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# Roberto Longhi Foundation Exhibits Its Caravaggios at the Capitoline Museums

## “The Times of Caravaggio: Masterpieces from the Art Collection of Roberto Longhi” will run through January 10 to focus on the artist’s influence

Italian Hours

by Lucy Gordan



Roberto Longhi

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The temporary exhibition, “*Il Tempo di Caravaggio: Capolavori della collezione di Roberto Longhi*” or “*The Times of Caravaggio: Masterpieces from the Art Collection of Roberto Longhi*” has been extended through January 10 at Rome’s Capitoline Museums. During the past decade there have been two other major exhibitions in Rome about this hot-tempered, violent genius. Born near Milan, he lived on and off in Rome from 1593-1606 before having to flee from justice for the few remaining years of his life because he murdered a thug in Piazza Navona.

The first of these was a monographic, blockbuster exhibition, “*Caravaggio*”, the first since World War II, held at the Quirinal’s *Scuderie* to mark the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Caravaggio’s death. The second, “*Roma al Tempo di Caravaggio*”, that proved to be just as popular, held at *Palazzo Venezia*, covered the many artists from all over Europe who were painting in Rome during Caravaggio’s sojourn and soon thereafter.

The third in the *Palazzo Pretorio* in the off-the-beaten-track town of Prato in Tuscany, was “**After Caravaggio: 17<sup>th</sup>-Century Neapolitan Art Exhibition in Prato.**” As I wrote about it at the time: ...this title clearly states the exhibition is not about Caravaggio, but about the painters, his contemporaries and others of the next two generations, who lived in Naples, studied his Neapolitan, and sometimes Roman, works, and were deeply influenced by his style and subject matter. Sixteen of Prato’s 19 paintings, never exhibited publicly before, belong to the **Fondazione De Vito**, and the other three to the Civic Museum in Prato’s *Palazzo Pretorio*...”

Instead, this present exhibition is dedicated to Caravaggio, the painters who influenced his work and those his works influenced. All 45 paintings and one charcoal drawing are on loan from the **Roberto Longhi Foundation** in Florence to commemorate the 50th anniversary of this great art historian/collector’s death.



*Portrait of Cavaraggio, Ottavio Leoni (Wikimedia Commons).*

Four of the painters collected by De Vito were also collected by Longhi: Neapolitan Giovanni Battista Caracciolo nicknamed “Battistello”, Spanish Jusepe De Ribera, probably Neapolitan Master of the *Annunciation to the Shepherds*, and Calabrian Mattia Preti, considered the last of the “*Caravaggeschi*”.

Born on December 28, 1890 in Alba (in *Piemonte*) to parents of Emilian origin, both of whom were teachers, Roberto Longhi from an early age loved painting, particularly two works: Barnaba da Modena’s *Madonna* in his parish church and Mattia Preti’s *Concertino* in

Alba's town hall.

However, beginning with his thesis at the University of Torino (which he defended on December 28, 1911, his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday), his research and writings focused on Caravaggio. As the exhibition's first wall panel tells us: "The choice was a ground-breaking insight for the time since Caravaggio was one of the 'least known of Italian artists'...Nonetheless, the pioneer Longhi immediately understood the revolutionary impact of Caravaggio's painting and considered him to be both the 'night porter' or last painter of the Renaissance, and the first modern painter."

In 1912 Longhi moved to Rome for his doctorate and a teaching job in a *liceo* and wrote for the magazine *L'Arte*. That same year his career took off when he contacted the Lithuanian-born naturalized American art historian Bernard Berenson, offering to translate his book *Italian Painters of the Renaissance*, into Italian. They became lifelong friends.

Over the years, besides *L'Arte*, Longhi wrote for *Vita Artistica* and in 1950 founded *Paragone*. He was also a professor of art history at the University of Bologna, where he taught the poet Attilio Bertolucci—the father of film directors Bernardo and Giuseppe— as well as the poet, writer, and film director Pier Paolo Pasolini (for besides painting he was interested in theater and literature); and later at the University of Florence, where the Tuscan writer, art critic, and ardent feminist Carla Lonzi was one of his students.

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*Villa Il Tasso. Photo: Wikimedia Commons*

Not only was Longhi the most prominent Italian art historian of his time, but, like his friend Berenson, he was also an important collector. In 1924, he had married his student Lucia Lopresti, who, using the pseudonym Anna Banti, wrote prolifically: historical novels including a **“biography” of Artemisia**, short stories, and essays, as well as translations of French, British, and American literature. In 1939 they settled in Florence and bought their historically important home, parts of which date to the Renaissance, “*Villa Il Tasso*”, also known as “*Villa Ficalbo*” at Via Benedetto Fortini 30, in the Gavinana neighborhood of Florence. Longhi collected a considerable number of artworks by masters of all artistic periods, from the 13th to the 20th century, and “*Villa Il Tasso*” offered him a peaceful refuge for his research. The core of his collection includes a work or maybe two by Caravaggio and many by Caravaggio’s inspirers and followers, the latter known as “*Caravaggeschi*”.

Here the *Fondazione di Studi di Storia dell’Arte Roberto Longhi* was founded in 1971 by Longhi’s last will and testament. Having no children, he left his art collection and his libraries of books and of photographs “to the benefit of future generations”. Since 1971 up to now the

Foundation has awarded grants to over 400 young scholars for a year of study in Florence to carry out their own personal project in the field of art history. These Fellowships' (open to foreigners too) pre-requisites and applications can be downloaded from the Foundation's website: [www.fondazione-longhi.it](http://www.fondazione-longhi.it). At her death in 1985 his widow left the Villa itself and all its furnishings to the Foundation.

*The Times of Caravaggio* opens with four small panels by Venetian Lorenzo Lotto who inspired Caravaggio's interest in bright light, and Bolognese Bartolomeo Passarotti's canvas of a market scene, which possibly triggered his obsession for still lifes and portraits of "low-class" people. Of particular interest in this first of five rooms is Longhi's canvas, *A Boy Peeling Fruit*. There are three other copies of this early work all dating to 1592-93, all believed by many scholars including Longhi, who included it in the 1951 exhibition, to be Caravaggio's earliest work painted upon his arrival in Rome.

Besides Longhi's, one version is at Hampton Court, another in London's Dickinson Group and the fourth in a private collection in Switzerland. Some scholars and Longhi, however, came to believe that all four are copies of a lost original. Nevertheless, whether originals or copies, we can date Caravaggio's arrival in Rome from this work.



*Boy Bitten by Lizard by Caravaggio. Photo: Museo Capitolino.*

Also of interest here is Longhi's signed and splendidly executed life-size charcoal drawing dated 1930 of the Exhibition's star: Longhi's canvas of a "*Boy Bitten by a Lizard*" exhibited alone in the next room. Longhi purchased his in Rome at the end of the 1920s. A second version is on display in London's National Gallery, but, according to Longhi, both date to 1596-7 and seem to be among Caravaggio's early works painted to-be-sold (hence the duplicate) in the household of Caravaggio's sophisticated patron Cardinal Francesco del Monte.

Longhi also suggested that Caravaggio borrowed the motif of the bitten finger from a *Boy Bitten by a Crab*, a drawing by a prominent Renaissance artist **Sofonisba Anuissola**. As for the model, some scholars suggest Mario Minniti, Caravaggio's companion and the model for several other Caravaggio paintings. Others believe it is a disguised self-portrait.

The remaining three rooms include works by "Caravaggeschi", both Italians and foreigners: Spanish, French, Flemish, and Dutch, many of whom were working in Rome alongside



Caravaggio. Yet Longhi pointed out that, “Just as Caravaggio didn’t have a mentor, he did not have disciples.” Here the highlights are Spaniard Jusepe de Ribera’s portraits of five *Apostles*, and Neapolitan Battistello Caracciolo’s *Deposition of Christ*, both artists among Caravaggio’s first followers in Naples when he fled from Rome.



*The Denial of Peter by Valentin de Boulogne. Photo: Museo Capitolino*

Also on display is Valentin de Boulogne’s masterpiece, *The Denial of Peter*, recently loaned by the Foundation for exhibits at the Metropolitan and at the Louvre. The painting’s setting, though more elegant, is purposely reminiscent of Caravaggio’s *The Vocation of Saint Matthew* in Rome’s French Church, *San Luigi dei Francesi*.

It’s worth noting that the *Caravaggeschi* often followed Caravaggio’s same subjects like “Judith and Holofernes”, here represented by Battista del Moro, Francesco Cairo and Carlo Saraceni, a wrinkled-skinned, emaciated elderly “St. Jerome” by Maestro dell’Emmaus di Pau, and “Repentant Mary Magdalene” by Domenico Fetti.

Once it becomes possible to return to Italy, many of Caravaggio’s masterpieces can be

enjoyed in Rome's museums: *Villa Borghese*, The Capitoline Museums, Odescalchi Balbi Collection, *Palazzo Barberini*, Doria Pamphili Gallery, *Palazzo Corsini*, and the Vatican Museums. Churches as well: *San Luigi dei Francesi*, *Santa Maria del Popolo* and the *Basilica di Sant'Agostino*. In Italy but outside Rome they can be found at: Milan's *Biblioteca Ambrosiana*; *Gli Uffizi* and *Palazzo Pitti* in Florence; Cariprato Bank in Prato; Genoa's *Palazzo Bianco*; Cremona's *Museo Civico Ala Ponzzone*; *Pio Monte della Misericordia*, *Galleria di Palazzo Zevallos Stigliano* and *Museo di Capodimonte* in Naples; *Museo di Palazzo Bellomo* in Syracuse; and the *Museo Regionale* in Messina. In the meantime, several of his paintings are in the USA: Fort Worth's Kimball Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, Hartford's Wadsworth Museum, Detroit's Institute of Arts, Kansas City's Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, and Cleveland's Museum of Art.

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