PDF | The Lost Painting: The Quest for a Caravaggio Masterpiece

by Jonathan Harr
An Italian village on a hilltop near the Adriatic coast, a decaying palazzo facing the sea, and in the basement, cobwebbed and dusty, lit by a single bulb, an archive unknown to scholars. Here, a young graduate student from Rome, Francesca Cappelletti, makes a discovery that inspires a search for a work of art of incalculable value, a painting lost for almost two centuries.

The artist was Caravaggio, a master of the Italian Baroque. He was a genius, a revolutionary painter, and a man beset by personal demons. Four hundred years ago, he drank and brawled in the taverns and streets of Rome, moving from one rooming house to another, constantly in and out of jail, all the while painting works of transcendent emotional and visual power. He rose from obscurity to fame and wealth, but success didn’t alter his violent temperament. His rage finally led him to commit murder, forcing him to flee Rome a hunted man. He died young, alone, and under strange circumstances.

Caravaggio scholars estimate that between sixty and eighty of his works are in existence today. Many others—no one knows the precise number—have been lost to time. Somewhere, surely, a masterpiece lies forgotten in a storeroom, or in a small parish church, or hanging above a fireplace, mistaken for a mere copy.

Prizewinning author Jonathan Harr embarks on a spellbinding journey to discover the long-lost painting known as The Taking of Christ—its mysterious fate and the circumstances of its disappearance have captivated Caravaggio devotees for years. After Francesca Cappelletti stumbles across a clue in that dusty archive, she tracks the painting across a continent and hundreds of years of history. But it is not until she meets Sergio Benedetti, an art restorer
Told with consummate skill by the writer of the bestselling, award-winning *Civil Action*, *The Lost Painting* is a remarkable synthesis of history and detective story. The fascinating details of Caravaggio’s strange, turbulent career and the astonishing beauty of his work come to life in these pages. Harr’s account is not unlike a Caravaggio painting: vivid, deftly wrought, and enthralling.

"...Jonathan Harr has gone to the trouble of writing what will probably be a bestseller... rich and wonderful... in truth, the book reads better than a thriller because, unlike a lot of best-selling nonfiction authors who write in a more or less novelistic vein (Harr’s previous book, *A Civil Action*, was made into a John Travolta movie), Harr doesn’t plump up his tale. He almost never foreshadows, doesn’t implausibly reconstruct entire conversations and rarely throws in litany of clearly conjectured or imagined details just for color’s sake... if you’re a sucker for Rome, and for dusk...[you’ll] enjoy Harr’s more clearly reported details about life in the city, as when--one of my favorite moments in the whole book--Francesca and another young colleague try to calm their nerves before a crucial meeting with a forbidding professor by eating gelato. And who wouldn’t in Italy? The pleasures of travelogue here are incidental but not inconsiderable." -- *The New York Times Book Review*

"Jonathan Harr has taken the story of the lost painting, and woven from it a deeply moving narrative about history, art and taste--and about the greed, envy, covetousness and professional jealousy of people who fall prey to obsession. It is as perfect a work of narrative nonfiction as you could ever hope to read." -- *The Economist*

*From the Hardcover edition.*

**Amazon.com Review**

In 1992 a young art student uncovered a clue in an obscure Italian archive that led to the discovery of Caravaggio's original *The Taking of the Christ*, a painting that had been presumed lost for over 200 years. How this clue--a single entry in an old listing of family possessions--led to a residence in Ireland and the subsequent restoration of this Italian Baroque masterpiece is the subject of this brisk and enthralling detective story. *The Lost Painting* reads more like a historical novel than art history, as Harr smoothly weaves several narratives together to bring the story alive. Though he does not provide an in-depth examination of the painting itself--the book is not aimed specifically at art experts--Harr does include many details for lay readers about restoration, the various methods used to track artwork through history, how originals are distinguished from copies, and an inside view of the art world, past and present. He also discusses various forensic approaches, including X-ray, infrared reflectography, chemical analysis of the paints and canvas, and other modern techniques. But most of the book is focused on more primitive methods, including dogged research through dusty archives and meticulous attention to detail.

This entertaining book boasts an engaging cast of characters, all of whom are inflicted with the "Caravaggio disease," including some of the foremost Caravaggio scholars in the world, persistent students, obsessive restorers, and most of all, the artist himself. Mercurial, supremely gifted, and prone to violence, Caravaggio lived like an outlaw and a pauper most of his troubled life. Yet even when he attained wealth and fame--and briefly, respectability--he was still hounded by the law (for murder) and numerous vengeful enemies. Harr does an admirable job of bringing the man alive in these pages while keeping his long-lost painting at the center of the action. -- *Shawn Carkonen*

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