Masters of Darkness

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Alexander Roslin (1718–1793), The Artist and his Wife Marie Suzanne Giroust Portraying Henrik Wilhelm Peil, 1767. Oil on canvas, 131 x 98.5 cm. Donated by the Friends of the Nationalmuseum, Sophia Giesecke Fund, Axel Hirsch Fund and Mr Stefan Persson and Mrs Denise Persson. Nationalmuseum, NM 7141.

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In conjunction with the major retrospective dedicated to Swedish photographer Hans Gedda at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in the winter of 2013/2014 (see article on p. 101), the Nationalmuseum also presented a small-scale exhibition of paintings by artists of the 17th-century international Caravaggist movement, as a historical counterpoint to Gedda’s contemporary imagery. As the name indicates, the source of inspiration for those European artists of different nationalities loosely referred to as Caravaggisti, was the art of the Lombard master Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610). The pictorial world of this artistic movement was examined through a selection of 29 paintings from the Museum’s permanent collections. While these include no paintings by the master’s own hand, they contain a wide range of excellent works by his followers, many of which have been exhibited only rarely. At the same time, the display can be seen as part of an ongoing search for new ways of presenting the permanent collections in the refurbished museum building due to open in 2017. These have traditionally been ex-
hibited chronologically and strictly according to national schools, but the exhibition Masters of Darkness took a different approach. An innovative pictorial language introduced in European painting around 1600 was the common thread running through a series of thematic presentations, bringing together works by Italian, Spanish, French, Dutch and Flemish artists, active in Italy and elsewhere in Europe during the first half of the 17th century.

Few artists have had an effect comparable in scale and depth to that of Caravaggio. His arrival in Rome in 1592 coincided with the election of Pope Clement VIII, and the papal city was destined to soon become the centre of international Caravaggism. If the turmoil of the Reformation and the growing dominance of the European nation states had diminished the political and economic power of the papacy by 1600, Rome was still the unrivalled artistic capital of Europe. Ecclesiastical and secular patronage on a grand scale attracted scores of artists from all over Europe, based on parish censuses, as many as two thousand between 1600 and 1630. Here they became witness to a true revolution in painting as the Northern Italian artists Caravaggio and Annibale Carracci transformed Italian art, each in their own manner overturning the entrenched Mannerist style that still dominated official commissions. By 1600, with his first public works for the Contarelli Chapel in the French national church of San Luigi dei Francesi, Caravaggio had become a universally acclaimed master of the contemporary art scene. He created an expressive new pictorial language, with naturalistically modelled figures depicted from life, a theatrical construction of narrative, the action in the foreground, a dark background to focus attention on subjects illuminated by a strong beam of light from a specific source, and accentuated chiaroscuro that makes the whole seem vital and alive. Naturalism and fantasy are in constant tension, lending the images a special charge. In Rome until 1606 – the date of his exile from the Papal States after committing a murder – he executed a series of public and private works that would change the course of European painting.

The echo of Caravaggio’s revolution in painting spread widely early on. In 1603, the Dutch art critic Karel van Mander wrote about the artist, lauding his powerful naturalism. Following his flight from Rome, and even more after his death in 1610, an increasing number of painters adopted his manner, taking advantage of market demand for Caravaggesque works. All those aspiring artists who flocked to Rome from the beginning of the 1610s until the end of the 1620s, the decades that saw the influence of Caravaggio’s naturalism reach its apex, were determined by the master’s innovative way of painting. Many of them left after a period of time and established strong Caravaggesque traditions elsewhere, for example, in the Dutch city of Utrecht. The exhibition Masters of Darkness charted the spread of Caravaggio’s pictorial innovations throughout Europe and the creative energies it generated for roughly four decades. Caravaggism encompassed a great diversity of artists who, with their varying artistic temperaments and cultural backgrounds, explored different aspects of the master’s art.

By way of transition between the twin exhibitions Hans Gedda and Masters of Darkness, Domenico Fetti’s “portrait” of an elderly man in the guise of a Classical Poet and a Vanitas Still Life by an unknown Northern European artist displayed on the entrance wall were compared and contrasted in a playful manner with Gedda’s photographs of similar motifs (Fig. 1). In the adjoining spacious gallery the exhibited works were then subdivided into the themes of “Genre Painting”, “Saints and Martyrs”, “Biblical Stories”, “Still Life Paint-
ing” and the “History of Antiquity” (Fig. 2), allowing us to witness the dissemination of new subjects and the transformation of older imagery under the master’s influence. Large-format wall texts helped to phrase the hanging, as did the dramatic effect of both the exhibition design and the complex lighting of the individual paintings. Texts on all works, audiovisuals, and films, made for an in-depth presentation of this part of the collections.

The opening section featured paintings with genre motifs, reflecting in various ways a new type of gallery pictures introduced by Caravaggio and developed by Bartolomeo Manfredi and others (Fig. 3). Few Caravaggisti succeeded in securing public commissions on the competitive Roman stage, and many specialised instead in paintings for display in the private art galleries of a powerful new breed of collectors, bankers, princes, and cardinals. Inspired by the stock characters of contemporary popular theatre and picaresque novels, tavern scenes with half-length protagonists engaged in drinking and card-playing, amorous affairs, music-making, pick-pocketing and fortune-telling, found a special resonance with Netherlandish and French artists, as exemplified by Nicolas Régnier’s *Sleeper Awakened by a Young Woman with Fire* and Hendrick ter Brugghen’s companion pieces *Girl Holding a Glass* and *Man Playing the Lute*. While warning against overindulgence in sensual pleasures, such images would have been seen by sophisticated 17th-century viewers as intensely humorous entertainment. Like Paulus Bor’s *The Flower Vendor*, based on a poem by Dutch author Jacob Cats (1577–1660), these pictures reflect the period’s prejudice against, and fascination with, an underworld of socially marginalised groups that included Romani as well as mercenaries, prostitutes, card-sharps and petty thieves. Another section of the exhibition was devoted to the new genre of still-life painting in Caravaggio’s spirit, as interpreted by Roman and Neapolitan still-life specialists such as Pietro Paolo Bonzi and Giovanni Battista Recco.

Fig. 3 and 4 Interiors from the exhibition *Masters of Darkness*. 
One of Caravaggio’s principal aims was to reform contemporary religious art, to give it a new spiritual depth through the use of an efficient new pictorial language defined by clarity and piety, one that corresponded to the spirit of Tridentine reforms. One long gallery wall presented examples of Caravaggesque Counter-Reformation imagery, focusing on individual saints and martyrs as role models for the Catholic faithful. Displayed at the centre of the wall, Francisco de Zurbarán’s iconic image of Christ, *The Veil of St Veronica*, was flanked by the Spaniard Jusepe de Ribera’s two large altarpieces, *St Paul the Hermit* and *The Martyrdom of St Bartholomew* (Fig. 4), and by a series of half-length private devotional images of penitential saints by, among others, Cecco del Caravaggio and Francisco Collantes. An apprentice and companion of Caravaggio’s, the mysterious Cecco has recently been identified as the painter Francesco Boneri. A short film about the recent restoration of his masterpiece *The Penitent Magdalene* (Fig. 5) was shown as part of the exhibition. A version of the story of *Judith and Holofernes* by Antiveduto Gramatica, another early follower, formed a transition to a section of the exhibition devoted to multi-figure history paintings on biblical themes. In addition to Matthias Stom’s splendid altarpiece of *The Adoration of the Magi*, the display featured half-length gallery pictures by Flemish and Dutch artists not known to have visited Italy, including Jacob Jordaens, Lambert Jacobsz., and Pieter Claesz. Soutman. Finally, as a reminder that some of Caravaggio’s closest followers in fact operated in a highly pluralistic Roman context that presented them with multi-faceted artistic options, the exhibition concluded with a work in the idealising classicist tradition represented by the Carracci, *Queen Artemisia of Caria Building the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus* by a former Caravaggist, the Frenchman Simon Vouet.

Today’s visual culture contains widespread echoes of Caravaggiist imagery in various media, especially photography, films, and video art. To further demonstrate these links a short film was shown as part of the exhibition, featuring excerpts from a 2005 BBC interview with the Italian-American film director Martin Scorsese discussing Caravaggio’s influence on his own filmmaking. In connection with the twin exhibitions *Hans Gedda* and *Masters of Darkness*, the Nationalmuseum also produced an app containing images of a selection of exhibited artworks with accompanying texts, made available free of charge as a download from the Nationalmuseum’s website, Google Play and iTunes.

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![Fig. 5 Cecco del Caravaggio (Francesco Boneri), *The Penitent Mary Magdalene*. Oil on canvas, 99 x 135 cm. Nationalmuseum, NM 12.](image)