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Department of Art

February 6, 1961

Mr. Daniel Catton Rich
Director, Worcester Art Museum
55 Salisbury Street
Worcester, Massachusetts

Dear Mr. Rich:

I have gone over my photographs of Caravaggæesque paintings rather carefully (though not so carefully as the lapse of time since my last letter to you might suggest), and I can't say that I have found anything very illuminating. I still think the Worcester Saint Jerome is not by Caravaggio himself; but it is closer to him than to any one of his followers whom I have been able to find.

Longhi's attribution to Johann Ulrich Loth is provocative, although I am rather sceptical of it. But I can not pretend to know anything about Johann Ulrich Loth, nor have I ever encountered anything more than the briefest and most superficial treatment of him. I find that even the association of him with Carlo Saraceni is of no assistance, because I interpret the facts as indicating that they were together in Venice during 1619-1620 rather than in Rome. Loth incidentally is not mentioned in Saraceni's will, although several members of Saraceni's staff are. During these last months of Saraceni's life, he was turning away from Caravaggism rather than intensifying it in his work. And anyhow I can see no connection between the Worcester painting and Saraceni or any of his better known followers such as Jean Le Clerc or the so-called Pensionante. After Saraceni's death, Loth did go on to Rome, returning to Munich by 1624, and of course he might have gone through a phase of intense Caravaggism in Rome as is suggested in the article in Thieme-Becker; if he did, I know nothing of it nor have I ever read anything or seen a painting which indicates it, but then as I have already said, I can not pretend to know anything about him.

Perhaps, as you say, Longhi has a lot of material relevant to Loth which is unknown to us. I don't find that Longhi has ever published anything about him, even in the I Proporzioni article of 1943 or in the catalogue of the Milan '51 show. I suspect Longhi's attribution of being a shot in the dark; but he has made many of these before, and they have been successful often enough so that it would be a mistake not to consider his judgment at least. Incidentally, his recent article in Paragone (about the different versions of Caravaggio's Christ at the Column and the whole problem of copies of Caravaggio) has some relevance to the whole problem.

It does seem likely that your painting is by a North European, if for no more specific a reason than the rudeness I mentioned in my earlier letter. Something of this quality appears in the Sarasota Inspiration of

Saint Matthew which is now attributed rather convincingly to Regnier, and in a Young Saint John in the Desert at the Louvre where it is attributed to Guido Cagnacci certainly wrongly. I do not mean to suggest that your painting is by either one of these artists, but merely to suggest what seems to be the general area, an artist from North France or the Low Countries active in Rome during the second decade of the century. My earlier comparison of the painting to Vouet was not intended to suggest that it be attributed to him, for as you point out it doesn't look much like any of his known works. However, none of his earliest works in Rome have been positively identified with good documentation, nor have any of Regnier's either, so they remain as possibilities, though not very good ones, I'll admit. Following Longhi's attribution, I have tried also to find some German who might be considered. I have even compared it with a signed Sandrart in the Brera with which it has faint similarities. But there are few Germans who are known to have been in any way associated with Caravaggism; little is known of most of those who were (unless Elsheimer is to be included which I think would be a mistake); and nothing of what little is known would connect your painting with any of them.

All of this is simply prefatory to saying that I do have an opinion on the painting, which I offer to you for whatever it may be worth. I have noted in my work that Caravaggesque paintings seem to fall into not two but three classes. The two customarily recognized are of course exact copies, the makers of which are rarely identifiable, and variants, paintings by usually recognizable masters who have incorporated Caravaggio's manner, or some large or small aspect of it, into their own styles. The third class, which I have formulated in my book and which I would like to suggest as appropriate to the Worcester painting, is that of paintings which should be characterized literally as "imitations" of Caravaggio. They are paintings which are not copies so far as any one knows, and yet which do not show any distinctive signs of another hand than Caravaggio's own; that is, they are paintings by Caravaggists who have so completely submerged their styles in his and who were of so high a competency as to produce works in almost perfect imitation of his style. These paintings are by definition of high quality, like yours; and their number is small, which can be explained by the reasonable assumption that no painter good enough to carry out one of them would be willing to obliterate his own artistic personality so completely very often or for a very long period of time. There is some literary evidence to support this hypothesis, but not very much; and it is complicated by the fact that such seventeenth century art historians as Mancini, Baglione and Bellori often refer to Caravaggio's followers as his "imitatori" without apparently intending to imply exactly what I would by my class of "imitations." Paintings which I would classify as imitations of Caravaggio by unrecognized and probably unrecognizable masters, are the Narcissus (although I think there is pretty good stylistic evidence to attribute it to Valentin or perhaps even to Manfredi), the Prado and Vienna Dauids, the Corsini Madonna and Child, possibly the Balbi Conversion of Saint Paul, the Thyssen Saint Catherine and the Escorial Salome (all three of which are almost universally accepted as autograph Caravaggios), the Holy Family with the Child Saint John (of which there are a number of copies), the Cremona Saint Francis (probably a copy of an imitation which has been lost), and a few others. The justifications for classifying these as imitations are various and too complicated to go into now; most of them are based less on differences in quality than on the incorporation into single


paintings of features which are derived from different phases of Caravaggio's oeuvre. Your painting seems to be an excellent example of just this, and so I would propose classifying it as one of these rare "imitations."

This is about all I can say at the moment, except that I would like to add a request. Creighton Gilbert has asked me to read a paper in Sarasota during late April, the occasion being their annual do combined with the annual meeting of the Southeastern College Art Conference. I intend to talk about these three classes of Caravaggesque paintings along the lines of what I have written above; and with your permission I'd like to use your painting as my starting point and as a key reference. Creighton informs me that he does not intend to publish the paper. Having never seen the painting, I hesitate somewhat to use it, but because it is so good an example and is unpublished, I have overcome these scruples. I could either use the slides you sent me or have duplicates made. I'd appreciate hearing from you about this fairly soon because I am starting to write my paper and shall have to recast it if you feel my using your painting would be premature or inappropriate. If you prefer for me not to use it, I shall of course return the slides and transparency as soon as I hear from you.

I have one or two final questions in the painting itself. From the detail photograph of the book it appears that the letter N or Z may have been intertwined with another letter which has wholly or partially disappeared. Is this correct? Also I note dark spots on the open page and wonder if these indicate losses; if so, is there any evidence that other letters were once written on the page? Finally, has the painting been X-rayed; if so, with what results?

I'm sorry to have been so slow about writing you but what with other commitments and with the examination period following so soon on the holidays, I haven't before had time to consider the painting in leisure. Nor would I have been able to write you so long-windedly as I have.

Sincerely yours,


Alfred Moir
Associate Professor of
Art History

If you agree that the painting might well be by a North European artist, you could ask J. Richard Judson at Smith about it. His book on Houthorst you may already know; I can not pretend to know as much about the North European Caravaggists as he does.

February 9, 1961

Mr. Alfred Moir
Associate Professor of Art History
Newcomb College
Tulane University
New Orleans 18, Louisiana

Dear Mr. Moir:

I have your detailed and thoughtful letter of February 6 regarding our problem child, the Caravaggesque painting of the "Vision of St. Jerome".

We would be delighted to have you use our picture in your discussion for the annual meeting of the Southeastern College Art Conference in Sarasota. Do keep the slides until you have finished with them. I would be most happy to receive a copy of your paper, which I am sure will make your arguments regarding the imitations clearer. I am not sure from your category whether you believe such imitations would be contemporary with Caravaggio or done at a later date.

The idea of submitting a photograph to J. Richard Judson at Smith is a good one, and I shall send him the material at once. Since he is so near, he can probably see the original. I did send photographs and color slides to Benedict Nicolson, who had no definite thoughts on the attribution.

The letters on the book may be read several ways and seem to be scribbles. The spots on the open page do not indicate losses. The painting has not been x-rayed; our conservator did not feel it would be worthwhile.

With appreciation.

Sincerely,

Daniel Catton Rich
Director