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 school typified by Michelangelo Buonarroti 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 100,000 lire banknote of Italy and a movie has been made of his life. Interest in Caravaggio has been enhanced by four current books: three 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 (Fig. 1), known to us as Caravaggio, was short and intense, characterized by bouts of brawling, jail, expulsion, and homicide. His paintings are typified dramatic manipulation of light (chioscurra); reliance on human models, many with multiple appearances in his paintings; by a blatant, and in light of current events, disturbing 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 records by his own hand but the interpretations of his paintings by generations of art historians combined with recent unearthed archival information provide a rich history of the man and his time. They include technical 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 super-realism of Caravaggio and the concentration of fruit portraits (equivalent to finding a cache of contemporary photographs!) are here used to analyze the horticultural information of the period.

Fig. 1. Michelangelo Merisi, known as Caravaggio from a pastel portrait by Ottavio Leoni.
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. Photograph-like in detail they include exact 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); Boy Bitten by a Lizard, 1595 (cherry, apple); Musician, 1595 (grape); 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) followed by a review of each of the fruits. Finally, fruit in two early paintings of questionable attribution will be considered.

Boy with a Basket of Fruit (1592)

This early genre painting of 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 including a bicolored peach with a bright red blush; four clusters of grapes—two black (one of which shows fruit mummies), one red, and one “white”; a ripe pomegranate split open, disgorging its red seed; four figs, two dead-ripe black ones, both split and two light-colored; two medlars; three apples—two red, one blushed and the other striped, and one greenish with a russet basin and an insect scar; two branches with small pears, one 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 reddish sprigs with reddish leaves that resemble mint. While the display of fruits is beautiful they do not have the super-realism characteristic of some of the later paintings.

Bacchus (1597)

The arresting painting of a young, flushed Bacchus (Fig. 4) is one of the most famous of 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 change in style. The suggestion by David Hockney (2001) and also Robb (1998) of the use of a mirror or optical aids is suggested 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 grape; a bursting pomegranate; figs; a large green pear; three apples—one greenish and one red with a codling moth (*Carpocapsa pomonella*) entrance hole, and a small golden russet crab with two areas of rot, likely a form of *Botrysphaeria*; and a half-rotten quince. The basket
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.
Fig. 3. Boy with a Basket of Fruit.
Fig. 4. Bacchus.
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 black and white grape clusters and senescing leaves, one of which is turning red probably an indication of crown gall.

**Supper at Emmaus (1601)**

*Supper at Emmaus* is an extraordinary work, painted when Caravaggio was 30 (Fig. 5). The scene describes a miraculous post-crucifixion event (*Luke 24:30*) involving the disciple Cleophas, the apostle Simon, an innkeeper, and a beardless stranger (who has just been recognized as the risen Christ) blessing a repast consisting of bread, a chicken, white wine, water, and a marvelous basket of fruits seemingly hovering precariously off 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 into the frame of the observer with the elbow jutting out into the viewer’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 photo-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 represent 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 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 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, is devoted entirely to a basket of fruit. Spike (2001) attributes it to 1596 while Puglosi (1998) assigns 1601, the same year as *The Supper at Emmaus*, The 1601 date seems more likely to me for a number of reasons and I have assigned this date here. The fruit baskets in both *Supper at Emmaus* and *Still Life with a Basket of Fruit* are the same, both perched
Fig. 5. A. *Supper at Emmaus*; B. Close-up of fruit basket.

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