

Masterminds, master killers and masterpieces

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My former lecturers and tutors in art history will forgive me for what I am about to write. They will forgive me for ever associating a masterpiece with the unsettling darkness that is coming to light in this blessed country of ours.

I am no art expert, less so of political, social, judicial, or even basic human affairs. Indeed, there is very little I understand. And there is much emerging from the dark that I would rather not see, hear or read about. I would rather strain my senses to hold on to some frail and silent beauty, even as ugliness taps me on the shoulder.

It's not denial. It's not indifference. It's not being naïve. It's not even helplessness. In times of crisis, we deal as best we can. But there is no such thing as a 'best way', is there? We are encouraged to write, protest, observe, listen, speak, investigate, think, reflect, create, pray, scream – to do something, anything... "For it is far better to light a candle than curse at the darkness".

In the face of ugliness, I turn to beauty; I look at art with searching, weary eyes. Maybe there, I might find some clarity, some flicker of reality, some whisper of the truth.

I recently stood before Caravaggio's *Beheading of St John the Baptist* in the heart of a rioting city, the echoes of a protest pounding in my head. These last few days, I stood in the heart of that same continued outcry, but the scene I had before me was not made of protesters, stumbling politicians and broken eggshells. When I blinked, it was the haunting *Beheading* that I saw.

Let me begin with the undeniable: the painting is essentially about a murder, wherein the 'real' murderer is absent. The executioner in the painting is not the 'real' murderer. Sure, he is a killer, an accomplice, and has committed a terrible thing, but he is also the one who 'carries out' the order of some higher authority. The order happens to be a death sentence.

At first it seems to come from the man in the middle – the jailer, the man with the keys; those dangling keys, an illusion of a way out. Those keys are like a 'get out of jail' card, which he flashes before anyone who might threaten or undermine him. He carries himself with confidence and pride, the one who knows, and yet is ignorant or forgetful that whatever power he might have was granted to him; as easily as it was given, it will be taken away.

The jailer is an oblivious prisoner. All the days of his working life, he spends them in prison, subservient to the wishes of one higher than him. He is a puppet who cannot see the strings that bind and control him. The man in the middle, the man who has the keys, the one who holds the game in his hand; our eyes first fall on him and the scene is set in motion; then we wait eagerly for answers, for its conclusion.

But we must not forget he is the middleman; caught between start and finish, between freedom and imprisonment, between rule and the unruly, between lies and truth.

The full story cannot emerge from him because he is enslaved by the incomplete. He is not the source; he can stand there and point as best he can so that our attention is directed elsewhere. Desperate, that is now his only interest.

Meanwhile, there are other prisoners behind bars. How distant and insignificant they seem. The same finger that points to the Baptist might one day point to them, if it hasn't already. The middleman points fingers, because that is the only power he really has. Pointing fingers. No one has ever gained anything for the better by pointing fingers. Adam pointed to Eve; Eve to the demon; yet all three were banished from the garden, as prisoners of the earth. And such, the story repeats itself across different forms and epochs.

"The head of John the Baptist is often coupled with the two words: 'veritatem et iustitiam' – truth and justice"

Meanwhile, the two prisoners wait for their turn, for some form of justice to be served. Perhaps they will soon be joined by another – the executioner might just as well be a prisoner himself. These prisoners in the painting are almost like a distraction from what really matters, from the main event and, once again, from what is indeed absent in the scene: the mastermind.

The artist of this masterpiece – Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio – was a man who killed and fled out of fear, becoming a refugee, a man who asked to be pardoned for his crimes. But Caravaggio's hand was drenched in blood, and all he touched was stained.

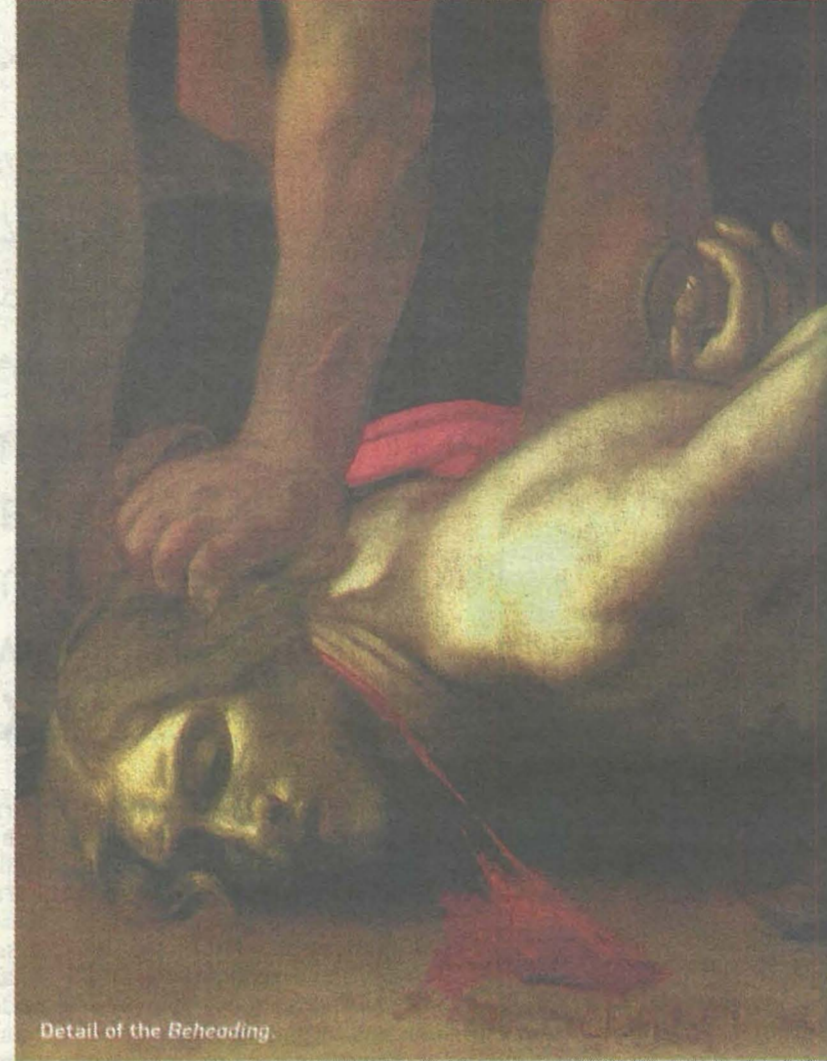
Several of his paintings following his heinous crime – a cold-blooded murder – often carried some symbol or vision of death, his own death. He is blinded by his own deeds. Blades and daggers loomed everywhere, like the dagger swinging before the eyes of Macbeth, obsessed by the crime he had just committed.

Caravaggio sought his 'best way' to deal, to cleanse himself, to rid himself of the darkness he had brought upon himself. He painted. In desperation, he painted images like never before. He practically 'sold' himself (and his art, his life) to the Order of St John to gain some form of freedom, to regain some control over his life, the very same one he had already compromised and damaged beyond repair. But whatever he painted was stained. No matter how often he would clean his brush, red pigment would drip out of its fibres, ceaselessly.

He signed his name, but he signed it in blood, moreover, in the blood



Caravaggio's masterpiece *The Beheading of St John the Baptist* at St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta.



Detail of the Beheading.



The head of the Baptist placed in the centre of an eight-pointed cross of the Order. Winged heads of angels are depicted between the angles of the cross which is surrounded by the legend *Propter veritatem et iustitiam* (For truth and justice). Like the inscription on the obverse, this motto was first adopted by Grand Master Jean de Valette on his silver and copper coins. FROM THE COLLECTION OF M. J. DE LA VILLE LE ROULX. Right: Reverse of a 2 Tari coin issued during the reign of Grand Master Jean de la Cassière from 1572 to 1581, showing the Baptist's head on a plate. He commissioned the building of St John's Co-Cathedral.

of John the Baptist – ironically enough, in the blood of the man who washes away and purifies. Herein lies a paradox: the attempt to conceal is what reveals. First, the name of Caravaggio ('F. Michelangelo') is visible because it is signed in the red pigment of the blood.

Without the blood, there would have been nothing to sign with, or for. But the blood spills from the neck of the Baptist who cleanses, who makes clear: the name of Caravaggio is visible as it is also about to be concealed by the very same coagulating blood out of which it is written. But truth and justice

will ensure that the name will be forever stained with blood, visible for all.

In numismatics, the head of John the Baptist is often coupled with the two words: 'veritatem et iustitiam' – truth and justice. John the Baptist was a prophet who spoke the truth, a curious man shouting in the desert. But the desert was not barren and empty as one would make it out to be. His words did not always fall on deaf ears. Ultimately, it was also his sharp words that brought the sword to his neck. He scolded authority – the tetrarch Herod, a puppet of the Roman

Empire – for his unethical and unruly behaviour.

Herod, embittered, listened. And did nothing, if not allow those who were closest to him (Herodias, for example) to manipulate and bend his thoughts and power to their will. In the midst of a celebration, a dark plan was devised, but Herod was too proud, too weak, to step away. The Baptist was imprisoned and cut off, but even then, he continued to preach.

Ultimately, the fulfilment of the plan – a dark promise – silenced him for good. The last mention of justice and truth would be a choked attempt, in the gasp coming from his parted lips and the gurgle from the open, gaping wound of his neck. But might that final, choked attempt be just enough for truth and justice to be heard by whoever was listening?

The old woman covers her ears. What noise discomferts her? Why not conceal her eyes? Perhaps the sound bores deeper into her conscience. Perhaps it stirs her profoundly, a panicked reaction to the ignorance and indifference of her youth (might this be the girl – Salome – beside her?). "How have I not realised before? How has it come to this?" she asks. "Surely what I am hearing is not meant for me. What have I to do with this?" Pointing fingers. Always pointing fingers.

In the early 17th century, the painting would have been an uncanny extension of the real. No great leap of the imagination was required to stand with the painted characters in their painted prison. A few days ago, I stood before it and, like the middleman, all I could do was point. I pointed at



Caravaggio's painting *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist* (1610) at the National Gallery, London.

the characters, one by one, each a witness and an accomplice of the crime; I pointed to Caravaggio, the mastermind, the artist, the murderer, the opportunist, the pardoned convict, who slid his way out of trouble again and again.

This painting – a work of undeniable beauty – was born of violence. It was born of murder. An action which brought an end to something temporary gave birth to something that lasts: a vision, a memory, an embedded truth that does not age or lose any of its force and meaning. If anything, it deepens with time.

As we move forward, less will there be to hold truth back. What was intended to silence the truth that sought to bring to light temporary (and dare we say, in their early monstrosity, forgivable?) crimes, gave birth instead to something permanent that cannot ever be forgotten, or silenced. Names have been signed in blood that can never be washed away, the opus they will always be remembered for – *The Beheading of St John the Baptist*.

The final word, however, is that of the Baptist – the legacy rests with him and in his name. An act of violence,

the spilling of blood, still ends with a cleansing, a purification of sorts.

Caravaggio may have fled the island in a frenzy for freedom, but he was not to get far. Meanwhile, Salome's golden plate waits expectantly to receive the head of the Baptist. But the painting will not end the story for us – that is up to us; we have to follow the way that will bring this messy, complex and tragic story to its fulfilment. And when we do, and we shall, then we can finally say that truth and justice have been served. May this be the hope we lay before us.