

FAITH AND ART

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There are seven figures in the painting: from left to right they are John, Jesus, Judas, three soldiers (the one farthest to the right barely visible in the rear), and a man holding a lantern to the scene. They are standing, and only the upper three-quarters of their bodies are depicted. Judas has just kissed Jesus to identify him for the soldiers.

The mystery of Ireland's Caravaggio

ON THE TAKING OF CHRIST BY CARAVAGGIO

Ireland's leading business newspaper, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, had a recent feature in its Sunday arts supplement *Domenica* casting doubt on whether the painting at the National Gallery of Ireland that is attributed to Caravaggio (1571-1610) - *The Taking of Christ* (*La presa di Cristo in Italian*) - was in fact by Caravaggio.

The *Il Sole* piece was written by Anna Coliva, former long-time director of the Galleria Borghese in Rome, the only museum in the world to have six paintings by Caravaggio. She has written extensively about Caravaggio's work. Her *Il Sole* article coincided with an exhibition of the version of *The Taking of Christ* by Caravaggio that is part of the Ruffo Collection, currently taking place at Palazzo Chigi in Ariccia, located about 26 kilometres from Rome.

In her article Coliva referred to

the fact that two versions of the work exist - in Rome and in Dublin - seeing this as possibly being a case of the recurring question of Caravaggio replicas and copies.

A replica is a second work by the artist himself: a copy is done by a different artist altogether.

She contrasted the pathos of the Rome painting with the Dublin version, which in her view seemed to "loosen the grip of dramatic tension in a diffused, golden, reassuring luminosity, devoid of violence, typical of Honthorst's best achievements". This is a reference to the Dutch artist Gerrit van Honthorst (1592-1656).

The opportunity to see the painting now on display in Ariccia "raises many doubts about the Irish painting hitherto almost unanimously considered to be by the hand of Caravaggio," wrote Coliva.

Her firm view is that the Dublin painting is a van Honthorst and not

a Caravaggio. In a meeting with her in Rome at the weekend she instanced a number of tell-tale signs. For example, in the Rome version there is a scar on the left hand of Judas, a sign of evil, whereas in the Dublin version the depiction is rather of muscle movement, not a scar. Similarly she is adamant that Caravaggio would

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not have painted the lamp in the way that van Honthorst did. In fact she said van Honthorst was known as 'Gherardo delle Notti' (Gerard of the night) and that the lamp in the Dublin version is a trademark of his, as it were. She later told me that her opinion on the Dublin painting crystallised when she saw

it alongside other Caravaggios at an exhibition in Rome some years ago.

If definitively established that the Dublin version is a copy by van Honthorst, and not an original Caravaggio, the news would be a big disappointment for Irish art lovers, of whom I myself am one, even if Coliva described the Dublin painting to me as a masterpiece in its own right. The discovery of the "Dublin version" in a Jesuit house on Leeson Street by the late Sergio Benedetti was one of the most remarkable occurrences in recent art history. Benedetti, a Florentine, was conservator and Head Curator at the National Gallery of Ireland. He passed away in 2018. (*more on him at <https://www.nationalgallery.ie/remembering-sergio-benedetti-1942-2018>*)

This is not the first time that doubt has been cast on the Dublin art work. For example, there was a small flurry of reports in 2004 about whether or not the painting

on display in Merrion Square was a real Caravaggio. The *Irish Examiner* reported at that time that: "In a further gesture that underlies the confidence of the National Gallery that it has the true Caravaggio, Mr Benedetti has proposed that the Roman dealer's copy of the painting be put on display alongside the Dublin painting when it is exhibited in Milan (later that year)".

Perhaps this idea should be looked at again. Notwithstanding the logistical challenges it would entail, the two paintings could be displayed side-by-side, say for three months in Rome and three months in Dublin.

The National Gallery of Ireland has been asked to comment on the *Il Sole 24 Ore* report, and is looking into the matter.

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