

# Caylus



**FRANCESCO BUONERI, CECCO DA CARAVAGGIO**  
(Alzano Lombardo?, ca. 1588-1590 – post 1620)

*Christ on the Cross*

Oil on panel  
58 x 39 cm

## PROVENANCE:

Private collection, Barcelona

## RELATED LITERATURE:

PAPI, G. *Cecco del Caravaggio*. Soncino: Edizione del Soncino, 2001.

- . «Il Maestro dell'Emmaus di Pau e Filippo Vitale. Tracce dell'influenza di Cecco del Caravaggio a Napoli». En *Filippo Vitale. Novità ed ipotesi per un protagonista della pittura del '600 a Napoli*, Exhibition catalogue. Milano: Galleria Silvano Lodi & Due, 2008, pp. 43-55.
- . «Pedro Nuñez del Valle e Cecco del Caravaggio (e una postilla per Francesco Buoneri)», *Arte Cristiana*, 742, 1991, pp. 39-50.
- . *Cecco del Caravaggio*. Firenze: Opus Libri, 1992.
- . «Caravaggio e Cecco». In *Come dipingeva il Caravaggio*, M. GREGORI *et alii*. Milano: 1996, pp. 123-134.
- . «La Cappella Guicciardini in Santa Felicità: la difficile trasferta fiorentina della 'schola' del Caravaggio». En *Gherardo delle Notti, lacerti lirici. L'Adorazione dei pastori risanata dopo l'attentato*, A. NATALI. Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale, 2003, pp. 40-65.
- . *Caravaggeschi nelle collezioni bergamasche*. Exhibition catalogue. F. ROSSI and E. DE PASCALE. Bergamo: 2000, pp. 30-41, 80-82.
- CORTI, G. «Il 'Registro de' mandati' dell'ambasciatore granducale Piero Guicciardini e la committenza artistica fiorentina a Roma nel secondo decennio del Seicento», *Paragone*, 473, 1989, pp. 108-146.

\* This painting will be included in the exhibition devoted to Cecco da Caravaggio that opens in March 2021 at the Accademia Carrara in Bergamo.

This notable crucifix - painted on both sides [Fig. 1] - reveals the surprising and successful hand of Cecco da Caravaggio. It represents an extremely significant addition to his oeuvre and offers further information for knowledge of this still enigmatic painter, the only one of all the leading Caravaggisti of whom neither his place and date of birth nor his place and date of death are known. This suggests a conscious amnesia on the part of his

contemporaries, as if Cecco had been the subject of a *damnatio memoriae* by the art literature of the period.

In the reconstruction that I offered of the artist in my monograph of 2001, as well as in subsequent studies.<sup>1</sup> I proposed the hypothesis of a Neapolitan period following in the footsteps of Caravaggio, between 1606 and 1611. For this reason I bore in mind the closeness evident between works such as *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* in the National Museum in Warsaw and the early Caravaggesque naturalism of artists such as Filippo Vitale. Cecco subsequently moved to Bagnai in 1613 where he worked on the decoration of the Casino Montalto, probably contracted by Agostino Tassi, painting the fresco of *The Family of Darius presented to Alexander*. After this nothing is known of the artist until 1619 when he was commissioned by Piero Guicciardini to paint a large *Resurrection* (Chicago, The Art Institute) to be hung in that patron's chapel in Santa Felicità in Florence. As is well known, the documents published by Gino Corti in *Paragone*<sup>2</sup> allowed me to identify the artist's birth certificate.<sup>3</sup> This provided his name, Francesco Buoneri, and allows for the suggestion that he, like Caravaggio, was born in Bergamo, as well as for the possibility that the Buoneri and Merisi families already knew each other by 1600.<sup>4</sup>

*The Resurrection* [Fig. 2], which the artist completed and delivered in the spring of 1620, was not appreciated by Guicciardini who never hung it in his chapel in Florence and soon sold it in Rome, probably to Scipione Borghese in whose inventory it appears around 1625 with a correct attribution to Cecco. From that point onwards there are no further traces of the painter. I have thus suggested that he left Rome and returned to Lombardy, and in fact two of his paintings, a *Saint Francis* and a *Beheading of John the Baptist* [Fig. 3], are in the Agliardi collection in Bergamo.

The latter work reveals evident stylistic similarities with the present *Christ on the Cross*, including the shadows and the warm brown tonality that envelops the figures. Shades of brown are recurrent in Cecco's work and this example offers a fine symphony of them. In this case they are also required by the subject and by the cross. Here the artist tries out a

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<sup>1</sup> PAPI 2001; *ibid.* 2008, pp. 43-55; *ibid.* 2011, pp. 48-61.

<sup>2</sup> CORTI 1989, pp. 108-146.

<sup>3</sup> PAPI 1991, pp. 39-50; *ibid.* 1992; *ibid.* Milán 1996, pp. 123-134; *ibid.* 2003, pp. 40-65.

<sup>4</sup> PAPI 2000, pp. 30-41, 80-82; *ibid.* 2001.

sensational trompe l'oeil in the mimetic depiction of the wood of the cross, particularly in the painting on the reverse where the illusionism reaches its maximum level.

Another remarkable trompe l'oeil by Cecco should be mentioned in this context: *Love at the Fountain of Life* (private collection) [Fig. 4], which is one of the most surprising paintings in the entire history of western art, in which the artist deceives the viewer by creating the impression that what we are seeing is a normal image but which on closer inspection is an image inserted into a large canvas leaning against the wall of the painter's studio. It is, in other words, a painting inside a painting. This is also the case with the present work, in which Cecco aims to create the illusion of a wooden support with its grain and different thicknesses, and all the carpentry that holds the different pieces of wood together on the reverse side.

Other comparisons can be established with the large, gnarled hands and the powerful chiaroscuro, all of which are very similar to those in the above-mentioned *Beheading of John the Baptist*, the *Sibyl*, *Mary Magdalene* and the *Flautist* in Oxford [Fig. 5].

The expressionist representation of Christ's thorax, which is very long and thin, is notably different to that of the athletic and heroic protagonist of *The Resurrection*, and this type of suffering, wasted body type would seem to suggest a contact with Spain or with Spanish clients. Links between Cecco and the Iberian Peninsula would also seem to be demonstrated by other paintings which, like the present example, come from that region: the *Guardian Angel* and *Girl with Pigeons* in the Prado and the *Man with a Rabbit* in the Royal Palace in Madrid.

With regard to dating, given the lack of documents and reliable chronological references, a late date can only be suggested, similar to that for other works painted in Bergamo in the 1620s.

Gianni Papi

Florence, 1 February 2020



Fig. 1. Francesco Buoneri, Cecco da Caravaggio, *Christ on the Cross* (verso).

Oil on panel, 58 x 39 cm.



Fig. 2. Francesco Boneri, Cecco da Caravaggio, *The Resurrection*. 1620.  
Oil on canvas, 339 x 199 cm. Chicago, Art Institute (1934.390).



Fig. 3. Francesco Boneri, Cecco da Caravaggio, *Beheading of John the Baptist*.



Fig. 4. Francesco Boneri, Cecco da Caravaggio, *Love at the Fountain*.



Fig. 5. Francesco Boneri, Cecco da Caravaggio, *The Flute Player*. Ca. 1620.  
Oil on canvas 103 x 138 cm. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum.