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**Caravaggio's *Crucifixion of Saint Peter* portrays  
martyrdom with the drama and realism characteristic  
of the Baroque era.**

*Caravaggio (Michelangelo Merisi da) (1573-1610), CRUCIFIXION OF SAINT PETER (1600-1601). Oil on canvas. 7' 6 1/2" x 6' 8 3/4". Cerasi Chapel, S. Maria del Popolo, Rome, Italy. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.*

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# Depicting Martyrdom

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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The violent persecution of Christians in the early church is reflected in the paintings of martyrs. The martyrdom of the Apostle Peter occurred in Rome in the first century during the reign of Emperor Nero (54-68). Origen (185-232) reports that Peter was crucified in Rome with his head downwards, an orientation that the apostle preferred so as not to imitate the crucifixion of Christ.<sup>1</sup> Caravaggio, the great Italian painter of the Baroque style, continues that tradition in his painting, *Crucifixion of Saint Peter*, which was commissioned in September 1600 by Cardinal Tiberio Cesari for his chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome. Cesari, who also commissioned Caravaggio to depict the *Conversion of Saint Paul on the Road to Damascus* across the chapel from the *Crucifixion*, died shortly after the commission.

The second painting discussed here, by the fifteenth-century North Italian Renaissance painter Andrea Mantegna, depicts the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian. Sebastian died about 288, during the reign of Diocletian (284-305), which is the time when the greatest number of Christian persecutions is believed to have occurred. Sebastian's acts, wrongly ascribed to Ambrose, are a fifth-century legend. It is believed that he entered the army at Rome during the brief reign of the previous Emperor Carinus (282-285) to aid the martyrs. He became one of the captains of the Praetorian Guard under Diocletian, who was unaware that he was Christian. When his faith was discovered, Sebastian was sentenced by Diocletian to be shot by archers. Miraculously he lived through the ordeal—perhaps, as legend has it, by the intervention of Irene of Rome, who was the widow of Castulus, the chamberlain of Diocletian and another martyr of this era. Sebastian regained his strength and continued to assist Christians. When his work was exposed a second time, he was beaten to death. Sebastian is the patron saint of plague victims and soldiers.<sup>2</sup>

These two paintings allow an exceptionally informative comparison between the Renaissance and Baroque styles of painting which began in Italy. Mantegna, an artist working in Milan, Padua, and Venice, and fully aware of the happenings in early fifteenth-century Florence, depicts Sebastian in a characteristic Renaissance manner. The martyr, as is typical in the visual tradition, is painted at the moment when he has been shot with numerous arrows. Yet his body is more reminiscent of a fifth-century classical Greek sculpture in *contrapposto* (with counterpoised shifting of weight) and is tied

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*Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506), SAINT SEBASTIAN (1456-1459). Oil on panel. 26 3/4" x 11 4/5". Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria. Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.*

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to a Corinthian column. The proportions of the classical body had been lost during the medieval period and were only rediscovered in the fifteenth century. The body is modeled, lifelike, and stable. Surrounding Sebastian are antique ruins (the arch, fragments at his feet, and so on). Even though Sebas-

tian is persecuted at the height of the Roman period, Mantegna places him in a contemporary Renaissance setting with these ruins surrounding him. The ruins were frequently brought from Rome and Greece to artists' studios so that they could copy them and incorporate their design into painted and sculpted compositions. Atmospheric perspective is used for the buildings in the background and the entire composition utilizes one-point linear perspective to give a heightened sense of three-dimensional space. All of these are characteristics of the Renaissance and its reinvention of ancient humanism.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to the *Saint Sebastian*, the *Crucifixion of Saint Peter* is dynamic, realistic, and powerful. Caravaggio, the leading painter of the Italian Baroque, is famous for his realism and dramatic compositions. He incorporates the potent physicality of figures found in the sculptures of the High Renaissance artist Michelangelo.<sup>4</sup> The tenebrist lighting, strong and raking, creates a theatrical, immediate, and intense composition. The three soldiers' straining, physical movements form a complex set of diagonals in the composition. Peter is leaning forward as if somehow to object to the hoisting of the cross upwards, but is struggling with gravity. The buttocks and dirty feet of the soldier in the foreground are pushed out towards the picture plane and into our space. As we study the rope and understand what is about to occur, we wonder if the rope is actually strong enough to support the weight being lifted. The nail holes in Peter's feet and left hand are realistically painted. The drama and realism of the Baroque are clearly present in this painting, which portrays the scene of martyrdom in a new and fresh way.<sup>5</sup>

## NOTES

1 Johann Peter Kirsch, "St. Peter, Prince of the Apostles," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, volume 11 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911), [www.newadvent.org/cathen/11744a.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11744a.htm) (accessed March 24, 2016).

2 David Hugh Farmer, "Sebastian," *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, fourth edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 447.

3 To view Andrea Mantegna's *Saint Sebastian* in color and for further discussion, see [www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/renaissance-venice/venice-early-ren/v/andrea-mantegna-saint-sebastian-c-1456-59](http://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/renaissance-venice/venice-early-ren/v/andrea-mantegna-saint-sebastian-c-1456-59) (accessed April 4, 2016).

4 Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 136.

5 To view Caravaggio's *Crucifixion of Saint Peter* in color, see [www.khanacademy.org/humanities/monarchy-enlightenment/baroque-art1/baroque-italy/v/caravaggio-crucifixion-of-st-peter-1601](http://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/monarchy-enlightenment/baroque-art1/baroque-italy/v/caravaggio-crucifixion-of-st-peter-1601) (accessed April 4, 2016).



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