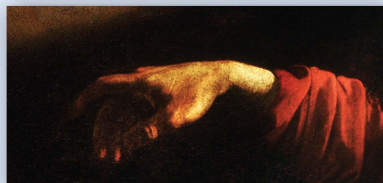


# Caravaggio's *The Calling of Saint Matthew*

## *Background*

The famous Baroque painter, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610 AD), was a murderer. Yet, in one of the great ironies of history, he did his greatest works while on the run from the law! He was born just seven years after the death of the great Michelangelo himself and would rival the Renaissance master in the history of art. Caravaggio's style inspired generations of young painters including great masters like Vermeer, Rubens, and Rembrandt. And yes, he did kill a man in a duel in 1606 (probably a dispute over a woman) and spent the last four years of his life hiding out from justice. He died of disease at the young age of 36.

His 1602 painting, *The Calling of St. Matthew*, was commissioned by Cardinal Mattheu Cointerel for the French national church in Rome and was his big break as an artist. It is one of a pair of paintings on the life of St. Matthew that face each other on opposite walls in the church. Baroque art, of which Caravaggio is the most representative figure, broke from the formalism of the Renaissance by emphasizing naturalism in human figures and the interplay of light and darkness, a style called chiaroscuro, which was pioneered by Caravaggio himself.



## *What to Look For*

Caravaggio divided his canvas into two unequal panels with the figures on the left sitting and those on the right standing. He dressed the sitting figures in contemporary Italian garb, while the figures of Jesus and St. Peter are barefoot and wearing ancient clothing to depict their humility in the face of the worldliness of the tax collectors. Christ's hand is an exact mirror reproduction of Adam's hand in Michelangelo's famous "Creation of Adam" fresco in the Sistine Chapel, highlighting Christ as the New Adam. Light from a window behind Jesus follows the arc of the hand downward to illuminate the face of the bearded man sitting at the table, whom Jesus is calling.

It's hard to tell whether Matthew is pointing at himself (as in "Who *me*?") or at the young man counting the money (as in "Do you mean *him*?"). Perhaps he's gesturing to say, "You probably want him not me"! The picture contains an incredible range of human facial expressions and realism. It is sort of a snapshot of that unique moment when Christ called the evangelist away from his money counting table to the work of an Apostle.



## *Arti-Facts*

- **Date:** 1599-1600 AD
- **Medium:** Oil on canvas
- **Size:** 127 in. x 130 in. (10 ft. 7 in. x 10 ft. 10 in.)
- **Location:** Rome, Italy, Church of San Luigi dei Francesi.