thematic driver. Light beams from an invisible source, presumably another window similar to the one visible above the publican’s table. Entering the dark scene, the light beam illuminates Matthew’s stunned face. The division between light and dark, a fundamental state of painting, becomes the occasion for conversion.

The Calling’s light beam is significant because it engenders surrounding objects with symbolic weight in the contexts of both conversion and artistic creation. The beam first passes through Christ’s halo, clips the edge of the visible window, continues between Christ’s hand and the window’s central vertical support, and rests on the saint’s face. The illumination of Matthew’s face is a fundamental visual metaphor for conversion that Caravaggio had already made use of in his Conversion of the Magdalene (fig.9), painted one year before the Contarelli laterals.  

\[\text{11}^\text{Grace A. H. Vlam, “The Calling of Saint Matthew in Sixteenth-Century Flemish Painting,” The Art Bulletin, 59:4 (Dec., 1977): 561-570; Sandrart was the first to notice that the seated figure on the far-left of the Calling is lifted from Holbein’s woodcut The Card Players from the Dance of Death series (1545). See Friedlaender, 106.}\]

contrast, and window is central to my reading of the *Calling* in the context of artistic creation, as a painting about “painting.” The next three sections will discuss the window and the hand.

II. Windows and the Notional “Painting” and “Studio”

First of all, on the surface on which I am going to paint, I draw a rectangle of whatever size I want, which I regard as an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen.  

In 1438, Leone Battista Alberti famously related that when he went about constructing a surface for painting a rectangular portion was segregated as if a window opened onto the painted object. For Alberti, the window was a metaphor for the painted surface in the context of perspectival rendering: like the flat window-surface, the painted surface gave way illusionistically to the representation of a three-dimensional, homogeneous, and logical space. This window metaphor is explicitly related to Renaissance illusionism, and has had the legacy of becoming commonplace in contemporary discourses on painting. In the time separating Alberti and Caravaggio, European painters, motivated by an awareness of the power of the illusionistic breakdown of the two-dimensional into three, developed a self-referential visual language comprised of such metaphors as the window. The niche, the embrasure, the doorway, and perhaps most resonant, the mirror all became “figures of speech” in this painted language.  

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While predominantly associated with the emergence of the landscape genre, the window, as a painted entity and as a verbal metaphor, also acted as a frame, a visual container of the painted image, in much the same way that Alberti verbalized it. In Pietro Aretino’s famous letter to Titian, the author introduces his description of a Venetian sunset, and voices his regret at the painter’s absence to capture it, by linking the potential painting’s frame and the window: “Then, placing my arms on the window frame I rested my chest and virtually the whole of my body against it, and gazed out...I raised my eyes to the sky which, since God had created it, had never been so marvelously painted with so many shadows and lights.”

This linkage between the painted space and the window is pervasive in the north as well, where it is explored predominantly in visual language. It is presented perhaps most explicitly in a woodcut from a treatise on the perspective of Dürer’s school (fig.10). While essentially instructional, this woodcut makes the window a framed container for the image and posits its flat grill as an analogue of the two-dimensional surface of the drawing. Outside the realm of instruction and closer to Caravaggio’s day, the “window metaphor” appears in the paintings of Jan Porcellis (fig.11) and Van Dyck (fig.12). In these paintings, the conflation of window and pictorial surfaces is made a pun. Porcellis’ *Tempest* (1629) uses a fictive window frame to capture a sea storm, and yet, the viewer’s relationship to the scene is made ambiguous and impossible: the shape and location of the window frame preclude a viewing position either from a ship or from

15Stoichita, 35.


a coastal house. In its superfluous mediation between viewer and seascape, Porcellis’s window frame makes a joke at the window metaphor’s expense requiring the union of window and pictorial surfaces when such a coupling makes no sense. Likewise, Van Dyck’s Portrait of the Painter Andreas Van Ertfeld (1632) displays a moment in Ertfeld’s capturing of his own tempest, like Porcellis’s located just behind a large window. Touching the casement with its corner, Ertfeld’s canvas is linked to the window frame, here containing a scene impossibly placed within the artist’s studio. The paintings of Van Dyck and Porcellis testify to the fact that by the first quarter of the seventeenth-century, the “window metaphor” was commonplace enough to be the base assumption of visual jokes, and they also serve as examples. While the Calling’s window is not explicitly linked to the containment of the landscape, it exists well within a pan-European culture that could draw the connection between it and “painting” as a notional entity—with formal constraints, representational problems, practical concerns, an economic reality, etc.—a “painting” that could be commented on through painting itself, that is, self-reflexively.

The window’s prominent position within the painting requires that it not be read as an insignificant background element. Generally, Caravaggio’s paintings are noticeably devoid of architectural elements, and those works that do include them heavily abbreviate their interaction with the narrative. By contrast, the Calling’s window

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19His Beheading of the Baptist (1607), Seven Acts of Mercy (1607), and Burial of St. Lucy (1608) are noted exceptions, though their architectural backgrounds are more definitely “backgrounds” and faintly rendered.
occupies a central position in the composition, located directly above and bisected by Christ’s hand. As such, the window separates the two figural groups, which are also separated by posture (standing/sitting) and clothing (contemporary/archaic).

As rectilinear, the window is central to the composition as a whole. Its shape echoes that of the canvas itself and the composition’s constituent parts as well. In the shallow foreground space, the table-top group takes up a squat rectangle of canvas space, a shape emphasized by the horizontal of the table, and the vertical shadow above the spectacled figure’s shoulder and the central vertical axis of the window shutter and stool edge. Christ and Peter enter from the right occupying another rectangular portion of the canvas space that is delineated by the shape of the window. The window’s central, vertical cross-beam creates a vertical axis passing through Christ’s hand along the left side of the rectangle, while the window’s right side-casing creates its central axis which passes through Peter’s head dividing light from shadow as they play across his silver hair. The top and right side of the rectangle are formed by the bottom-casing of the window canvas’s right edge, respectively. Most noticeably, the painting’s chiastic pattern of light divides the composition into quadrants of light and shadow, echoing the window’s own structure. The Calling’s composition collapses into the window, as the window expands to contain and frame it.

The window is also coordinated with the painting’s primary light source. The beam of focused light entering the scene from the upper right conveniently clips the lower-right corner of the window’s frame as it rakes across the back wall. Similarly, the window’s projecting shutter channels the beam so as to hit Matthew square in the face.

Furthermore, his choice to eliminate the vast architectural backdrop in the first version of the Martyrdom, contemporary with the Calling, indicates not only his struggle with such features but also his growing preference against them.
Both of these details work to link the window, though covered, to the painting’s primary light source and to the painting’s most obvious visual metaphor: light as a figure for divine grace or vocation. In this linkage, there is an antithetical relationship between the two windows, one visible and covered, the other invisible and emittent. This relationship further connects the visible window to the painting as a whole and to “painting” as a notional entity; for it is the contrast between light and dark, the creation of depth with modeling that can generally define most illusionistic painting. Furthermore, it is this particular painting’s dramatic light effects, the artist’s fierce contrasts between light and shadow that define its revolutionary style, defining it as Caravaggio’s style. As we shall see, however, it is not only the light effects themselves, but the elevated position of the light source that completes this self-referential move and emphasizes Caravaggio’s uniqueness.

First, the window in the Calling must be considered in another highly self-referential context of artistic creation: the artist’s studio. In fact, considerations of Caravaggio’s window as a studio element are part of a lengthy critical tradition in which incidental elements are cited as examples of Caravaggio’s unselective naturalism criticized by Bellori among others. Bellori’s description of the Magdalene (1597, fig.13) is exemplary:

20 Irving Lavin, 1993: 90. Also, the window’s shutter when dropped through space divides the two seated figures closest to Christ, who are counter-posed. Their counterposition creates a sense of movement in an extremely still scene, and is linked to the window shutter.

21 Roberto Longhi, Caravaggio (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1968): 24-25, supposes that the setting of the Calling reflects the artist’s studio as a kind of camera obscura; Valerio Mariani, Caravaggio (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico della Stato, 1973): 60, notes the reoccurrence of studio furniture, but moves formal analysis toward the importance of the window as set apart from the “intenso amore di verità” and the profound “modo diretto” of the furniture. For Mariani, the antithetical relationship of visible covered window and emittent, invisible window creates an “atmosphere of intense meditation, of mystery.”; Alfred Moir, Caravaggio (New York: Harry Abrams, 1982): 44: “Possibly the Calling records Caravaggio’s
In finding and arranging his figures, whenever it happened that he came upon someone in the town who pleased him, he was fully satisfied with this invention of nature and made no effort to exercise his brain further. He painted a young girl seated on a chair with her hands in her lap in the act of drying her hair; he portrayed her in a room with a small ointment vessel, jewels and gems placed on the floor; thus he would have us believe that she is the Magdalene.22

Bellori’s dismissive tone and emphasis on props reveals a conception of Caravaggio’s paintings as utterly naturalistic, thinly-veiled in fictions through which the realities of his studio environment are easily recognizable. In much the same way, art historians posit the window as a “document” of his studio space at the Palazzo Madame. That the Calling could “record” this space is no doubt a compelling idea; however, phrasing it thus forecloses a certain amount of the artist’s creative agency—an agency directly thematized by the painting—and neglects the possibility that Caravaggio could be evoking a notional studio as his window evokes a notional “painting.”

Maurizio Marini and Sandro Corradini, “’Inventarium omnium et singulorum bonorum mobilium’ di Michelangelo da Caravaggio ‘pittore,’” Artibus et Historiae 14:28 (1993): 163: “‘Scabelli’, tavolini e sedie impagliate non possono non suggerire dettagli della Vocazione di San Matteo e del San Meteo e l’angelo, del San Gerolamo in meditazione, del San Gerolamo scrivente, della Morte della Vergine, mentre meno esplicito appare il ruolo figurativo del ‘battente di porta’ (da usare nella Vocazione di San Matteo? o nella Madonna dei pellegrini?, ma, forse, poggiate qui occasionalmente in attesa di essere utilizzato altrove.”; Varriano 8, holds that the lantern in the Taking of Christ “might suggest that the available lighting in the Palazzo Mattei was either inadequate or that Caravaggio sought a more constant and controllable source of illumination” than an elevated window.

Evidence against a mere documenting of studio space appears in the *Calling* itself. First, the window’s large shutter projects into the figures’ space. This, coupled with the lack of reflected light on the left wall, belies an indoor setting.\(^{23}\) Second, the general composition of the *Calling*—a strong raking light-beam on the right with a dramatic node slightly right of center articulated by a window—seems to derive from one of the Contarelli Chapel’s ceiling frescoes, Guisepe Cesari’s *St. Matthew Resurrects the Daughter of the King of Ethiopia* (fig.14), dated 1591-1593. As Hibbard notes, Caravaggio may even have worked on this cycle early in his career when employed as Cesari’s assistant.\(^{24}\) Caravaggio alters Cesari’s composition greatly by depopulating and darkening the scene, eliminating the visible source of light on the far right, and enlarging, closing, and more strategically placing the articulating window.

If Caravaggio has molded some of his own studio elements around a borrowed and altered composition, it is important to note the prominence of the window among them.\(^{25}\) This prominence is suggestive enough to consider why the window is the most salient marker for his studio space, and whether it also alludes to a notional studio, not necessarily a particular artist’s, but one composed of imagined, conventional identifying

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\(^{25}\)As mentioned before, unlike the studio furniture that forms the backdrop and foundation of the narrative, the window interacts with it on a much more functional level, emphasizing Christ’s hand and channeling the main light source, the driver of the central conversion metaphor.
features. By 1600, there was a genre of pictures that thematized just such a notional studio space: the artist-in-his-studio picture or artist-at-work picture.

For an artist-in-his-studio picture to exist, characteristics of a notional studio must be established and conventionalized, and from the beginnings of what we now call the artist’s studio, the window was of fundamental import. As early as Cennino Cennini’s time (c.1400), the artist’s space and the window have been linked in Italian writing about art. When Cennino writes in his *Libro dell’arte* about sgraffito decoration, artists are advised to:

> ...procure a *studietto* where no one may inconvenience you in any way, possessing a single cloth-covered window, at which you will place your desk, like those used for writing, suchwise that the light from the window will fall upon your head as you face the said window, with your glass resting on the black cloth.

As much as Cennino’s instruction stresses the blending of the scholar’s space with the artist’s space—just the constellation in place for Caravaggio’s contemporaries two hundred years later—he also gives his own unusual prominence to the studio window. Furthermore, that Cennino’s window is cloth-covered resonates with Caravaggio’s window and other windows in relatively contemporary artist-in-his-studio pictures (Frans Floris, *Saint Luke Painting the Madonna* (1556, fig.15) and Adriaen van Ostade, *Painter in his Studio* (1669, fig.16). Similarly essential windows, though not explicitly covered,


27Stoichita, 226-247.

28Cennino Cennini, *Libro dell’arte*, ed. Fabio Frezzato (Vicenza: Neri Pozza Editore, 2003): 193; “Quando è ben seccho, abbi una tavolletta ben piana, info[de]rata o di tela negra o di zendado; e abbi un tuo studietto dove alcuna persona non ti dia impaccio nessuno, e cche abbi solo una finestra impannata; alla quale finestra metterai il tuo descho si cchome da scrivere, in forma che lla finestra ti batta sopra il chapo, staendo tu vòlto col viso alla detta finestra e ‘l tuo vetro disteso in sulla detta tela negra.”
appear in numerous self-portraits of the artist-in-his-studio paintings. Parmigianino’s *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1524, fig.17) includes a window with similar crosses to Caravaggio’s; Bartolomeo Passarotti’s *Portrait of Giambologna* (1580, fig.18) features noticeable windows in the artist’s space.\(^{29}\) In his *Unterweisung der Messung*, Dürer diagrams a perspective device (fig.19) in a studio as stripped down as Caravaggio’s, though it includes *two* windows, in lieu of other objects, to indicate it as such.\(^{30}\) Rembrandt’s *Artist in the Studio* (1628, fig.20) puns on the studio window and its relation to painting as a notional entity. While the viewer sees no window, its light floods the studio from the left. Similarly, while the large, daunting easel faces away from the viewer, he or she can imagine its discomfiting contents, their effects painted on the artist’s troubled face.

Almost exactly contemporaneous with Caravaggio’s *Contarelli* commission, Annibale Carracci’s *Self-Portrait on Easel* (1604, fig.21) serves as an index of the advanced state of the artist-in-the-studio picture around 1600. In the picture, a portrait of Annibale sits on an easel, the artist’s melancholic visage staring out toward the viewer. A

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\(^{29}\) In their explication of the emergerence of the modern studio space via the blending of the scholar’s study and the artist’s studio, Cole and Pardo differentiate between the artist’s *bottega* (workshop) and *studio* (a more private space for drawing and more inventive, intellectual activity). As much as these are recognizable divisions in literature, in architecture, and in pictures, their boundaries certainly blended, and the window was not exclusive to either. (Cennini writes of a studio window; Passarotti shows us a *bottega* window; Parmigianino does not specify though we assume a private (studio) space; In Michelangelo’s proposed expansion to his Florentine residence of 1545, *bottega* and *studio* are differentiated, both including windows.) That one was private and designed for “designing” does not preclude a need for natural light, if anything, it necessitates it. Vasari’s *Saint Luke Painting the Virgin* (1570-71) shows both *studio*, in front, and *bottega*, in the rear, both featuring windows along their shared right wall. See Cole and Pardo, 14-19.

palette hangs on the easel touching the canvas, yet the artist himself is absent. Not yet framed, the portrait is surrounded by the context of its creation, the artist’s studio space, indicated, in addition to the easel, by a window whose light outlines a statue.

Interpretations of the painting have been various.31 Without hazarding my own, I’ll only note that the window both indicates the artist’s studio space and is a visual echo for the easel portrait. Similar to the Calling’s composition, Annibale’s portrait collapses into the window, its visual analogue.

III. The Elevated, Partially-Covered Window and the Particular Studio

If windows (among other objects such as easels and palettes) characterized the artist’s studio space in depictions of artists in their workspaces that span Caravaggio’s lifetime, their elevated placement in that space was also a concrete reality for some. In his remodeling of the *Casa degli Omenoni*, Leone Leoni constructed an octagonal chamber, referred to as a “studio” in a 1615 inventory, which was illuminated from above. Elevated window placement could also be a theoretical ideal for both sculpture and painting, either when produced or exhibited. In his *Terzo libro* (first edition 1540), Sebastiano Serlio remarks on the display of sculpture and paintings:

> Those who delight in keeping sundry statues and other things made in relief, ought to have a…room which receives light from above. Because it would never happen that the objects would lack for light, but instead, in whatever place they were put they would demonstrate their perfection. Such a room would also be very appropriate for paintings, on condition that they shall have been painted in a similar light. Which the greatest part of the judicious painters are in the habit of doing; who, as they desire to give great force and relief to their figures use light from above.

Implicit in Serlio’s advice is that sculpture and painting should be displayed in rooms that simulate the studio space in which they were constructed. This is for, among other

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reasons, the practical desire for consistent lighting among rooms of display and manufacture, and, presumably, the virtual spaces produced by paintings and sculptures themselves, illumination from above being the common denominator for all three.

By 1675, the association between the studio space and elevated windows was relatively explicit, as it surfaces in Sandrart’s biography of Caravaggio, where the author relates the artist’s studio lighting practice to the artist’s heightened *rilievo* and overt naturalism:

> He was determined not to make a brushstroke that was not from life, and to that end he placed the model before him in his room in order to copy it as well as he could. And in order to bring out better those effects of relief and natural roundness, he used dark vaults or other shadowed rooms with one small light above, so that the light falling on the model made strong shadows in the darkness and so emphasized the effect of relief. 34

That Caravaggio’s paintings are described as lit by small windows which penetrate shadowed rooms is important because it is a distinct alteration on normal studio practice as theorized by Serlio, which relied on elevated windows for precisely the opposite effect. Indeed, Serlio’s advice about lighting sculpture and paintings is provided in the context of his praising the Pantheon, which is characterized by

> …a celestial light, which is not impeded by anything, and therefore not made without great judgment, because this temple was dedicated in ancient times to all the gods (whence came here many statues, of which diverse tabernacles, niches, and small windows bear witness) which made it necessary that all should have their due light.

If the Pantheon’s light is unimpeded and democratic in its covering of all things equally, Caravaggio’s lighting fragments forms and obscures others selectively. When Caravaggio’s biographers describe his trademark tenebrism, they do so in relation to the elevated studio window. Mancini writes:

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34 Joachim von Sandrart, 1675, as n.1, 275-277, reproduced in Hibbard, 375-380, above quote 375-376. For *rilievo*, see below, p. 20, n.40.
A characteristic of this school is lighting from one source only, which beams down without reflections, as would occur in a very dark room with one window and the walls painted black (come sarebbe in una stanza da una fenestra con le pareti colorite di negro), and thus with lights and shadows very bright and very deep, they give powerful relief to the painting, but in an unnatural way, something that was never thought of or done by any other painter like Raphael, Titian, Correggio or others.35

Critiquing Caravaggio’s use of models, he mentions the studio arrangement again two sentences later:

[Caravaggio’s school] succeeds well with one figure alone, but [for] narrative compositions [it fails] since it is impossible to put in one room a multitude of people acting out the story, with that light coming in from a single window (con quel lume d’una fenestra sola).36

In 1672, Bellori echoes Mancini’s first characterization:

He went so far in this style that he never showed any of his figures in open daylight, but instead found a way (maniera) to place them in the darkness of a closed room (l’aria bruna d’una camera rinchiusa), placing a source of light high (lume alto) so that the light would fall straight down, revealing the principle part of the body and leaving the rest in shadow so as to produce a powerful contrast of light and dark (a fine di recar forza con veemenza di chiaro e di oscuro).37

For Bellori, this lighting arrangement was distinctive and definitive of Caravaggio’s style enough to be one of two things the artist’s followers emulated and his detractors critiqued:

The painters in Rome were greatly taken by this novelty, and the young ones particularly gathered around him, praised him as the unique imitator of nature, and looked on his work as miracles. They outdid each other in imitating his works, undressing their models and raising their lights (alzando lumi)...This easy style attracting to others...older painters...never stopped attacking Caravaggio and his style (maniera), saying that he did not know how to come out of the cellar (cantina) [and


36 Ibid.

37 Bellori, translated in Hibbard, 364.
that he painted all his figures with a single source of light and on a plane without any diminution (ad un lume e sopra un piano senza degradarle).\textsuperscript{38}

In his 1678 biography of Guido Reni, Carlo Cesare Malvasia sets the artist’s sweet, pleasant light, seen daily in the streets, squares, and churches against Caravaggio’s tenebrism, characterized by

...awesome and forced shadows that occur when the light of the sun falls from high above through a half-closed window, or from a lit torch, both of which are, in every way, too artificial, violent, and affected, are not seen naturally and in ordinary circumstances, except for the case of representations of night scenes, fires, or similar things.\textsuperscript{39}

While the above comments about Caravaggio’s distinctive lighting seem to allude to Serlio’s advice, even in their divergence from it, Bellori’s “dark room” and “cellar,” Mancini’s “dark room with one window and the walls painted black,” and Sandrart’s “dark vaults”—remind us of Leonardo’s advice to the painter of graceful faces:

If you have a courtyard which you could for your purpose cover with a linen awning, the light there will be good. Otherwise, when you wish to portray someone, do it in dull weather or towards evening...Pay attention to the street towards evening, when the weather is bad, to how much grace and sweetness can be seen in the faces of the men and women. Therefore, O painter, use a courtyard where the walls are coloured black...The utmost grace in the shadows and lights is added to the faces of those who sit in the darkened doorways of their dwellings...The face acquires great relief.\textsuperscript{40}

Coincidentally perhaps, Serlio’s remarks on the Pantheon’s optimal light for relief are similarly offered in regard to grace:

\textsuperscript{38}Ibid.


And not only the fixed and material things of the building have an admirable grace, but the people who are seen therein, even though they have a commonplace aspect and presence, are augmented by an indefinable aura of dignity and comeliness. 41

It is unclear whether Caravaggio’s biographers were thinking of either Serlio or Leonardo when characterizing the artist’s tenebrism; more telling is that all writers emphasize an end product of rilievo, whether it is accentuated (Leonardo), given local consistency relative to other objects (Serlio), or taken to a forceful extreme in the especially powerful contrast in light and dark characteristic of Caravaggio’s style (biographers). By 1600, rilievo was well established as a formal descriptor in Italian art criticism. Alberti set the standard definition in 1436 as the illusion of a form modeled in the round, attained by the manipulation of the surface tones: “light and shade make real things appear to us in relief (rilevato); white and black make painted things appear the same.” 42 In relation to Caravaggio’s lighting practice as illustrated in the Calling, it is significant that rilievo was originally a technical term of the artist’s workshop and specifically linked to the painter’s system of lighting. In his early Quattrocento Il Libro dell’ arte, Cennino Cennini advises the painter:

How you should give your figures the system of lighting, light and shade, endowing them with a system of rilievo: if, when you are drawing or painting figures in chapels or painting them in other difficult places, it happens that you cannot control the lighting to your purpose, give the rilievo to your figures or design according to the arrangement of the windows in these places, since it is they that must provide the lighting. And so, following the lighting, whichever side it is coming from, apply your rilievo and shadow after this system...And if the light pours from one window larger than the others in the place, always accommodate yourself to this brighter light; and you should systematically study and follow it,

41 Sebastiano Serlio, Il terzo libro, 5, cited in Muller, 1977, 578.

42 Michael Baxandall, Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-century Italy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985): 121-122; Alberti, 82.
because if your work fails in this, it will have no *rilievo* and it will turn out to be a simple thing with little mastery.\textsuperscript{43}

As Michael Baxandall notes, a coherent system of *rilievo*, in which highlights and shadows are apprehended as form, hinges upon the viewer’s knowledge of where the lighting comes from. Thus, *rilievo* effects depend on the painter’s ability to control and make consistent the lighting across the painted plane. Caravaggio’s flaunts his uniquely controlled lighting system in the *Calling*—through partially closed windows. This control may have been on Scannelli’s mind, albeit as perhaps second to exaggerated voluminous projection of the figures, when he wrote of the painting: “This is truly one of the most full-bodied, *rilivate*, and natural works.”\textsuperscript{44}

That Caravaggio’s biographers write about his tenebrism in the context of how its great *rilievo* and exaggerated chiaroscuro is produced in a studio setting, with relatively explicit descriptions on how such effects are produced using elevated, partially-covered windows or small lamps, is important not only because such studio activity is highlighted as distinctive of Caravaggio’s unique style, but also because it allows the possibility that at least one of the artist’s early biographers could have thought to connect the way his paintings looked with the concrete studio practice that made them appear the way they did. In the context of the artist-in-the-studio picture or any painting purposefully evoking the studio space, these connections take on greater significance. In such paintings, the artist depicts a studio space that can refer, self-reflexively, to the means of painting’s production if the viewer makes the logical connection between the studio depicted and


the studio in which the manufacture of the painting took place. If the Calling’s window evoked a “notional” studio environment, its tenebristic light beam could limit that environment to one specifically altered by the artist. The difference between such a scenario and one in which Caravaggio merely “records” his particular studio environment rests in the greater agency granted to the artist by the former.45

The Calling’s covered window could evoke a notional studio, and perhaps even Caravaggio’s particular studio for certain viewers. With evidence from his biographies, evocations of Caravaggio’s particular studio are made stronger. The tenebrosity of the setting recalls Mancini’s “very dark room” with black walls, Bellori’s “darkness of a closed room,” and Sandrart’s “dark vaults.” Sandrart refers to the locale of the Calling in particular as a “dark room” (finster Zimmer).46 That the window in the Calling is covered and non-emittent, in contrast to the primary light source (presumably another small, elevated window), hails Mancini’s “one window”, Bellori’s “single source of light” and Sandrart’s “one small light above.”47

This type of primary light source—one that rakes diagonally across the background wall—appears in numerous early Caravaggios, other than the Calling, but with two related differences: it does not become part of the narrative or interact formally with the figures themselves. Almost identical diagonal raking light can be seen in Boy with a Basket of Fruit (1593, fig.22), Boy Bitten by a Lizard (1594, fig.23), the Lute

45 Implicit in my argument that the Calling is an artist-in-his-studio picture (though it does not contain an actual artist) is the assumption that if anyone is conscious of the relationship between the way a painting looks and how it is produced, it is the artist himself, the mediator of that relationship. That the artist’s mediation process is a selective one justifies attention to the prominence of certain studio elements as represented and the possible symbolic meanings they could contain.

46 Sandrart, reproduced in Hibbard, 378.

47 The Calling does seem to have more than one light source (what illuminates Peter’s back?); however, the raking light source also seems uniquely primary in its intensity and involvement in the narrative.
Player (1596, fig.24), and the Magdalene (1596-97).\textsuperscript{48} In all of these paintings the raking light source seems, if anything, incidental, and has be read as documenting or recording the artist’s actual studio space.\textsuperscript{49} In the Calling, however, things are different. Not only is this raking beam given metaphoric status in the narrative as a symbol of divine grace and forgiveness;\textsuperscript{50} it is also formally coordinated with the vector of Christ’s arm, the visible covered window, clipping its corner, and, by extension, Christ’s calling hand.\textsuperscript{51} As such, the primary light source moves past the realm of purely documentary significance and becomes emblematic of Caravaggio’s unique practice. Similarly, when Caravaggio paints a covered-window that is formally linked to the painting’s primary, dramatic light source, he refers to a notional studio environment, his distinctive modifications to it—covering all windows but a small, high one—and the relief-like qualities that his tenebrism promotes, qualities that Serlio and Leonardo associate with illumination from above, and that his biographers always link to his particular studio environment.\textsuperscript{52} It is not only the formal conjunction of the covered window and the painting’s primary light source that constitutes the driver of the Calling’s self-reference, but Christ’s hand,

\textsuperscript{48}It is arguably also present, though perhaps less prominent, in the Fortune-Teller (1596-7), the Madonna with the Serpent (1606), and Crucifixion of St. Andrew (1607). It seems deliberately disguised by a red curtain in the Judith (1598).

\textsuperscript{49}See n.21.

\textsuperscript{50}In this way, the Calling is similar to the Conversion of Paul (Cerasi Chapel, 1600), painted shortly after the Contarelli laterals.

\textsuperscript{51}We can imagine a moment, after painting these pre-Contarelli chapel pictures, in which Caravaggio realized that this incidental light could be used for symbolic and/or emblematic effect. Friedlaender, 13; Valerio Mariani, Caravaggio (Roma: Instituto Poligrafico della Stato, 1973): 57; Catherine Puglisi, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (London: Phaidon, 1998): 156. All note the narrative coordination of these light wedges in the Calling as distinct from earlier examples.

\textsuperscript{52}Maria Rzespinska and Krystyna Malcharek, “Tenebrism in Baroque Painting and its Ideological Background,” Artibus et Historiae, 7:13 (1986): 91-112, suggests that the dark room could also evoke meditative environments such as those outlined in Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises.
located directly beneath the covered window as it literally calls forth Caravaggio’s characteristic beam of elevated light.
In what amounts to a demonstration piece of sorts, as it proved instrumental in securing papal patronage for another artist, Parmigianino’s *Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror*, painted in 1524, draws an explicit connection between the hand of the artist and his studio environment. Vasari writes of the convex, painted surface:

> Since anything reflected in a convex mirror expands close up and decreases in the distance, in the foreground he painted his hand in the act of drawing, a little enlarged as it appeared in the mirror, it is so beautiful that it looks real...His painting on this hemisphere has a divine enchantment. 53

Not only is this painting a novelty in its illusionism, but it also thematizes “painting” as a notional entity in an inventive conceit based on the mirror metaphor. As Vasari notes, Parmigianino painted the portrait on a piece of wood itself convex, creating the illusion that the painting was the mirror. The artist's studio, identified by a crossed-window similar to the *Calling’s*, collapses into the painting’s mirror space. Similarly, the virtual, mirrored space itself—including the artist’s microcosmic studio—collapses into the artist’s drawing hand, the circular golden frame of the painting echoing the similarly toned ring on the artist’s little finger. In this subtle play on the metaphor of the artist's hand as an artwork’s generating force, Parmigianino’s drawing hand stretches, enlarged, across the bottom of the composition touching its edge as if the brush has finished where it had begun, on the painting’s border, pausing long enough to be deftly edited out. As a

kind of unlikely, anachronistic pendant to Caravaggio's *Calling* in its thematization of the artist’s hand as creative force within a studio setting. Parmigianino's portrait sets the stage for the *Calling*'s driving symbolic constellation: the formal linkage of the covered window, the raking light beam, and Christ’s hand.\(^\text{54}\)

Often characterized as a witty play on his full name—Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio—the transposition of Adam’s hand from Michelangelo’s Sistine *Creation of Adam* (fig.25) fresco to Christ’s in Caravaggio’s painting, functions within the *Calling* as much more than a pun on his namesake, especially considering the scene’s studio context.\(^\text{55}\) As recognizable in Caravaggio’s day as our own, this central quotation makes Christ’s hand, calling and creating, the artist’s own, and, like Parmigianino's portrait, places the artist’s hand in a particular studio environment, a setting that, when activated by its resident, produces lighting effects that are as stylistically characteristic as the studio’s lighting arrangement is distinctive.\(^\text{56}\)

\(^{54}\)Caravaggio’s choice to make Christ’s hand a symbolic entity and to use hands (Christ’s, Peter’s, Matthew’s) as general compositional devices—forming a triangular vector aimed at the evangelist—could have been informed by Flemish precedents of the scene. Vlam, 561-570, cites several examples which engage hands and their activity as symbols for avarice and as primary compositional markers. Jan van Hemessen’s version (1536, Munich, Altre Pinakothek) is exemplary. Perhaps the most elaborate and well-known example of hand activity used as a composition device and symbol is Dürer’s Christ Among the Doctors (1506, Fundacion Coleccion Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid). Caravaggio’s familiarity with some of these works is accepted by many scholars, and cases for influence on the *Calling* is often made referring to the similarity of Matthew’s right- hand gesture and that of the banker in Quinten Metsys’s Banker and his Wife (1514, Louvre).

\(^{55}\)Caravaggio is famous for inventive signature, signing his name in the blood spilling out of the Baptist’s neck in the Beheading of the Baptist, as well as numerous creative inserted self-portraits (David and Goliath, the Martyrdom of Matthew, the Sick Baachus, Taking of Christ, etc.).

\(^{56}\)Interpretations of the hand do often connect it to 1 Cor. 15:22 (“And as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive”). The most thoughtful is Lavin, 1993, 95: “Christ’s right conspicuously reverses the left hand of Adam in Michelangelo’s Creation scene...where Adam receives the gift of life from God the Father...Caravaggio’s Christ, the New Adam, not only beckons to Levi, signaling his new life as Matthew, but also receives the penance that Matthew pays for his sins with symbolic coins.” Irving Lavin, “Divine Inspiration in Caravaggio’s Two St. Matthews,” *Art Bulletin*, 56:1 (Dec., 1974): 62, notes the connection between the hand and Matthew’s name in the *Golden Legend*: “The biography of Matthew begins with a discussion of the evangelist’s name. One of the etymologies Jacobus gives is that Matthew
As much as Caravaggio’s Sistine quotation meshes his name with Michelangelo Buonarroti’s, it also equates both artist’s painted hands as “artist’s hands.” That a hand painted by Michelangelo or Caravaggio could signify the respective artist’s general creative practice is made possible by the same self-consciousness of the artist that grew into the self-referential visual language manifest in such metaphors as the “window.” Indeed, this signification included its own trope: “by the hand of…”57

In Michelangelo’s case, the synecdochical relationship between painted-hand and artist’s practice is also one, by 1600, established in Vasari’s Vite and the artist’s autobiography as dictated to Condivi, both of which Caravaggio could have been acquainted with. Paul Barolsky notes that when Vasari praises Michelangelo’s divinissime mani at work in the Sistine Separation of waters from earth (fig.26), the author implies an analogy between the creative agency of God’s hands, hands especially prominent in the scene, and that of the artist’s own. Similarly, Condivi relates an anecdote in which Michelangelo produces an ink drawing of a hand that served as both an example of his work, an oblique signature (as it proved his authorship of other work), and a figurative extension of his actual hand (as it was “by the hand” of Michelangelo).58

Even if Caravaggio was unfamiliar with these sources, evidence connecting hands painted by Michelangelo and the act of painting exists on the Sistine ceiling itself. When God Separates Light and Dark (fig.27)—an activity similar to illusionistic modeling—his

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58Barolsky, 1995, 14.
hands are the driving elements of the action as they separate the dark and bright cloud forms. Significantly, as God’s hands sink into the clouds, their three-dimensional illusions disintegrate alluding to the painter’s similar power of miraculously creating depth in the modeling of light and dark.\(^5\) Similarly, in the \textit{Calling}, Christ’s hand, imbued with creative force from its quoted source, becomes the artist’s own. This is also a hand which seems to direct the painting’s primary light source, and in doing so calls attention not only to that which gives the painting, as a stylistic exemplar for Caravaggio, its distinctive tenebrism and heightened \textit{rilievo}, but also the particular studio lighting arrangement that allows for these effects. This arrangement is formally linked to Christ’s hand, which is frozen on the central axis of the covered window. Evocative of a studio context, this covered window is consequently linked to the light prompted by the hand, beaming from an invisible source, presumably the elevated, partially covered window of which Caravaggio’s biographers speak.

The formal constellation of light beam, window, and hand amounts to a self-referential flourish similar to Michelangelo’s play on light/dark modeling of the \textit{Separation of Light and Dark}. The interaction between hand, light source, and window establishes an antithetical relationship between the \textit{Calling}’s non-emittent, yet visible, covered window and its emittent, invisible, (partially covered) window that is analogous to the light/dark contrapposto of Michelangelo’s pun and is similarly centered around the hand’s creative force.\(^6\) Christ’s/the artist’s hand throws the \textit{Calling}’s antithesis into


motion as the visible, painted, covered window is literally created by the virtual light of
the invisible, elevated window, distinctive of Caravaggio’s studio and style.

Barolsky recalls that the word for style, maniera, derives from manus, hand. It
seems more than coincidental that Caravaggio chooses a hand for his oblique signature in
a painting not only evocative of his studio but one emphasizing (and literally illustrating)
the studio practicalities that make Caravaggio’s style so distinctive. As noted, when
Bellori describes the artist’s studio novelties he links style (maniera) to such practical
inventions as modifications to room lighting: “He went so far in this method of working
that he never showed any of his figures in open daylight, but instead found a way (trovò
una maniera) to place them in the darkness of a closed room.” In such an environment,
as made manifest in the setting of the Calling, Christ’s hand is, on the one hand, a
signature that is nominal and, on the other, exemplary of a group of stylistic markers
including the artist’s tenebrism, extreme rilievo, and also the studio modification that
makes them possible. It is finally, of course, also the creative force that allows for their
existence: the hand of the artist.

tenebristic results of Caravaggio’s signature lighting system: “havendo i chiari e l’ombre molto chiare e
molto oscure.”


62 Bellori, reproduced in Hibbard, 364.
V. Coloring

In the *Calling*, the artist’s hand is ultimately responsible for the painting’s tenebrism, its extreme contrasts between light and dark. And, as much as the painting’s formal arrangement of light beams, hands, and windows emphasizes the specific studio lighting arrangement that makes this tenebrism possible, it also calls attention to a related entity with which Caravaggio may have also wanted to identify his practice: color.

Christ’s hand calls forth a burst of color that splashes into the table top group as it shoots from his sleeve, passing through the electrified gap between the two counter-positioned figures closest to Peter, touching down in the billowing sleeve of the figure to Matthew’s left. The color stream continues into Matthew’s left arm, stopping to spot the lips of his left-hand companion and parenthetically framing the saint as it stripes the arms of the youth at the table’s end. That this burst neglects the centrally-positioned, sword-carrying youth with his back to the viewer, makes its vector from Christ’s arm all the more forceful; the color’s horizontal motion also implied by the contrapposto, in both position and tonality, of the hat plumes that flank the painting’s central spatial gap. Thus, Christ’s hand/the artist’s hand commands both light and color.

That Caravaggio would want to foreground his coloring—the combination of both his distinctive lighting and the color effects it makes possible and invigorates—in the *Calling* is suggested by his subsequent reputation as a colorist. When seventeenth-century writers address Caravaggio’s coloring they refer not simply to the hues used but
also their tonality, the way they are applied, the effects they create, their relations to one another and to the deep shadows between them. While Caravaggio’s biographers and other writers about art often criticize the artist for his unselective naturalism in the use of models, leading to errors in decorum, they are uniquely consistent in their praise of his coloring.⁶³

Mancini writes: “Our age owes much to Michelangelo da Caravaggio for the coloring that he introduced, which is now widely followed,” and in “coloration he attained a high point;” Caravaggio’s school is “forceful and excellently colored.” reaching an influential high point in coloration.⁶⁴ Baglione lauded the bel colorito of Caravaggio’s Fortune-Teller and implicitly praised his coloring in his criticism of the artist’s lack of disegno: “Many young artists followed his example and painted heads from life, without studying the rudiments of design and the profundity of art, but were satisfied only with the colors.”⁶⁵ And, for Bellori: “Caravaggio’s colors are prized wherever art is valued.”⁶⁶

Bell notes that Caravaggio’s earliest critic, Mancini, stresses Caravaggio’s lack of naturalism more than later writers. (Bellori and Malvasia especially, who critique of the

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⁶³Bell, 1993, 103-129, presents Caravaggio’s overlooked reputation as a good colorist as its thesis. The following argument is much indebted to her readings of Caravaggio’s seventeenth-century critics. It also assumes, with Bell, that “even though many of the details of Caravaggio’s life and his relationship to his contemporaries have been shown to be fallacious by modern scholarship, this does not undermine their value as critical assessments.”

⁶⁴Mancini, from Hibbard, 346: “Deve molto questa nostra età a Michelangelo da Caravaggio, per il colorir che ha introdotto, seguito adesso assai comunemente,” and 351: “molta forza et è di bonissimo colorito.”


⁶⁶Bellori, from Hibbard, 373: “Sono pregiati li suoi colori dovunque è in conto la pittura.”
artist’s unselective naturalism, leading to errors in decorum). But even here, Caravaggio’s lack of naturalism is related more to his artificial lighting system than his coloring per se; Mancini stressed that Caravaggio’s colors “tended towards black” and were too dark, a result of his unnatural, yet stylistically distinct, lighting arrangement.\(^67\) Indeed, aside from beginning his biography lauding Caravaggio’s influential coloring, he adds halfway through: “It cannot be denied that for single figures, heads, and coloration he attained a high point, and that the artists of our century are much indebted to him.”\(^68\)

Later writers are less critical of unnatural lighting while still praising Caravaggio’s coloring, often recognizing that lighting and color work together in the creation of effects characteristic of the artist’s style. Scannelli praises the relief and surface verisimilitude afforded by Caravaggio’s coloring and tenebrism.\(^69\) Surface verisimilitude refers to the aspect of appearance such as the textures of cloth, flesh, hair, and metal; the play of light on flat and curved surfaces; the variety and intensity of colors in nature. These are precisely the effects showcased in the swath of billowing fabrics and feathers cast by Christ’s hand (including the faint reflection of Matthew’s sash on the table surface) as it follows the vectors of the light beam from the upper right and Christ’s hand. In fact, Scannelli writes of the Calling in particular noting its surfaces: “truly, one of the most…relief-like, and natural works [demonstrating] the artifice of painting

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\(^67\)Mancini, 146, section on framing, cited in Bell, 1993, 106, n.24; I will return to Mancini’s opinion on Caravaggio’s lighting as it shares sentiments with Malvasia and Zaccollini’s critiques of tenebrism. Bell, 1993, 107-110, notes similarities between Mancini’s opinion, Zaccollini’s (1618-22), Pietro Testa’s (1630s), and Abraham Bosse’s (1649).

\(^68\)Mancini, from Hibbard, 348: “Non si puol negare che per una figura sola, per le teste e colorito non sia arrivato ad un gran segno e che la profession di questo secolo non li sia molto obligate.”

\(^69\)On surface verisimilitude and relief, Scannelli, from Hibbard, 357, Book I, Chapter VIII. Bellori explicitly praises Caravaggio’s surface verisimilitude, n. 71. Also, Bell, 1993, 110-123.
through its imitation of mere surface appearances.”

Malvasia also admired Caravaggio’s surface realism, and the artist’s coloring is repeatedly considered forte (strong) and of il fiero tingere (fierce tinting). For Malvasia, the ferocity of Caravaggio’s coloring was directly related to his tenebrism, as deep shadows contrast heavily with lighter colors, making them appear more vivid, or life-like. Reducing bright areas to a few spots while making their colors more vibrant because of that limitation, the artist’s tenebrism worked in tandem with his coloring in a relationship similar to their coordination along the same vector in the Calling.

There is a common distinction among later writers (Bellori, Malvasia, Scannelli) between the excessive naturalism of Caravaggio’s unselective use of models and his depictions of torn clothing and dirty bare feet, and the proper naturalness of his color. For Bellori, this was a naturalism of color that entails a level of artifice worthy of praise:

Caravaggio strengthened his tones and gave them blood and flesh reminding painters of [the importance of] imitation. However, one finds that he never used cinnabar reds and azure blues in his figures; and even when he sometimes had to use them, he weakened (li ammorzava) them, saying that they were the poison of colors.

As Bell notes, this crucial passage reveals Bellori’s recognition that Caravaggio tempered his pure pigments for the sake of compositional harmony. Vivid colors are considered difficult to unify, and the verb ammorzare, literally to extinguish a fire, and referring here

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70 Scannelli, from Hibbard, 358: “e alla parte destra l’istoria pure del Santo quando fu chiamato da Christo all’Apostolato, veramente una delle più pastose, rilevate, e naturali operationi, che venga a dimostrare l’artificio della Pintura per imitazione di mera verità.”

71 As much as Caravaggio’s distinctive lighting aided his coloring for Malvasia, their relationship also worked negatively, as tenebristic lighting’s near lack of reflected light made colors ultimately unnatural. In fact, it is the specific studio environment illustrated by the Calling that makes colors unnatural, as it limits the lit setting to extraordinary circumstances—night scenes, fires, etc.

72 Bellori, from Hibbard, 373.
to the reduction of color saturation, indicates a conscious limitation, on Caravaggio’s part, of the vividness of color.\(^7\)\(^3\) Where harmony is concerned in the *Calling*, the colors shot from Christ’s sleeve are predominantly reds and orange-yellows, comprising an analogous color harmony.

The distinction between unselective naturalism and naturalism of color is also apparent in Bellori’s consideration of the versions of *The Supper at Emmaus*: “both are praiseworthy for the imitation of natural color, even though they are lacking in decorum, since Michele frequently degenerated into lowly and vulgar forms.”\(^7\)\(^4\) For Bellori, Caravaggio’s attention to coloring over other aspects of painting was problematic, but the critic’s words are telling: “[Caravaggio] aspired only to the glory of coloring, so that flesh, skin and blood and natural surfaces would appear real, and to this alone he turned his eye and industry, leaving aside all other ways of thinking about art.”\(^7\)\(^5\) Caravaggio is admired for and innovative in his coloring, particularly its verisimilitude. While the artist’s models and depictions of vulgar things amounted to the mere copying of nature, to the point of breaching decorum, Caravaggio’s coloring for these later writers was recognized and praised for its artifice, and was considered, along with his dramatic chiaroscuro, novel. Granted, negative criticism often heavily tempered any positive

\(^7\)\(^3\)Bell, 1993, 120

\(^7\)\(^4\)Bellori, from Hibbard, 367: “l’una e l’altra alla lode dell’imitazione del colore naturale; se bene mancano nella parte del decoro, degenerando spesso Michele nella forme umili e vulgari.”

\(^7\)\(^5\)Bellori, from Hibbard, 362: “E perché egli aspirava all’unica lode del colore, sì che paresse vera l’incarnazione la pelle e l’angue e la superficie naturale, a questo solo volgeva intento l’occhio e l’industria, lasciando da parte gli altri pensieri dell’arte.”
currency given to Caravaggio’s distinctive lighting and coloring effects, but that such effects relied on an artifice worthy of imitation was also a reality.76

Caravaggio’s innovations in lighting and color cued towards forceful potentials in the areas of color vivacity and rilievo were consistently recognized by seventeenth-century writers, and the Calling’s prominent coordination of tenebristic lighting and a coloring that flaunts its ability to meticulously depict surface detail and reflection makes the painting—as the artist’s first large public commission—a demonstration piece.

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76 As Bell, 1993, 123-125, notes, this is perhaps most evident in Giustiniani’s unusually high praise of the artist in relation to Carracci and others.
If seicento critical responses to Caravaggio’s coloring were generally positive, critiques of his lighting were often negative. As much as Caravaggio’s tenebrism was a way towards the fierce colors and rilievo lauded by his critics, it was also unnatural in that it occurred in too specific an environment. This was the sentiment behind Malvasia’s placement of the artist’s style in relation to Guido Reni’s. As opposed to Reni’s lighting—“the type everyone sees daily on the streets, in the squares, and in churches”—tenebristic lighting consisted of awesome and forced shadows that occur when the light of the sun falls from high above through a half-closed window, or from a lit torch, both of which are, in every way, too artificial, violent, and affected, and are not seen naturally and in ordinary circumstances.77 This consideration of tenebrism also informed the critic’s characterizations of Guercino and Spada as ‘temperers’ of Caravaggio’s lighting. Both artists decreased the contrast of Caravaggio’s shadows, adding reflected light to make smoother transitions between light and dark.78 Without reflected light, Caravaggio’s harsh transitions between sharp lights and deep shadows made for a lighting that fragmented forms. This critique of tenebrism

77 See n.39; Malvasia echoes Vasari’s evaluation of Leonardo’s chiaroscuro, which in turn lauds its rilievo: “It is a thing to be marveled at how that ingegno, wishing to impart the greatest relief to the things he made, so endeavored with dark shadows to achieve the darkest backgrounds, that he sought out blacks which might shade and be blacker than other blacks, so that by such means the lights should be brighter; and in the end this manner turned out so inky that—there being no light tones left—they looked rather like things made to copy nocturnal effect, than a refinement on the light of day: but it was all from seeking to impart greater relief, to attain the end and perfection of the art.” Vasari, IV, 26.

78 Bell, 1993, 116.
appears in writing almost immediately after the end of Caravaggio’s short career, and probably was voiced during it as well. It surfaces in Zaccolini’s writings on light and color from 1618-1620: “Without the tempering of reflected light, the said shadowy space will not seem to be a shadow but will appear to be total darkness, as in nighttime; this is not a good imitation of nature, but rather makes a crude, cutting manner (tagliente).”

Zaccolini’s description of Caravaggio’s style as “cutting” tagliente is part of a whole group of critical neologisms and terms borrowed from the critique of Venetian painting provoked by the artist’s unique style. As Philip Sohm has illustrated, many of these neologisms loaded the formal qualities of Caravaggio’s work with the biographical content of his fugitive life. Malvasia characterized Caravaggio’s style as “dark and hunted (cacciata)” with a violent uproar (fracasso) of light and shadow, and Giovanni Battista Passeri wrote that his “robust” style “charges ahead” and “attacks” contemporary painting. Borrowing from the critique of Venetian painting, Sussino considers the artist’s robust chiaroscuro as a “surreptitious dyeing with stains” (tingere di macchia, furbesco) with a “fury of shadows” (fierenza d’ombre). Literally “stain,” macchia had long, not necessarily pejorative, associations with the painterly styles of Venetian artists,

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81 Ibid. 457-458.

82 Francesco Sussino, Le Vite de’ Pittori Messinesi, introduction by Valentino Martinelli (Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1960): 113; partially cited in Sohm, 467, #81: “a mio credere questa [the Nativity in Messina] si è la migliore, perchè in esse questo gran naturalista fuggì quel tingere di macchia, furbesco, ma rimostrossi naturale senza quella fierenza d’ombre.”
but when applied to Caravaggio, the term connected the artist’s tenebrism to nefarious behavior and to a type of painting that hides the artist’s inadequacies. Baldinucci defines macchia as

…a dense and frightfully dark forest…where brutes and thieves hid in the shadowy undergrowth (macchia) to engage in their malfeasance secretly, as one says, to make whatever it may be alla macchia, that is to make it in hiding, secretly and furtively (furtivamente), thus of printers, counterfeitors, and forgers who print and make money without any authorization, one says to print or mind alla macchia.83

The furtive style (un dipingere furbesco or furtivo) referred both to the sly and malicious activity of thieves and also to a style of painting that concealed an artist’s shortcomings by cloaking them in shadows.84

Among these neologisms are serrato or “shuttered” and cadente or “raking or oblique.” Cued towards Caravaggio’s life, serrato conflated the dark settings and plebeian figures of his paintings with the sinister and secretive locales of thievery and violence that pervade later biographies. However, when coupled with cadente, the less morally-charged descriptor of light direction, serrato could be an apt critical term for description of Caravaggio’s tenebristic effects on forms. Referring to an obscuring light when aimed at oblique angles, lume serrato fragments forms with dramatic self-shadows, as if light and shadow traversed objects in relief leaving a serrated pattern similar to the shadows of window blinds. In his consideration of Jacopo Bassano’s late work of the 1580s, seicento painter-theorist Giovanni Battisa Volpato notes that serrated, raking light

83 Baldinucci, Vocabolario toscano dell’arte del disegno (Florence: Santi Franchi, 1681), 86, cited and translated in Sohm, 467, #82.

84 Sohm, 458.
highlights particular prominences of figures, detaching them from the remainder of the body, which is left in deep shadow.\textsuperscript{85}

The coupling of \textit{serrato} and \textit{cadente} to form a \textit{lume serrato e cadente}—a shuttered, raking light—is specifically related to the Contarelli chapel laterals in one of the terms’ first art-critical appearances. In his life of Guido Reni, Malvasia includes an anecdote in which Annibale Carracci responds to Caravaggio’s success in Rome by imagining a directly opposite style:

Is there anything so marvelous here? Did it seem to you that this was something new? I tell you that all those fellows with the never-seen-before style that they themselves invented will always have the same reception when they appear and will have no less praise. I know another way to make a big splash, in fact to beat and mortify that fellow [Caravaggio]; I would like to counterpose to that fierce coloring one that is completely tender. Does he use a raking (\textit{cadente}), shuttered (\textit{serrato}) light? I would like it to be open (\textit{aperto}) and frontal (\textit{in faccia}). Does he cover up the difficult parts of art in nighttime shadows? I, by the bright light of noon, would like to reveal the most learned and erudite of my studies.\textsuperscript{86}

Sohm notes that, if accurate and not completely invented by Malvasia, Annibale’s response would probably have been made after viewing the Contarelli chapel lateral,

\textsuperscript{85}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{86}Malvasia, Felsina Pittrice, Vol. II, 9: “che tante maraviglie, disse Annibale ivi presente? Parvi egli questo un nuovo effetto della novità? Io vi dico, che tutti quei che con non più veduta, e da essi loro inventata maniera usciran fuore, incontreranno sempre la stessa sorte, e non minore la loda. Saprei ben io, soggions’egli, un altro modo per far gran colpo, anzi da vincere e mortificare costui: a quell colorito fero vorrei contrapporre uno affatto tenero: prende egli un lume serrato e cadente? e io vorrei aperto, e in faccia: cuopre quegli le difficoltà dell’arte fra l’ombra della notte? ed io a un chiaro lume di mezzo giorno vorrei scoprire i più dotti ed eruditi ricerci.”; also, G. Perini, “Biographical anecdotes and historical truth: an example from Malvasia’s Life of Guido Reni” Studi Secenteschi XXXI, 1990: 149-60. Bell, 1993, translates these as “broken” and “cutting.” While these translations are valid in context and within the spirit of the cueing of critical terms toward Caravaggio’s fugitive biography, their contextual oppositions to \textit{aperto} (open) and \textit{in faccia} (frontal) suggest a more neutral reading in relation to lighting and visual form. The translation of \textit{serrato} as “shuttered” follows Sohm, who translates \textit{cadente} as “falling,” from \textit{cadere} (to fall). Sohm’s translation of \textit{cadente} could well describe light descending from a “high, partially covered window,” consonant with this paper; however, \textit{cadente’s} contextual opposition to \textit{in faccia} suggests, in its emphasis on directionality—“in the face”—a translation as “oblique.” Sohm translates \textit{in faccia} as “direct,” a translation that is vague when counterposed with “falling,” though more pointed with “oblique.”
Caravaggio’s public debut in Rome. From the mouth of Malvasia, Annibale’s words are a mobilization of new critical terms developed in response to Caravaggio’s mythically criminal life and a succinct formal critique of the Contarelli lateral’s tenebrism. In Annibale’s imagination, the chapel becomes even more of a demonstration piece, as he would oppose its “never-seen-before style” with a revelation of his own “most learned and erudite” studies. Even if we assume Annibale’s words as purely of Malvasia’s invention, the formal connotations of serrato and cadente seem implicit in Zaccolini’s more contemporary critique of tenebrism where the absence of reflected light reduces shadows to total darkness in a “crude, cutting style” (maniera cruda, tagliente). Indeed, such critical ideas are already apparent in Alberti’s treatise of 1436 in terms not morally cued Caravaggio’s biographies. Alberti describes the historia’s composition as the arranging of parts, surfaces chief among them:

> From the composition of surfaces arises that elegant harmony and grace in bodies, which they call beauty. The face which has some surfaces large and others small, some very prominent and others excessively receding and hollow, such as we see in the faces of old women, will be ugly to look at. But the face in which the surfaces are so joined together that pleasing lights pass gradually into agreeable shadows and there are no very sharp angles, we may rightly call a handsome and beautiful face.

Similar to Zaccolini’s smooth transitions between light and dark areas, the surfaces of the beautiful woman’s face are joined by smooth, gradual shadows. Conversely, in the composition of old women’s faces, the conjunctions of surfaces appear ugly precisely because of the high relief occurring between their receding and projective elements, as if

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87 Taking Malvasia on his word, Sohm entertains a hypothetical situation, positing the Taking of Christ (1602), in which Caravaggio’s imbedded self-portrait holds a lantern, as a response to Annibale’s criticism, as it was painted two years after the Contarelli laterals.

88 See n.79.

89 Alberti, 71, the definition of composition occurs at the exact center of the treatise, a privileged place in the book’s own composition.
deep wrinkles and sunken cheeks fracture the facial form at sharp, oblique angles by casting self-shadows too deep and dark.

The formal effects and literal connotations of a *lume serrato* and *cadente* are both evident and strangely exemplified in the Contarelli laterals themselves. The *Calling* would seem to uniquely illustrate Annibale’s *luce serrato* and *cadente* with its prominent window shutter—literally “shuttering” the light—and the composition’s mobilization of oblique, raking light as part of its narrative subject matter. Instead of illustrating these metaphors, the Martyrdom would showcase their formal effects as bodies are dramatically fragmented by shadows with raking light disintegrating volumes into dramatic contrasts between light and darkness, incidental lighting clipping knee-caps and toes from bodies.
VII. Conversion, Creation, and Composition

If the terms of Annibale’s account of the Contarelli laterals provide some access—through the guise of Caravaggio’s mythic biography—to the critical reception of the paintings as the artist’s first public exhibition, they also hint at a formal relationship between the *Calling* and the *Martyrdom* that provides a key to understanding the scope of the *Calling*’s self-referentiality, its self-positioning as a painting about “painting,” and about Caravaggio’s particular kind of “painting.”

A discussion of the *Calling* cannot neglect the painting’s context within the Contarelli chapel as a cohesive, interactive space, and the chronology of the chapel commissions suggests an interactive relationship between the two paintings. The two lateral paintings were commissioned in 1599, some time before the commissioning of the central altarpiece, Caravaggio’s *Inspiration of St. Matthew* in 1602 (fig. 28). 90 Thus, at the time of their public exhibition in July of 1600, the Contarelli laterals were Caravaggio’s only works in the chapel and faced one another, establishing a thematic and formal dialogue. In the light of the *luce serrato e cadente*, the *Calling* illustrates, with its window and raking beam, the critical metaphors that are taken to dramatic formal ends in the *Martyrdom*. Set in a studio context with a distinctive lighting arrangement, the

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90 In 1599, a statue of Matthew had been commissioned from Jacob Cobaert for the altar. It was not complete by 1602, and thus, Caravaggio was commissioned. See Cinotti, *Michelangelo Merisi Detto il Caravaggio* (Bergamo: Poligrafiche Bolis Bergamo, 1983): 105ff.
*Calling* reveals the method behind the *Martyrdom*’s light effects, where such a lighting arrangement is taken to task at an extreme degree.

An oppositional, mirroring relationship pervades the formal and thematic aspects of the works as well. The narratives themselves, conversion and martyrdom, bookend Matthew’s spiritual life on earth. Literally opposite the *Martyrdom* in the chapel space, the *Calling* is quiet while the *Martyrdom* screams. The *Calling* has a frozen stillness, while the *Martyrdom* explodes outward. Caravaggio composes the *Calling* along an emphatic horizontal, while the *Martyrdom*’s figures form a centrifugal arch punctured from above by the vertical axes of the palm of martyrdom and the assassin’s clutch. A coherent source of light beams into the *Calling* from the left, while an incoherent light source pierces the *Martyrdom* from the right.

The formal effects of the *lume serrato e cadente* on the *Martyrdom* are fundamental to understanding the *Calling* as a self-referential demonstration piece. Light rakes across the dark chapel setting creating radical contrasts of light and shadow that fragment forms separating toes, knee-caps, ankles, arms, and thighs from their bodies. This is particularly noticeable in the right-hand repousoir figure and the angel’s bodies. The disjunctive modeling of these figures tests the viewer’s inference of figural volume to the utmost extent. Figural forms disappear into inky blackness and cast dramatic self-shadows, fracturing themselves.

In his analysis of the painting, Todd Olson positions the Martyrdom’s fragmented bodies within contemporary interest in Christian martyrology. ⁹¹ Reworking the common assumption that the revision of the *Martyrdom* was motivated by Caravaggio’s realization

that its original composition was not consistent with the constraints of the *historia*—the narrative plot was obscured, the saint was difficult to recognize—Olson posits the *Martyrdom*’s final form as negotiation between the contradictory pressures of *historia* form and the representation of the martyr’s body, venerable precisely because of its formal violation. Drawing on Alberti’s definition for *historia*, Olson recalls that the interdependent parts of its composition adhere to a structure analogous to the imagined wholeness of the human body; in Alberti’s words: “the parts of the historia are bodies, the parts of the bodies are members, the parts of the member are the plane surfaces.”92 If the success of the *historia*’s composition depended on clear forms and bodies integrated within a hierarchical framework, martyrology glorified the fractured body and “dedicated itself to a pictorial structure based on the principle of violation.”93 Olson locates in the *Martyrdom*’s lighting effects a tension between “the projection of wholeness onto the figure of Matthew” motivated by the *historia*’s formal constraints and a “pictorial strategy whereby body and pictorial composition [are] violated.” Just as bodies are cut by the *lume serrato e cadente*’s sharp lights and pools of darkness, Matthew’s body is barely complete. Abrupt foreshortenings occlude the saint’s head, torso, and legs. Heroic nudity is reserved for the assassin, himself broken by self-shadow, leaving Matthew draped in a garment that barely suggests underlying substance.


93 The remainder of the paragraph quotes Olson, 115.
More than this, the revised pictorial composition in general, while intelligibly designed, is in the process of breaking apart: figures shattered by light flee the edges of the canvas in a cloud of smoke, itself sooted with shadow. Parts of bodies are subsumed by blackness only to emerge disarticulated from their adjacent limbs by strained spatial and tonal relationships, undermining the continuity between the “body parts” of the *historia*. The *Martyrdom*’s central quotation of Titian’s famous *Martyrdom of St. Peter Martyr* at once alludes to another composition bursting at its seams and couches its own structural disintegration within the lucid coherence of masterpiece reference. While scripted in the language of *historia* composition, Caravaggio’s revision of the *Martyrdom* stages its own dissolution. Olson suggests that the conflation between the violation of Matthew’s body via martyrdom and the pictorial body via the manipulation of spatial and light effects amounts to an iconoclastic gesture well within contemporary Counter-Reformation visual strategies. The *Martyrdom*’s *lume serrato e cadente* and tenebrism threatened to disintegrate the unity of the composition in a way that thematized the destruction of painting itself. Illustrating the simultaneous killing of priests and crucifixes, Counter-Reformation appropriations of iconoclastic imagery exploited the blurred distinction between deity and material object decried by Protestants. He cites examples of contemporary prints and paintings in which iconoclasts confused martyred

bodies with artwork to be destroyed. In this heretical confusion, Protestant condemnation turned against itself, iconoclasm was cast as a “symbolic reenactment” of martyrdom. For Olson, the Martyrdom is part of this visual tradition, though ingeniously mobilized by an inventive conflation of the martyr’s body and the compositional body as constituted in the historia’s pictorial form.

Olson’s analysis of Caravaggio’s novel solution to the Martyrdom’s composition is apt and illuminating, but when he writes that Caravaggio “easily adapted the pictorial structure of his small paintings to the demands of the Calling,” he neglects to consider how that painting mobilizes its own composition in interaction with the Martyrdom. Christ does enter a “tavern scene” filled with “half-length figures” forming a “motley crew” from which Matthew is selected, a scenario not unlike the artist’s Cardsharps (1596) or Fortune-Teller (1596). But such a reading fails to recognize the importance of the painting’s prominent window, alluding to a studio setting, and the Michelangesque reference of Christ’s hand, making the scene one of, not only spiritual, but artistic creation.

Likewise, Olson’s attention to the effects of contemporary martyrrology on the Martyrdom should be supplemented with attention to the interest of those involved with

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95 See Olson, 127-129. Olson cites engravings from Richard Verstegan’s Theatrum Crudelitatum Haereticorum Nostri Temporis (Antwerp, 1588) and Bartolomeo Ricci’s Triumphvs Iesv Christi crucifixi (Antwerp, 1608), as well as Pomarancio’s frescoes from the English College (1581) and Santo Stefano Rotondo al Celio (1582) in Rome.

96 Olson, 129.

97 Ibid. 112.

98 Ibid. 129. Olson’s reading is a common one; nearly every writer on the Calling notes that these figures are virtually lifted from his earlier paintings.
the chapel in the conversion of Jews. Gregory XIII, Cardinal Matteo Contarelli’s patron and mentor, was particularly appetent for converts, a mission which may have influenced Contarelli’s 1564 prescription for the chapel’s program. Caravaggio’s first *Inspiration of Matthew* altarpiece included the oddity of Matthew’s original Hebrew text, an inclusion that speaks to St. Jerome’s account of Matthew’s writing his gospel in the language of his fellow, newly-converted Semites. Cast as a baptismal scene, the Martyrdom itself curiously features a number of seminude neophytes.

In a mirroring, inverted relationship with the *Martyrdom*, the *Calling* scripts a scene of conversion as a scene of creation. While the thoroughly revised *Martyrdom* conflates its subject matter, the abject body of the martyr, with the *historia* that literally decomposes itself, the *Calling*’s minimal revision, including the Sistine quotation of Christ’s hand squarely below the studio window, conflates conversion with the creation of the pictorial composition. Thus, the scene’s studio elements are no longer to be dismissed as evidence of Caravaggio’s naturalism, because they are activated as symbols of the environment in which such creation would occur. The painting’s window, evocative of “painting” as a notional entity and frozen above the creating hand, mirrors the *Calling*’s composition as a whole, equating it with the birthed picture. The window’s rectilinear pattern extends beyond the boundaries of its frame imposing a rigid

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99 Matteo Contarelli is an Italianization of Matthieu Contrei, French Cardinal and namesake of the Contarelli chapel. In 1564, Contrei commissioned the chapel’s cycle from Giuseppe Cesari, though the Cardinal died in 1587 before the laterals were re-commissioned from Caravaggio.

100 In 1577, Gregory made it mandatory for all Jews in Rome to attend Christian sermons, and founded a college of converts to produce proselytizers. His bull of 1584, required that every catholic community was to provide a suitable man to preach the Gospel to the Jews in the synagogues on Sabbath. Adriene von Lates, “Caravaggio, Montaigne, and the Conversion of the Jews at San Luigi dei Francesi,” *Gazette des Beaux-arts*, 124:1509 (Oct., 1994): 107-116; and Lavin, 1993, 97-98.


102 Lavin, 1993, 98.
circumscription on the painting’s figure groups and quadrilateral, chiastic light-pattern.

Bridging the gap between figure groups, dictating the arrangement of color, and encompassing the fundamental formal driver of the painting, a dramatic division between light and dark is harnessed by a single hand, as if pulled through the elevated studio window, and deployed in a compositional order diametrically opposed to the 

*Martyrdom*’s disarrayed light effects.

The *Calling*’s studio setting, then, is one of compositional birthing. The *Martyrdom* dissolves the Albertian compositional “body,” the *Calling* flaunts, demonstrates, its memberment. In relation to the polemics on iconoclasm addressed by the *Martyrdom*, Matthew’s conversion from Jew to saint in the *Calling* encompasses a force inversely equal to the heretical audacity of the destruction of a sacred image, their production amounting to the inclusion of another body into the fold of the faithful.
Figure 1: Johann Jacob von Sandrart. *Story of Dibutades*. Engraving for Joachim von Sandrart’s *Academia nobilissimae artis pictoriae* (1683).
Figure 2: Joachim von Sandrart. *Story of Dibutades*. Engraving for his *Teutsche Academie* (1675).
Figure 3: Caravaggio. *Calling of St. Matthew*. Oil on canvas, 1599. Contarelli chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome.
Figure 4: Caravaggio. *Martyrdom of St. Matthew*. Oil on canvas, 1599. Contarelli chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome.
Figure 5: Marinus van Reymerswael. *The Calling of St. Matthew*. Oil on canvas, after 1536. Castagnola, Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection.
Figure 6: Jan van Hemessen. *The Calling of St. Matthew*. Oil on canvas, 1536. Munich, Alte Pinakothek.
Figure 7: Caravaggio. *The Cardsharps*. Oil on canvas, 1596. Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth.
Figure 8: Caravaggio. *The Fortune-Teller*. Oil on canvas, 1596. Musei Capitolini, Rome.
Figure 9: Caravaggio. *Conversion of the Magdalene*. Oil on canvas, 1598. Institute of Arts, Detroit.
Figure 10: Hieronymus Rodler (and Johann II von Bayern). Engraving for Eyn schön nützlich büchlin und underweisung der kunst des Messens mit dem Zirkel, Richtscheidt oder Linial (Simmern, 1531).
Figure 11: Jan Porcellis. *Tempest*. Oil on canvas, 1629. Munich, Alte Pinakothek.
Figure 12: Anthony van Dyck. *Portrait of the Painter Andreas Van Ertfeld*. Oil on canvas, 1632. Schleissheim, Staatsgalerie.
Figure 13: Caravaggio. *Magdalene*. Oil on canvas, 1596-7. Galleria Doria-Pamphili, Rome.
Figure 14: Giuseppe Cesari. *St. Matthew Resurrects the Daughter of the King of Ethiopia*. Fresco, 1591-93. Vault of Contarelli chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome.
Figure 16: Adriaen van Ostade. *Painter in His Studio*. Etching, ca. 1669.
National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection, Washington, D.C.
Figure 17: Parmigianino. *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. Oil on wood, 1524. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.
Figure 18: Bartolomeo Passarotti (?). *Portrait of Giambologna*. Oil on canvas, 1580. Private collection.
Figure 19: Albrecht Dürer. Woodcut from *Unterweisung der Messung*, c. 1525.
Figure 20: Rembrandt van Rijn. *The Artist in his Studio*. Oil on canvas, 1626-28. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
Figure 21: Annibale Carracci. *Self-Portrait*. Oil on wood, 1604.
The Hermitage, St. Petersburg.
Figure 22: Caravaggio. *Boy with Basket of Fruit*. Oil on canvas, 1593. Galleria Borghese, Rome.
Figure 23: Caravaggio. *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*. Oil on canvas, 1594. National Gallery, London.
Figure 24: Caravaggio. *Lute Player*. Oil on canvas, 1596. The Hermitage, St. Petersburg.
Figure 25: Detail: Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Creation of Adam*. Fresco, 1510. Sistine chapel ceiling, Vatican.
Figure 26: Michelangelo Buonarroti. *Creation of Sun, Moon, and Planets*. Fresco, 1511. Sistine chapel ceiling, Vatican.
Figure 27: Michelangelo Buonarroti. *Separation of Light and Dark*. Fresco, 1511. Sistine chapel ceiling, Vatican.
Figure 28: Caravaggio. *Inspiration of St. Matthew*. Oil on canvas, 1602. Formerly Kaiser-Friedrich Museum, Berlin.
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