

READING 40-1

Caravaggio's Fruit: A Mirror on Baroque Horticulture

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The star of Caravaggio (1571–1610) as a master painter has never been higher. His innovative artistry is recognized as the bridge between the Mannerist style typified by Michelangelo Buonarroti, Agnolo Bronzino, and Titian of the High Renaissance and the Baroque splendor of Rubens and Rembrandt. His paintings and persona have entered popular culture, his portrait and two of his works were featured on the old 100,000 lire banknote of Italy (Fig. 1), and a movie has been made of his life. Interest in Caravaggio has been enhanced by four current books; three of them biographies: *Caravaggio* by John T. Spike (2001), *M: The Man who became Caravaggio* by Peter Robb (1998), *Caravaggio* by Catherine Puglisi (1998), and a recent work *Secret Knowledge* by David Hockney, (2002) proposing Caravaggio's use of optical aids.

The life of Michelangelo Merisi, known to us as Caravaggio, was short and intense, characterized by bouts of brawling, time in jail, banishment, and homicide. His paintings are typified by a dramatic manipulation of light (chiaroscuro); reliance on human models, many with multiple appearances in his paintings; by a blatant homoerotic content (see Posner 1971, Robb, 1988); direct painting without preliminary drawings, a non-sentimental approach to religious art, and an eerie "photorealism" that extends to portraiture, various objects including musical instruments, scores, and plant material. Caravaggio has left few personal records by his own hand but the interpretations of his paintings by generations of art historians, combined with recently unearthed archival information, provides a rich history of the man and his time. They include analysis of the paintings including style and technique, psychological insights into the artist and subjects in the case of portraits, historical analysis of the period based on patrons, and an analysis of religious meaning through the choice of subject matter and symbolism. This paper takes a different approach. The dazzling



Fig. 1. Michelangelo Merisi, known as Caravaggio, in a pastel portrait by Ottavio Leoni, used in the 100,000 lire banknote of Italy

“super-realism” of Caravaggio and the concentration of fruit-images (equivalent to finding a cache of contemporary photographs!) are here used to analyze the horticultural information of the period.

THE PAINTINGS WITH FRUIT

Various fruits appear in at least twelve different paintings dated from 1592 to 1603 and definitely attributed to the Caravaggio. They include apple, cherry, citrus (flowers), cucumber, fig, gourd, grape, medlar, melon, pumpkin, peach, pear, plum, pomegranate, quince, squash, and watermelon. Just as the figures in Caravaggio’s paintings were painted from life, so too were the fruits. Exact in detail they include precise representations of disease symptoms, insect damage, and various abiotic defects. Fruits are scattered more or less incidentally in five early genre paintings (Fig. 2): *Boy Peeling Fruit*, 1592 (apple, fig, pear, peach plum); *Self Portrait as Bacchus*, 1593 (peach, grape); *Musicians*, 1595 (grape); *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* 1595 (cherry, apple); and *Lute Player*, 1596 (cucumber, pear, fig). In five other paintings, an assemblage of fruits is a prominent part of the composition, four in baskets and one on a plate. These will be discussed in sequence, based on the dates of origin according to Spike (2001) and Puglisi (1998) and followed by a review of each of the fruits. Finally, fruit in five paintings of controversial attribution will be considered.

Boy with a Basket of Fruit (1592)

This early genre painting by Caravaggio (Fig. 3) is of a sensual young boy holding a huge basket filled with fruit. The model has been identified as Mario Minniti, who appears in many of the early works, and who became a painter in his own right. The basket, the main focus of the painting, contains a great many fruits, all in nearly perfect condition and including a bicolored peach with a bright red blush; four clusters of grapes—two black, one red, and one “white”; a ripe pomegranate split open, disgorging its red seeds; four figs, two of them dead-ripe, black ones, both split and two light-colored; two medlars; three apples—two red, one blushed and the other striped, and one yellow with a russet basin and a scar; two branches with small pears, one of them with five yellow ones with a bright red cheek and the other, half-hidden, with small yellow, blushed fruits. There are also leaves showing various disorders: a prominent virescent grape leaf with fungal spots and another with a white insect egg mass resembling oblique banded leaf roller (*Choristoneura rosaceana*), and peach leaves with various spots. Incongruously, there are two sprigs with reddish foliage, perhaps mint. While the display of fruits is beautiful, it does not have the super-realism characteristic of some of the later paintings.



Fig. 3. *Boy with a Basket of Fruit.*

Bacchus (1597)

The arresting painting of a young, flushed Bacchus (Fig. 4) is one of the most famous by the artist. It displays a porcelain dish of ripe and rotting fruit, but the face and torso of the model, Mario Minniti, is the focal point. This work is characterized by a new sense of realism and represents a substantial

A



B



C



D



E



Fig. 2. Paintings by Caravaggio with incidental pictures of fruit: A. *Boy Peeling a Basket of Fruit*; B. *Self-Portrait as Bacchus*; C. *Musicians*; D. *Boy Bitten by Lizard*; E. *Lute Player*.

change in style. The suggestion by both David Hockney (2001) and Robb (1998) of the use of a mirror or optical aids is supported by the fact that the goblet of red wine is in the left hand of the model. The fruits include black, red, and white clusters of grapes; a bursting pomegranate; figs; a large green pear; three apples—one greenish and one red with a codling moth (*Carpocapsa pomonella*) entrance hole, a small, golden russet crab with two areas of rot, likely a form of *Botrytisphaeria*; and a half-rotten quince. The basket contains two fig leaves both with a dorsal (abaxial) view and a grape leaf yellowing at the edge suggestive of potassium deficiency. The head of Bacchus is crowned with clusters of black and white grapes and senescing leaves, one of which is turning red, probably an indication of crown gall, induced by *Agrobacterium tumefaciens*.

Supper at Emmaus (1601)

Supper at Emmaus is an extraordinary work, painted when Caravaggio was 30 (Fig. 5). The scene depicts a miraculous post-Crucifixion event (*Luke 24:30*) involving the disciple Cleophas, the apostle Simon, an innkeeper, and a beardless stranger in the center (who has just been recognized as the risen Christ), bless-



Fig. 4. *Bacchus*.

ing a repast consisting of bread, a chicken, white wine, water, and a marvelous basket of fruits seemingly hovering precariously over the edge of the table. The picture has some striking technical qualities. The use of perspective and foreshortening is startling: the seated Cleophas seems to move his chair and elbow into the observer's space. However, there is a disturbing perspective error (*see* Hockney, 2001) in which the distal right hand of Peter is larger than the proximal left one, suggestive of the use of some type of optical aid consistent with the exceptional realism of the painting. Combining separate views may have caused the perspective problem. The figures are clearly portraits of particular people, and the fruit is not generic but represents unique samples, purchased from the market and forever preserved.

The fruits display an enormous amount of horticultural information. The beautifully painted wicker basket contains fall fruit, somewhat inappropriate for an Easter event, but providing a clue to the date when the picture was made. The fruits are fully ripe and drawn precisely from life with the imperfections one would find in an "organic" production system—no insecticides, no fungicides—but sorely needed. There are three clusters of unblemished grapes, two red and one white (golden) as well as grape leaves with fungal spots; three apples, two bicolored and one russet; a plum, and a quince with leaves attached to the spur; a ripe, splitting pomegranate with spots on the skin; and two small medlars. All of the apples show defects: one has a precise representation of a series of scab lesions caused by the fungal pathogen *Venturia inaequalis*, one has a wormhole (probably from a codling moth) and the russet apple shows a rotten spot, perhaps black rot. The pomegranate has spots on the skin, and the plum is overripe and splitting. The golden cluster of grapes is fully ripe and there is at least one split berry, while the black cluster is rather loose, suggesting poor pollination; the leaves show fungal spots.

The large quince and the small medlars are blemish-free. The prominent position of the fruit bowl is arresting and contrasts with the upended chicken behind it with upright legs suggesting rigor mortis. Symbolism has been attributed to both the fruit and the chicken, but it is more likely that Caravaggio was confidently showing off his extraordinary talent.

Still Life with a Basket of Fruit (1601)

This stunning still life (Fig. 6), with *trompe l'oeil* realism, consists entirely of a basket of fruit. Spike (2001) attributes it to 1596 while Puglisi (1998) assigns it 1601, the same year as *Supper at Emmaus*. The 1601 date seems more likely to me for a number of reasons, and I have assigned that date here. The fruit baskets in both *Supper at Emmaus* and *Still Life with a Basket of Fruit* are the same, both perched precariously on the edge of a table, but with a different collection of fruit (possibly excluding the quince) that appears almost identical in both paintings. (Could it be the same speci-



Fig. 5. A. *Supper at Emmaus*; B. Close-up of fruit basket.

men?) We will never know for certain but I suggest this may have been either a preparatory painting for the larger *Supper at Emmaus*. Perhaps pleased with the result, Caravaggio added it to the *Supper at Emmaus* as an afterthought. This basket contains a peach, a summer fruit, suggesting that this image was painted first. Six different fruits are visible. The uppermost fruit is a good-sized, light-red peach attached to a stem with wormholes in the leaf resembling damage by oriental fruit moth (*Orthosia hibisci*). Beneath it is a single bicolored apple, shown from a stem perspective with two insect entry holes, probably codling moth, one of which shows secondary rot at the edge; one blushed yellow pear with insect predations resembling damage by leaf roller (*Archips argyospita*); four figs, two white and two purple—the purple ones dead ripe and splitting along the sides, plus a large fig leaf with a prominent fungal scorch lesion resembling anthracnose (*Glomerella cingulata*); and a single unblemished quince with a leafy spur showing fungal spots. There are four clusters of grapes, black, red, golden, and white; the red cluster on the right shows several mummified fruit, while the two clusters on the left each show an overripe berry. There are two grape leaves, one severely desiccated and shriveled while the other contains spots and evidence of an egg mass. In the right part of the basket are two green figs and a ripe black one is nestled in the rear on the left. On the sides of the basket are two disembodied shoots: to the right is a grape shoot with two leaves, both showing severe insect predations resembling grasshopper feeding; to the left is a floating spur of quince or pear.

What are we to make of these two 1601 works based on a collection of summer fruits and painted in Rome? Clearly, the markets were full of fruits, each represented by several cultivars. An earlier painting (1580) by Vincenzo Campi (1536–1591) of an idealized fruitseller (Fig. 7) illustrates this well. Here, the well-dressed woman vendor has large, yellow, blushed peaches in her lap and holds a large cluster of black grapes above a wooden container filled with black and white clusters. She is surrounded by plates, bowls and baskets containing black and white figs (the purple ones are also split), small red pears, cherries, apricots, blackberries, a pumpkin, as well as warty melons, an unidentified cucurbit, perhaps luffa, peas, beans, and roses in addition to blanched asparagus, artichokes, and cabbage lying on the ground. Two idealized fruit pickers harvest fruit from an enormous tree. The unblemished fruit in the Campi painting are generic in contrast to the portrait fruit of Caravaggio, replete with signs of insect predation and disease symptoms.



Fig. 6. *Still Life of a Basket of Fruit.*

Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge (1603)

This gorgeous painting (Fig. 8), a recent attribution, consists of a collection of tree fruits and cucurbits on a slab that resembles one in a startling 1602 religious work, the *Entombment of Christ*. There is a basket of fruits containing apple, grape, peach, pear, plum, and pear, with two pomegranates. The basket resembles the ones in the 1601 paintings; Caravaggio uses his studio props over and over. The apple has wormholes; clearly blemish-free apples were rare. Eight figs (three light and five purple), two showing wounds of red flesh, are on fig leaves outside of the basket. Most prominent are nine large fruits in the right of the painting, which represent four different genera of the gourd family (*Cucurbitaceae*) as identified by Harry Paris (pers. commun.). There are three round striped melons (*Cucumis melo*) with yellowish flesh in the foreground, one of which is burst open and from which a slice has been cut. Two of these melons show thick unfurrowed peduncles and one shows the beginning of abscission or separation (slipping) from the fruit. To the right are three smooth dark fruit, one of which has been sliced revealing the red flesh of a watermelon (*Citrullus lanatus*). In the background is a large green and yellow striped fruit with a very thick furrowed stem that is clearly a pumpkin (*Cucurbita pepo*). Most unusual are two very large, serpentine bottle gourds (*Lagenaria siceraria*).

THE FRUITS

A total of at least 17 different fruits are depicted in the standard paintings attributed to Caravaggio, more if some questionable attributions are included. Many are clearly different cultivars and a number show various biotic and abiotic defects. Viewed together, they represent a unique perspective on baroque horticulture between 1592 and 1603.

Fig (*Ficus indica*)

Caravaggio is attracted to figs and displays them in five paintings. At least four different types are shown: green, light tan, reddish, and black. Black figs are often shown split at the suture. Most figs are shown unblemished but there is evidence of leaf damage by various insects. There were many cultivars of figs in Italy in the 17th century and Bartolomeo Bimbi (1648–1720), names and paints 33 of them in one painting (Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, 1982). The figs painted by Caravaggio are similar to three figs ‘Cosagnolo Lungo’ (black), ‘Lardaiolo vero’ (white) and ‘Corboliere Lunghi’ (red), illustrated in an undated manuscript by P.A. Micheli (1679–1713), the first director of the Botanical Garden of Florence. The fig



Fig. 7. *Fruit Seller*, 1580, by Vincenzo Campi.



Fig. 8. *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge*.

is native to the Mediterranean area, mentioned in an Egyptian stele about 2700 BCE, commonly referred to in the Hebrew Bible, and widely cited by Greek and Roman agricultural writers.

Pear (*Pyrus communis*)

Pears are found in six of Caravaggio's paintings. A great number of types are displayed including yellow, green, and red with size varying from small to very large. The small bright red ones in *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* resemble Moscadella (Moscatelle) types described by Bimbi as well as the Micheli manuscript, and also resemble one of the pears in the Campi painting. The same pears are illustrated in paintings by Giovanna Garzoni (Fig. 9). There is evidence of leaf roller damage on one yellow pear. The soft-fleshed European pear (*Pyrus communis*), native in Europe, North Africa and Asia Minor, has been considered part of the cultural heritage of Europe. The pear has been consumed since prehistoric times and dried slices have been unearthed in Swiss cave dwellings of the Ice Age. The first literary mention of the pear is found in Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey* and is included as one of the "gifts of the gods" which grew in the legendary gardens of Alcinöus. They are mentioned by Theophrastus and the Roman agricultural writers; Pliny the Elder writes extensively of pear, mentioning many types. The pear is found in a number of religious paintings of the Renaissance; the most famous is Giovanni Bellini's *Madonna of the Pear*. Pears still find a large place in Italian horticulture although the most popular pear grown in Italy is now a French cultivar called 'Abbé Fétel'.

Apple (*Malus ×domestica*)

There is great diversity in the apples painted by Caravaggio based on size, color, and presence of russet. Some of the apples resemble modern cultivars; they are attractive with red striping and yellow ground color. Insect and disease problems are clearly evident (Fig. 6B). Codling moth seems to be a severe problem and entry holes are evident in many of the fruits. Apple scab is shown in one fruit; the disease is still the bane of apple growers. Apples have a continuous tradition of representation in Italian paintings since ancient Roman times and clearly were and continue to be a favorite Italian fruit. Although there are a number of small-fruited, bitter species native to Europe, the domestic apple was imported to Europe from central Asia in antiquity and was well known in ancient Rome.

Quince (*Cydonia oblonga*)

Quince was clearly common to Caravaggio, for he paints it at least three times, and each time as a relatively large fruit as it is known today. In two paintings the fruits are unblemished, although in one example, the leaves show spots, and in another the fruits are half rotten. The quince, native to western Asia, is an ancient fruit known in Mesopotamian cultures. The name cydonia is derived from Cydonea, now Canea, a city in Crete which, according



Fig. 9. *Small Pears in a Dish, with Medlars and Cherries* by Giovanna Garzoni (Meloni Trkulja and Fumagali, 2000).

to Pliny the Elder, was the origin of quince. Although once widely admired, quince has lost popularity, probably because they are acid and astringent, thereby restricting their use to preserves, but there are types grown in Turkey that are nonacid and can be consumed fresh.

Medlar (*Mespilus germanica*)

Medlars are included in two paintings of Caravaggio and all are small and appear similar. Cultivated by the Assyrians, the fruit was introduced to Greece and was referred to by Theophrastus. The fruit is disappearing from most European markets but can still be found in Italy, Germany, and France. The medlar must be fermented (bletted) to be enjoyed. Shakespeare ridiculed the fruit in a famous quote:

I'll graff it with you and then I shall graff it with a medlar; then it will be the earliest fruit i' the country; for you'll be rotten ere you be half ripe, and that's the right vertue of the medlar.
(As You Like It, III.2).

Peach (*Prunus persica*)

Caravaggio illustrates the peach in at least four paintings with a remarkable diversity in color. Insect damage, as well as brown rot incited by *Monilinia laxa*, was clearly a problem then as it is today. This fruit has been popular in Italy since antiquity and was introduced from China via Central Asia. The binomial *Prunus persica* suggests that it was introduced from Persia, obviously a way station. A painting from Pompeii shows large, green fruit with yellowing flesh and a freestone pit (Fig. 10). The peaches in Campi's painting (Fig. 7), although quite large, are predominantly yellow with a red blush.

Pomegranate (*Punica granatum*)

A prominent crown-like calyx characterizes the pomegranate, sometimes known as the Chinese apple. This ancient fruit is a favorite subject of Caravaggio, who includes it in four paintings. All but one of these fruits are shown split open to highlight the seeds enclosed by brilliant red pulp. There are two skin colors, red and light brown. Pomegranate appears to have originated in Iran, with archeological remains found at Nimrud. It spread throughout the Mideast including Egypt where it was known 4000 years ago. It is referred to in the Hebrew Bible and was used for juice and wine. It is presumed to have been introduced into Europe by the Carthaginians, and this is the basis of its Latin name Punicus. It is described by Theophrastus; Pliny the Elder considered it one of the most valuable of fruits both for its beauty and medicinal properties.

Plum (*Prunus domestica*)

European plums are found in two paintings by Caravaggio. A greengage plum ('Reine-Claude') is one of the fruits in *Boy Peeling Fruit* (1592), and purple plums resembling 'Damson' are found in *Still Life with Fruit on a Ledge* (1601). European plums are thought to be a hybrid between *Prunus cerasifera* and *Prunus spinosa*, which originated in Iran and Asia Minor and spread across Europe. They have been known in Europe since antiquity, and Pliny the Elder described 12 different plum cultivars in the first century. Greengage plums are still grown.



Fig. 10. Painting of freestone peach found in ancient Pompeii (Jashemski, 1979).

Cherry (*Prunus avium*)

The painting *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* (1595) includes both black and light-red cherries. There is archeological evidence of the cherry in Europe 7000 years ago. Theophrastus was the first to describe the cherry and refers to it as *kerasus* after the town of Kerasun in ancient Pontus on the Black Sea. By Roman times, cherry is a common fruit described by Virgil (first century BCE) and Pliny the Elder (first century CE) but generally as a product of wild trees.

Grape (*Vitis vinifera*)

Grape is found in six of Caravaggio's paintings in the form of fruit, leaves, and wine. Many cultivars are displayed and often in the same picture, with colors ranging from black to various shades of red, green, and amber. Most of the clusters are in excellent condition; defects include an overripe berry and mummies. Both red and white wine are displayed. The changing color of senescing leaves is featured along with insect damage; two leaves contain insect egg masses. Some leaves show evidence of nutritional deficiency symptoms. Grape was cultivated in Italy since antiquity and is one of the most ancient of fruit crops.

Melon (*Cucumis melo*)

The three melons (*melone* in Italian) shown in the 1603 painting *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* resemble heirloom cultivars of the cantalupensis group (the rock melon or the true cantaloupe). These are rounded in shape and often have prominent ribs. 'Noir des Carme', named for the Carmelite monks who cultivated it in France, is similar in appearance although the flesh is a deeper orange than the one painted by Caravaggio. A photograph of 'Noire des Carme' in Amy Goldman's *Melons for the Passionate Grower* (2002) shows this melon bursting when ripe, as does the one painted by Caravaggio, and also shows the remains of an abscission zone in the peduncle. The art historian Robb (1998) misidentifies this fruit as marrow, which is a form of pumpkin (*Cucurbita pepo*) with a club rather than a round shape, but this designation is unlikely since the shape is round, and the peduncles lack the furrowing that is definitive for this species. In Caravaggio's painting the wrinkled peduncle is unusually thick, a feature not unknown in melons, but is not 5-ribbed as is *Cucurbita moschata* or *C. pepo*. In Campi's *Fruit Seller* (Fig. 7) there is a basket of orange-fleshed warty melons similar in shape and appearance to 'Prescott Fond Blanc' but with a dark green rind. The Cantalupensis group appears to originate in Central Asia and, according to Amy Goldman (2002), was taken by missionaries to the gardens at Cantalupo, the papal country home near Rome from which it derives its name. It was known to be exported to France in 1495 and from there found its way to the rest of Europe. Evidence from the two paintings suggests substantial genetic diversity in melons. In the Campi painting the basket of melons is



Fig. 11. Bottle gourd (lower right) on a tapestry entitled *Benjamin Received by Joseph* (1549 to 1553) based on a cartoon by Agnolo Bronzino (1503-1573).

very uniform, but in Caravaggio's *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge*, two of the three melons are dark green and one is yellow, suggesting genetic segregation.

Pumpkin (*Cucurbita pepo*)

Caravaggio has painted a single striped, ribbed pumpkin very similar to some kinds grown in Europe and Asia. This fruit is known in United States, depending on its shape, either as pumpkin (if fruits are round) or squash (non-round); as *citrouille* and *courge* in French; and *zucca* in Italian. Shakespeare about 1590 derogatorily compares the rotund Falstaff to this fruit:

We'll use this unwholesome humidity, this gross watery Pumpion
(Merry Wives of Windsor, III,3).

Cucurbita pepo is very polymorphic and various cultivated types have been selected (Paris 2001), including Halloween, pie, and oil-seed pumpkins, and scallop, acorn, vegetable marrow, crookneck, cocozelle, straightneck, and zucchini squash. Native to southern North America, the species was introduced into Europe in the early 1500s and was rapidly commercialized. The German botanist Fuchs first drew the pumpkin in 1542 (*De Historia Stirpium*), and by 1566, ribbed fruits appear in a market scene painting (*Markttafereel op Het Land*) by Joachim Beuckelaer.

Gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*)

The two enormous, serpentine fruits in the 1603 still life are bottle gourds native to Africa, but also found in Asia and the Americas. *Lagenaria* was known to the ancient Egyptians and probably reached Europe from Africa at a very early date. The Italians may have selected these long fruited types, bulbous at the styler end, and known today as *cucuzzi*. When very young they are consumed as summer squash (*Cucurbita pepo*). This fruit was recorded in Europe as early as 1475, but Caravaggio's representations may be the first examples in paintings. A bottle gourd is clearly shown in the border of a famous tapestry from Florence (Fig. 11) made between 1549 and 1553 entitled *Benjamin Received by Joseph* based on a cartoon by Agnolo Bronzino (1503-1573). Interestingly, forms of *Cucurbita pepo* with a similar elongated shape are known as *cocuzzelle*, the diminutive of *cocuzza*, and were first illustrated by Fuchs in 1542.

Watermelon (*Citrullus lanatus*)

Three luscious watermelons, called *cocomero* in Italian, are illustrated in the 1603 still life. Of African



Fig. 12. A. *Portrait of Fillide*; B. *Conversion of Mary Magdalen*.

origin, watermelon has been known since antiquity and is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible (*Numbers 11:5*). It was introduced to India about 800 and to China about 1100. The Arabs brought it to Spain, from which it reached Italy; it is mentioned in European herbals of the 1500s. Watermelons became popular subjects in 17th-century still lifes.

Cucumber (*Cucumis sativus*)

A single cucumber peeks out of the painting *Lute Player* (1596) and is very similar in aspect to one found in an early still life attributed to Caravaggio (see below). The cucumber was long a favorite fruit in Roman antiquity. Pliny the Elder in the first century relates that the emperor Tiberius was so fond of out-of-season cucumbers that he forced its growth in a *specularium*, an early greenhouse using mirrorstone (mica).

Citrus (*Citrus* species)

Citrus is only tangentially represented in Caravaggio's works. In two paintings, the destroyed *Portrait of Fillide* (1598) and *Conversion of Mary Magdalen* (1599), one of Caravaggio's popular models, a courtesan name Fillide Melandroni, born in 1581, is holding citrus blossoms close to her bosom, a symbol of bridal fidelity (Fig. 12). The beautiful, exquisitely dressed Mary Magdalen (Fig. 12B) with a wedding ring and a bridal bouquet, has been interpreted as alluding to her role as a bride of Christ. The flower, based on pigmentation of the unopened buds, appears to be lemon (F. Gmitter, pers. commun.).

In *Boy Peeling Fruit* (1502), the first picture conceded by all to be by the hand of Caravaggio (Fig. 2A), the fruit being peeled has been described by Gregori (1985) as either a pear, apple, or bergamot (*bergamotto* in Italian, *beramote* in French), a citrus hybrid involving sour orange and perhaps acid lime (Reuther et al. 1967) and whose rind oil is used as the base of cologne (*eau de cologne*) and for other perfumery products. However, this fruit is unlikely to be a bergamot, which is described as lemon yellow; furthermore, peeling it does not seem like a reasonable activity since the bergamot is inedible due to extreme acidity. A pear is most



Fig. 13. *Still Life with Flowers, Fruits, and Vegetables*, attribution (Galleria Borghese, Rome).



Fig. 14. *Still Life with Flowers and Fruits*; attribution (Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford).

likely the fruit as stated by Giulio Mancini, a contemporary and friend of Caravaggio who wrote about the painting in 1617–1621. Bergamot is often pear-shaped and that may explain the confusion.

A painting of disputed attribution, *Still Life with Flowers, Fruits, and Vegetables* (Fig. 13) in the Galleria Borghese in Rome, contains a large citron (*Citron medica*) that looks very similar to citron painted by Bartolomeo Bimbi in the 18th century (Consiglioi Nazionale Delle Ricerche, 1982). The citron, the first citrus introduced to the West, was frequently used in Roman mosaics to represent the winter season (David Parrish, 1994) The citron is considered a sacred tree to Jews who know the fruit as the etrog, still used for the celebration of Sukkot, the Feast of the Tabernacles.

FRUITS AS METAPHOR

How is one to interpret the fruits of Caravaggio? Art historians are quick to interpret them symbolically, with religious, symbolic, or pornographic overtones—often at the same time! Nowhere is this more evident than in the painting *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (Fig. 8). Spike (2002) assumes the stone ledge is an altar table. The profusion of fruits is described with both religious and erotic overtones:

...A profuse harvest of late summer fruits, squashes, and melons, fills its surface, dramatically illuminated from above. The allusion is again to Amos's likening of the imminent judgment to the end of the summer season. The fruits and cucurbits are for the most part disposed in pairs, one intact and the other split open. The spilling of seed—of pomegranates, in particular—are a Christian symbol of Resurrection. The wicker basket at left contains the grapes and vine leaves of the Eucharist alongside the apples and peaches of original sin. The worm holes and other blemishes on these luscious fruits are Caravaggio's symbol of the transience of human life....The painting abounds with visual puns of overtly erotic content. The serpentine forms of the bottle gourds seem explicitly phallic; heaped on top of a pair of round melons, they are not content to stay in place. Instead they seem to slither and writhe like eyeless serpents. The bristling figs take up this masculine motif, while the lush interiors of the squash, and the sliced pink watermelon readily suggest thinly disguised representations of the female sex. To anyone thinking along these lines, the pair of peaches staked on top of the basket bear an uncanny resemblance to dimpled derrières. (Spike, 2001, p. 143,146)

Peter Robb (1998, p. 320–321) in an X-rated passage also sees blatant sexual symbolism in this painting and Catherine Puglise (1998) agrees, but I am skeptical. Robb is aroused by fruit, which reminds him of the human buttocks, as is James Joyce who in his *Ulysses*, seems also excited by melons. “*He kissed the plump mellow yellow smellow melons of her rump, on each plump melonous hemisphere, in their mellow yellow*



Fig. 15. *Still Life with Melons and Carafe of White Wine.*



Fig. 16. *Still Life with Melon, Watermelon, Pomegranate, Grape, and Other Fruits.*

furrow, with obscure prolonged provocative melonsmellonous osculation.” I am not convinced Caravaggio chose fruit for his paintings with either a religious or pornographic intention. It appears to me that Caravaggio was simply displaying his pride of painterly skill, and his sheer love of the shapes and lushness of his horticultural subject. The depiction of apples and peaches as symbols of the Resurrection is ludicrous. The cucurbits surely have no connection with Christian symbolism. The split pomegranate is a common motif that Caravaggio paints over and over; who could ignore the fantastic pulpy red seeds of the split fruit? Fruit as a metaphor for the transience of life is banal. I rather think Caravaggio painted what he saw, and ripe fruit and wormholes simply represent the real world. Perhaps the symbolic descriptions of fruit tell us more about the art historian than about the artist.

In any case, Caravaggio’s paintings tell us a lot about horticulture. The most startling fact is that the fruits of 1600 surely looked as luscious as the fruits 400 years later, giving the lie to the often-quoted suggestion that modern breeders have improved the appearance of fruits to the detriment of their quality, although quality is hard to determine from the picture. They underscore the rich diversity of fruits available, especially noted in apples and pears. They demonstrate that diseases and pests were a problem then as they are now.

I also suggest that the fruits pictured by Caravaggio might be of help in authenticating two disputed works; *Still Life with Flowers, Fruits, and Vegetables* and *Still Life with Flowers and Fruit* (Fig. 13 and 14). These two paintings had been in the collection of the Cavaliere d’Aprino, who employed the young Caravaggio to paint flowers and fruits. Whether they are by Caravaggio alone, or by a team including Caravaggio, has been debated (see Spike, 2003.), but the suggestion of a collaboration is not beyond the pale, since the composition is certainly different from the known fruit paintings of Caravaggio and could very well have been painted as a studio commission. (A related picture of game birds, painted perhaps by the same hand, is not incompatible with this interpretation.) What is interesting about the two “horticultural” paintings is that the choice of fruits (apple, cherry, fig, grape, medlar, peach, pear, pomegranate, and quince) is consistent with Caravaggio’s later works. However, some new fruits are portrayed, including arbutus, citron, and hazelnuts as well as vegetables such as cabbage, parsnip, and celery. In the *Still Life of Flowers, Fruits, and Vegetables* (Fig. 13), there are cucurbits including melon, pumpkin, gourd, and cucumber, which all show



Fig. 17. *Still Life.*

up in Caravaggio's 1603 *Still Life with Fruits on a Stone Ledge*. Interestingly, there is a partial representation of a cucumber, which in aspect is almost identical to, but a mirror image of, the one found in *The Lute Player* (Fig. 2E). The *Still Life with Flowers and Fruits* (Fig. 14) painting contains a wicker basket and a highly reflective bowl, filled with water, and apples with defects—all characteristic of Caravaggio's work. In my opinion, the choice of fruits adds support to the theory that the young Caravaggio had a hand in these paintings, for they presage his later work.

Three other fruit paintings have been at one time attributed to Caravaggio (Fig. 15, 16, and 17). Two of them, *Still Life with Melons and Carafe of White Wine* (Fig. 15) and *Still Life with Melon, Watermelon, Pomegranate, Grape, and Other Fruits* (Fig. 16) are now attributed to an unknown artist dubbed Pensionante del Saraceni, and were probably painted between 1615 and 1620. They are close in spirit to *Still Life with Fruits on a Stone Ledge*. The painting *Still Life* (Fig. 17) is not included in the works of Caravaggio by Spike (2001) or Puglisi (1998) but is certainly demonstrative of his style. It contains pumpkin, citron, grapes, and cabbage which are included in *Still Life with Flowers, Fruits, and Vegetables* (Fig. 13).

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Paintings by Caravaggio Discussed [Dates based on Spike (2001) or Puglisi (1998)]

- Boy Peeling Fruit*, 1592. Philips, London
- Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, 1593. Galleria Borghese, Rome
- Self-Portrait as Bacchus*, 1593. Galleria Borghese, Rome
- Musicians*, 1595. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
- Boy Bitten by a Lizard*, 1595. National Gallery, London
- Lute Player*, 1596. Hermitage, Saint Petersburg
- Bacchus*, 1597. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence
- Portrait of Fillide*, 1598. Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin (destroyed)
- Conversion of Mary Magdalen*, 1599. Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit
- Supper at Ennaus*, 1601. National Gallery, London

Still Life of a Basket of Fruit, 1601. Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, Milan

Entombment, 1602. Pinacoteca Vaticana, Vatican City

Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge, 1603. John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota

Attributed to Caravaggio

Still Life with Flowers and Fruits. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford

Still Life with Flowers, Fruits, and Vegetables. Galleria Borghese, Rome

Still Life with Birds. Galleria Borghese. c. 1615. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC

Still Life with Melons and Carafe of White Wine. [Pensionante del Saraceni] (Source: Bridgeman Art Library)

Still Life with Melon, Watermelon, pomegranate, Grape, and Other Fruits. [Pensionante del Saraceni] Private Collection

Still Life. Private Collection (Source: Bridgeman Art Library)