

## Seeing an Old Masterpiece With New Eyes

### A Discussion on Who Is Matthew in Caravaggio's Famous 'Calling'

By Elizabeth Lev

ROME, JULY 26, 2012 ([Zenit.org](http://Zenit.org)).- People often ask me if I ever tire of seeing Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling or Bernini's Borghese statues, and of course the answer is no (although I do grow weary of crowds from time to time). Still, every now and then it is refreshing to be able to look at an old friend with new eyes.

Last week, a new interpretation of what might be Caravaggio's most famous painting, "[The Calling of St. Matthew](#)," gave Romans a chance to think about an old favorite in a new light. This [interpretation](#) by Dr. Sara Magister, an art historian and collaborator with the Vatican Museums didactic office, was first aired on TV 2000, the television station of the Italian bishop's conference, and then published by Sara's father, Vaticanista Sandro Magister, on his blog. The [program](#) unites words of the Holy Father with both art and music, a harmonious blend of art and faith.

Dr. Magister proposes that the figure of St. Matthew in the painting is not the older man who points to himself, as is traditionally accepted, but actually the younger figure bent over his coins at the leftmost end of the table.

Magister dismisses the older man as one of the moneylenders, and suggests that the pointing finger really is aimed at the boy counting money. "His gesture is one of scandal," Magister writes, "directed at the young man next to him. As if he were saying, 'Do you really mean him, the sinner, the unclean?'"

Citing Pope Benedict XVI's homily of June 15, 2008, in Brindisi, Magister notes that "The Twelve Apostles were not perfect men. Jesus did not call them because they were already holy, complete, perfect, but so that they might become so, so that they might thereby also transform history."

Therefore according to this Roman art historian's view, Matthew in this painting is still mired in his sinful ways, and the light shining on the top of his head is beckoning the future evangelist at any moment to lift his eyes and follow Christ.

While a little shake up is always good for any discipline, and a new perspective often makes for great awakenings, I would like to look at Dr. Magister's analysis through the "three Ps" of art history -- public, precedent and practice.

The discipline of art history takes into account the intended viewers -- the artist's public -- when navigating the treacherous waters of iconography. Generally speaking, a message that cannot be correctly interpreted until 400 years after the fact, would be a sign of an unsuccessful painting.

It is significant, therefore, that viewers in Caravaggio's own age identified St. Matthew as the man in the

center, this including Caravaggio's biographer Giovanni Bellori. Later artists who studied and drew inspiration from this work by the Lombard master also assumed that Matthew was the oldest of the group. A version by Hendrick [Terbrugghen](#) from 1621, obviously inspired by Caravaggio's 1599 work, features a gray-haired Matthew pointing to himself. The same goes for Bernardo [Strozzi](#), Capuchin friar and painter, who tackled the subject in 1620.

More probative than the reactions of artists, however, is the principal intended audience of the work. The "Calling of St. Matthew" was executed for the French national church of Saint Louis des Français, dedicated to Louis IX, king of France and Catholic saint.

The commission specified that the canvas, along with its pendant, "The Martyrdom of St. Matthew," would have to be completed by the Jubilee Year of 1600. The French church not only served the Francophone community in Rome, but was poised upon the principal artery for pilgrims coming in from the northern gate of Rome (Piazza del Popolo), where about 80% of visitors entered the city in that era since it was en route to St. Peter's Basilica. The Jubilee year of 1600 saw over 300,000 pilgrims come to Rome in an extravaganza of Masses, homilies and papal events, including 28,000 Masses in St. Peter's Basilica alone.

The church of Saint Louis (or San Luigi, as the Italians call it) had a special apostolate during 1600. In her book, "[Caravaggio: A Life](#)," art historian Helen Langdon reminds readers that Henry IV of Navarre, raised a Huguenot, converted to Catholicism in 1594, and married Maria de Medici in 1600, drawing the wayward king back into the papal fold. With this extraordinary example of a monarch "seeing the light," the church of San Luigi was ideally suited for the task of preaching conversion sermons for the duration of the Jubilee year.

Caravaggio's commission, secured for him by Francesco Maria del Monte, the Medici cardinal in Rome, was part of Pope Clement VIII's plan to preach with both words and images.

The older Matthew, a successful "businessman" in the prime of life, who has worked long years for his clothes, position and riches, offered a powerful example for the faithful of how difficult it is to give up worldly vanities.

Dr. Magister quotes Pope Benedict on the "scandal" of the apostle's sinfulness, but perhaps the Holy Father's catechesis on St. Matthew from Sept. 6, 2006, is more illuminating. "For him it meant leaving everything," explained the Pope, "especially what guaranteed him a reliable source of income, even if it was often unfair and dishonorable." The concerns of steady income increase with age, and for the older man, getting up from that table meant there would be no going back.



Keeping in mind the proximity of the commission to the momentous conversion of the French King, it is perhaps relevant that Henry IV was 47 in 1600 and his portrait shows a well-dressed man with a graying beard. Holy Years are an invitation to change one's life, to become new again, despite the weight of years of sinfulness. Magister herself eloquently alludes to this aspect in her analysis, writing, "calling is a new creation: from an old man is literally born a new man." The promise of renewal is arguably the most important message that the pilgrims need to receive.

Art history also looks to precedent when interpreting a work. While Caravaggio made much of his disdain for earlier masters, whether the Greeks or the Florentines, his work reveals a great deal of sly emulation of great artists. Matthew's startled reaction harks back to and evokes literary and artistic precedents, where the most celebrated heroes from Odysseus to Moses balked at being chosen for great deeds.

In art, the theme of the disconcerting arrival of the supernatural has numerous precedents, from the awkward appearance of angels in Giotto's Scrovegni chapel, to the startled Marys in Botticelli, Filippo Lippi and Leonardo da Vinci's Annunciations, to Caravaggio's contemporary and rival, Annibale Carracci's "Three Marys at the Tomb" from 1598, where one of the Marys, shocked by the apparition of the angel, lays her fingers over her chest. The grand gesture, as it is called in baroque art, is designed to draw attention to a central event or figure.

The 17th century, preoccupied with the supernatural world of angels, divine intercession and forces of evil, used art to remind viewers that God is always calling, should we have the eyes, ears and hearts to listen. Finally, the practice of the artist is another essential factor in the understanding of a work of art. Patterns and rhythms in an artist's work often shed light on meaning.

Dr. Magister proposes that St. Matthew is still absorbed in counting money, and "soon he will raise his eyes and become aware of the call of his new master." While Michelangelo Buonarroti often portrayed the moment before an event -- David before slaying Goliath, Adam before the Divine Spark -- this was not the way of Michelangelo di Merisi, aka Caravaggio.

Caravaggio's most important characteristic, besides his dramatic use of light, was his penchant for capturing the culminating instant on canvas. At the height of his Roman career, Caravaggio made his mark by freezing the most dramatic moment with his brush. In the contemporary painting he executed for Santa Maria del Popolo, he shows Saul at the very moment of his conversion, lying on the ground, arms open and bathed in light. His unforgettable Judith and Holofernes puts the viewer in the midst of a beheading. The Arrest of Christ has Judas kissing the Lord; Abraham's knife is at Isaac's throat as the angel stays his hand; Thomas' finger is probing Christ's wound -- all these works bring the viewer to the breathtaking climactic moment of

the scene. This being his trademark, it seems unlikely that Caravaggio in this, his debut and first public commission, would employ dramatic light, and grand gesture for an event that hasn't happened yet. Caravaggio's life story tells us that he was anything but a patient man, not one to savor the story as it unfolded, but caught up in the action of the moment. The amazed Matthew, his body recoiling while his eyes open to the light of Christ, captured at the moment his entire world is turned upside down, is far more in tune with Caravaggio's method of shock and awe.

Magister argues that the finger of Matthew points not at himself but toward the young man with the bent head, and indeed the gesture is hard to read as the hand is bent at a slight angle. However, the answer can be found in Caravaggio's artistic practice. Draftsmanship was not Caravaggio's forte. He rarely drew, if at all, resulting in frequent problems with foreshortening. Looking at the "Martyrdom of St. Matthew" across the chapel, the reclining young man is impossibly positioned, while in the "Conversion of Saul," the body of the saint ends abruptly at the knees. The eyes of St. Thomas in "Doubting Thomas" seem to look outward, and the list goes on and on. Many art historians suggest that these errors are intentional, meant to draw us into a deeper interpretation, but again, his contemporaries, from Ludovico Carracci to Bellori, attributed it to lack of drawing skill.

The Calling of Matthew has always seemed to this art historian to be like an illustration of the parable of the farmer planting seeds from Mark 4:3-8.

There Jesus narrates the story of a farmer going out to sow seed. Some of the seed falls on a footpath, other seed on shallow soil with underlying rock, and still more among thorns that grow up and choked out the tender plants. Some seed, finally, falls on fertile soil, and sprouts, grows, and yields an abundant harvest. Jesus enters the tavern of the tax collectors sowing His light of revelation. Two men never look up, too taken with the pleasures of this world -- here the seed will never sprout. Two more young men are drawn to the light, fascinated and impulsive, and their interest sprouts quickly, though the soil is likely shallow -- this is just another passing fad for them. Matthew, in the center, is the fertile soil, where the seed will produce the greatest crop, through his witness and through his Gospel.

We can be grateful to anyone who inspires us to look at old masterpieces with new eyes. The inner truths they communicate are always worthy of meditation, study and awe.

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