

Biography and Art

European Art
1525-1725

Guido Reni: Compulsive gambler. Best-paid artist of the day. Virgin. Deeply religious. Afraid of women.

Caravaggio: Murderer. Radical innovator. Street fighter. Intellect. Exile.

GUIDO RENI: Accounts from his contemporaries describe the artist as highly strung, terrified of witches, resistant to women, unmarried, and a virgin (qualities that have also led some scholars to conclude that he was gay).

The museum's painting *The Adoration of the Magi* appears to be unfinished, and we know the painting was still in Reni's studio when he died. We also know that Reni was a compulsive gambler, and despite being the best-paid artist of his day, he constantly needed money, took on too many commissions, and crammed his studio full of assistants.

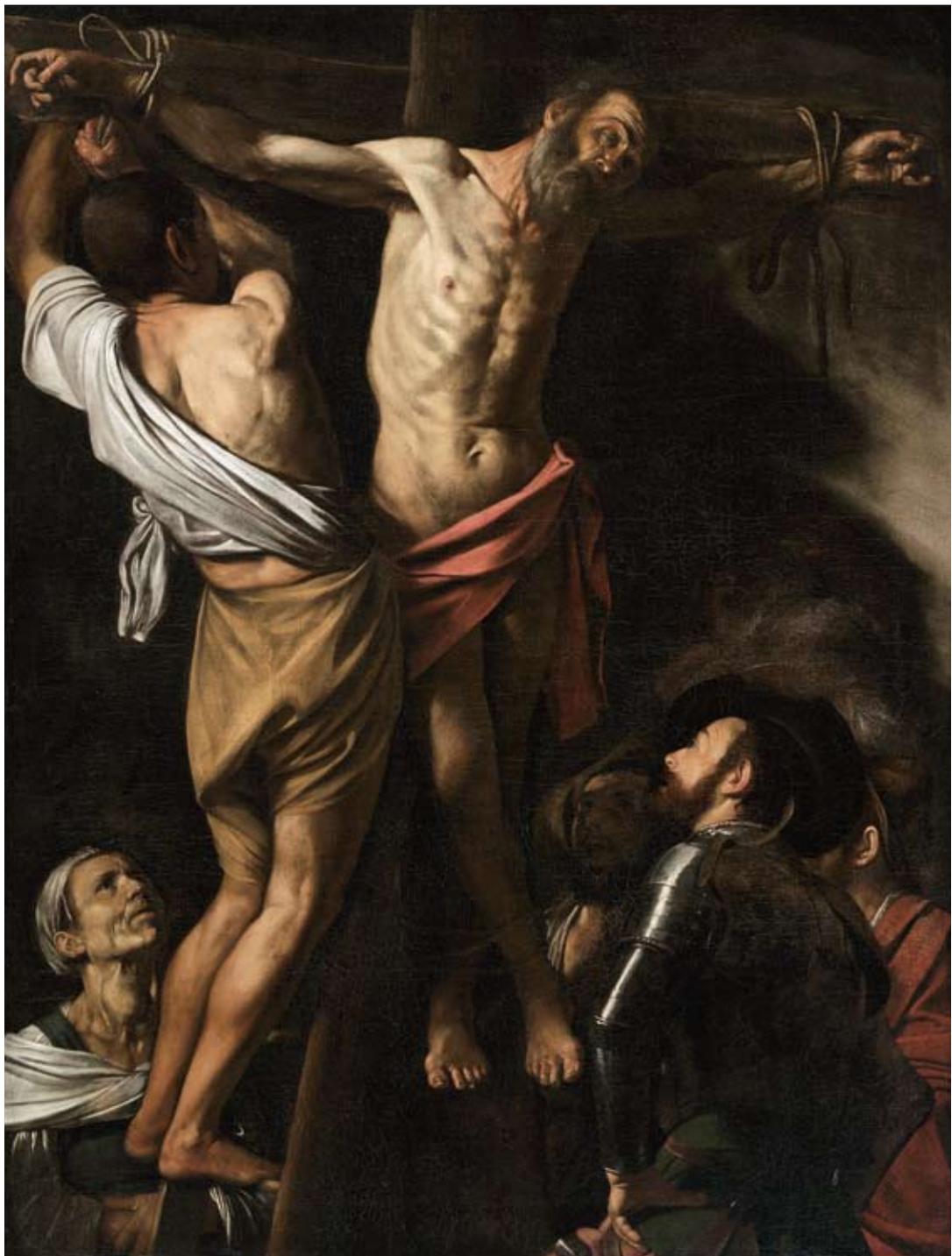
Is this work (at the right) a rush job done by studio hands? Did he paint quickly to make more money? Did his anxieties about women lead him away from painting them from life?

Or, are there other factors at work? Could there be spiritual or intellectual explanations instead? Could the unfinished quality have another meaning? Could it refer to a higher or better world than the concrete one in which we live?

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Guido Reni (Italian, 1575–1642). *The Adoration of the Magi*, 1642. Oil on canvas; 148 7/8 x 110 1/2 in. Leonard C. Hanna Jr. Fund 1969.132



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (Italian, 1573–1610). *The Crucifixion of Saint Andrew*, 1606–7. Oil on canvas; 91 15/16 x 72 7/16 in. Leonard C. Hanna Jr. Fund 1976.2

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Biography often colors the way we understand artists. Sometimes insights into an artist's life can explain a great deal about their art. However, biography—real or not—can also lead to misguided interpretations or cover up other explanations.

(CONTINUED FROM FRONT) CARAVAGGIO: He threatened other artists who trod on his artistic turf. In 1606, culminating years of antisocial behavior, Caravaggio murdered a friend after quarreling over a sports match. To escape prosecution, he fled south to Naples, where he painted the museum's *Crucifixion of Saint Andrew*.

He never married, contributing to a persistent belief that he was gay (even though documents point exactly the other direction).

Should we assume he was a rebel in all things? Radical innovator, yes, but he started his career in the cultured Roman court of Cardinal Francesco Maria Del Monte (1549–1627), and worked for years for a prestigious, educated clientele.

Does his aggressive personality have anything to do with the way the pictures were painted? Can his interest in showing unvarnished reality and honestly depicting people from lower social classes spring from other aspects of his personality? Could they connect to new scientific methods of scrutinizing nature closely? Could they express Counter-Reformation spirituality?