

Caravaggio

Death of the Virgin, 1601-1605/1606

Between 1601 and 1605/1606 Caravaggio painted the ***Death of the Virgin***, an oil on canvas of very large dimensions, for the *Church of Santa Maria della Scala*, a convent of the Carmelite order. However the brotherhood **refused to accept the art work** because they judged it to be undignified and irreverent. Put up for sale, the painting was acquired, upon Paul Rubens' suggestion, by the Duke of Gonzaga for his private collection; today the piece is housed in the Louvre Museum in Paris.

The scandal of the painting's subject centred on the fact that **it represents such a radical departure from traditional iconography**. The story was usually seen in a mystic way: Mary's divine nature was fully revealed on her deathbed when she passed from human to eternal life. By contrast Caravaggio chose to portray death's 'human' pain in a realistic and detailed way. There are no holy features to distinguish Mary's identity; rather she seems like the lifeless body of a common woman, with swollen belly and feet bared to above her ankles. It is said that Caravaggio's inspiration for this figure came from the cadaver of a prostitute who had drowned in the Tiber River.

The canvas shows the Apostles and Mary Magdalene as they keep watch over the Virgin's body. The unadorned setting is so dark that very little can be discerned: the floor and part of the ceiling with an ample scarlet drape that looks like a stage



curtain about to fall. The figures are all concentrated in the lower section of the canvas, while the centre is occupied by the pale body of a young woman lying on an unmade bed in an unseemly pose.

The Magdalene, shown dressed as a common woman, is seated on a small stool in the foreground crying in despair with her head in her hands. Even the Apostles are inspired by **real and humble people** as can be seen by their poor clothing, bare feet, coarse features and simple, natural gestures that express their grief.

A New Compositional Layout

The common everyday quality of the figures is organised in a **very elaborate composition**. The lower part of the painting presents a very shallow space since it is filled with people. The mourners are arranged on vertical axes lined up in front of the woman's horizontal body which is not parallel to the picture plane but is rather slanted with her head towards the background. This tilting deepens the sense of the scene's spatial depth.

Falling diagonally from the upper left, **the light** touches the Apostles' heads and illuminates the deceased face of Mary. Therefore light serves **two functions** here: **a narrative one** because it highlights the dramatic focus of the scene, as well as **a symbolic one** because, by making both Mary's serenity and the standing figures' grief emerge from the dark, it expresses the Christian mystery and gives special plasticity to the forms. The whole scene is dominated by a colour scheme based on scarlet red and a strong *chiaroscuro* effect.

A Dual Interpretation of the Painting

Although much has been written about this work there are essentially two lines of interpretation.

The first one reads the painting as **an allegorical system** in which the Virgin represents the Church. In that case her swollen belly would refer to Mary's hallmark of Divine Grace, her youth would refer to the Church's immortality and the humble setting and simple characters might refer to the polemic launched by reforming religious movements and Federico Borromeo against the clergy's enjoyment of pomp and luxury. The second interpretation insists on **the artist's poetics of naturalism**. In this case, via a realistic scene of human grief, Caravaggio was declaring God's presence in the daily experience of poor and meek people.



Fig. 1, 2 Caravaggio, *Death of the Virgin*, 1601-1605/1606. Oil on canvas, 369x245 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre. *Left*: compositional diagram.