

# Illustration

**LORENZO LOTTO**

(VENEZIA H.1480-LORETO, 1556/57)

## INFLUENCE OF VENETIAN REALISM IN CARAVAGGIO

"*Nothing is beautiful without chance*" (2012) is the title of the book by the Spanish art critic Artur Ramon. I verified that sentence in Madrid when accidentally I found myself in the "Museo Del Prado" with the first exhibition of Lorenzo Lotto's paintings (Venice h.1480-Loreto, 1556/57), structured with the few pieces that could be rescued from his work. This great portrait painter of the Italian cinquecento impresses with his pictures, where the intimacy of each personality is evident. Fear, anguish, worry, power, are decanted in passing from one painting to another. The fortune of finding myself at that moment was exalted when reviewing his fate completely forgotten for four centuries, as he was "rediscovered" by the art critic Bernard Berenson around 1900 in his monograph "*Lorenzo Lotto. An Essay in Constructive Art Criticism*". The "Portrait of a young man with a lamp" (see cover) is considered a masterpiece of European portrait. It represents a young man of about 25 years of age who observes us in front of a white curtain, which being slightly drawn reveals a flame in the gloom. It depicts the cultural environment of the moment with an extremely naturalistic style. Lotto introduced the extended horizontal portrait in order to show the total scene.

The observation of each of the portraits distills an intense psychological depth charged with symbolism. That search of Lotto of interpreting his characters' mood, mostly anonymous, poor, needy, as in "*St. Antoninus of Florence handing out alms*" (Figure 1) painted around 1506, brought to my memory the work and life of Michelangelo Merisi (Milan, 1571-Porto Ércole, 1610), known as Caravaggio, because of his place of origin, near Milan. In this painting the character in a red habit, according to some studies, may very well be Lotto, the one that alludes to his surname by wearing a laurel crown. The characters are shown on their backs in a clear attitude of shame. By chance I found here, in this unusual first exhibition five centuries after the artist's existence, a clear anticipation of Caravaggist realism. Even Manuel Mujica Láinez in his novel *Bomarzo* recreates in Pier Francesco Orsini the portrait of an unknown young man by Lorenzo Lotto ("*Portrait of a gentleman in his studio*", 1527, Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice).

Barefoot figures, dramatic looks, miserable clothes, souls open to the observer, prostitutes and street men as models, coexist in both painters. It was evident that beyond the religious works that could be done, both Caravaggio and Lotto, born in Northern Italy, value in their paintings that particular feature, strange and contrasting to the social moment of their lives, where the artists took refuge in benefactors and the Church. They never belonged with their paintings to the palace or papacy. This reflection explains the loss of almost all their works and the precarious life they led. They are twinned in being dispossessed and in the indolent death they suffered in the eyes of others. Lotto died poor and forgotten, trying to get some money by selling lottery in exchange for a picture. His personality is depicted briefly and accurately in his testament: "*alone, without firm government and very restless of mind*", such was his wandering spirit. Caravaggio died in strange and confusing circumstances of which the truth was never known. Some think he died of pneumonia running down the coast of Porto Ércole trying to meet with his work which had been left on a ship. The body was never found. His fame barely survived death. Both their production reached our days in small proportion. Most of it was lost. Thirty-eight paintings, ten drawings and some sculptures were found from the Venetian. A little bit more from Caravaggio, but not exceeding sixty works.

How to relate Lotto to Caravaggio who was born a



**Figure 1.** "*St. Antoninus of Florence handing out alms*" (1542). Church of San Giovanni and San Paolo (Venice)."

decade and a half after the death of the forgotten Venetian? Is it possible to interpret any analogy in the realism they both painted in an era of art foreign to that characteristic? Suddenly this linearity is transformed into a triangle with the inclusion of a third painter, Giorgio Barbarelli da Castelfranco (Venice c. 1477/1478-Venice, 1510) known as Giorgione (the great George). Due to the plague epidemic he died at the early age of 33 while he was enjoying wide fame. Only six pictures are attributed to him with certainty. He painted for private collectors in clear distinction with other artists of his time, similar to what his contemporary Lotto and later Caravaggio did. Since the sixteenth century his name was lost, casting doubts on his existence. In his work there is freedom of execution and richness of chromatic effects. He risked with the technique in exchange for greater expressiveness. He took the profane as the subject of his work, although he ventured into religion, but with total dispossession of the mystical, as a sort of defiance to that era. He personified with the expression and color moods of lyrical or romantic feeling. He revolutionized the genre of the portrait. In Figure 2 it is observed that the old woman holds a paper in the right hand that evidences the words *col tempo* (with time). Realism with great chromatic richness is exerted with thematic force evident in the wrinkles and hair. The dark background means that the observer has no distraction from his gaze towards the old woman.

His style influenced Titian, Sebastiano del Piombo and Palma the Old. Also in this analysis we find that Lorenzo Lotto shows in his portraits the influence of naturalism of his contemporary Giorgione, both settled in Venice. In the painting “Portrait of a young man with



**Figure 1.** “Portrait of an old woman” 68 x 59 cm, 1506. Gallerie dell’Accademia (Venice) Giorgione

a book” (circa. 1525) (Pinacoteca Castello Sforzesco, Milan) this footprint is evident. He then evolved to more dramatic scenes. Giorgione and Lotto had the same fate of oblivion, but their paintings were reunited when they were rediscovered at the end of the 19th century, as a derogatory grimace of fate or chance.

But what is the relationship that could have existed between them and Caravaggio, born when both had died? The three belonged by their origin to the north of Italy. The three suffered the same oblivion. It is known that Caravaggio visited Venice where he must have known the works of Giorgione, Lotto and Titian, to the point that he was accused of copying the works of the former. Bellori, one of his biographers, states “... *it was to contemplate the colors of Giorgione, whom he imitated at that time.*” It is possible to place this trip to Venice after 1584, when he finished his apprenticeship in the bottega of Simone Peterzano. Another point that could reaffirm the knowledge that Caravaggio possessed, not only of Giorgione but also of Lotto, is the fact that between 1513 and 1525 the latter was established in his moment of greatest splendor in Bergamo. There, he affirmed his style with the best works. Bergamo and Caravaggio are extremely close and the influence of the Venetian must have lasted a while in that area. Surely there was some knowledge of the art of Lotto in Caravaggio, who lived his first twenty years in the town that bequeathed his name.

These influences do not deprive Caravaggio of his artistic genius, the determinant realism in his religious figures and the naturalism of his painting taken to the extreme of shocking and being rejected by his own customers. The result of a personality “... *hardworking, but at the same time proud, stubborn and always willing to participate in a discussion or get involved in a fight, making it difficult to get along with him*”, as expressed by Floris Claes van Dijk (contemporary of Caravaggio in Rome, about 1601). His tenebrism and the shade that he gave to chiaroscuro was an imprint in the intensely emotional baroque realism.

I left the Museum meditating on the chance to which the book by Artur Ramon alluded. Then from my still lips sprang with the same spontaneity some words:

*I am a time of flesh worn out  
in a vortex of daily times past  
of strange amalgams I am the flame  
where chance transfigures the frame  
I am the man that ignores his recollections  
by ephemeral eternity of perception  
what lies in the profundity of oblivion?  
where do depart the forms that fall dead?*

Beyond the life of Giorgione, Lotto and Caravaggio, that I now tried to imagine in that need they had to approach man with a realistic painting, I was convinced that only art allows a forgotten event to reappear five centuries later. Outside ... the street was tinging with hurrying figures...