

The Best Painting in Naples

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“The real Naples, where poverty exists alongside nobility, and the beauty of the monuments and the proliferation of works of art provide a striking contrast to the general deterioration of the environment.”

Naples and Pompei (*Everyman Guides*)¹

Naples is an acquired taste. If in the Via Tribunali you cannot find the charm of this timeless city dating back 2500 years and of its inhabitants, it has passed you by.

Richard Lamb, Naples. What most tourists never see²

THIS ACCOUNT WILL DRAW attention to the many earlier commentaries on the art and general culture of Naples, whose claims shall inform ours, quoting extensively from these prior accounts; our goal is to emphasize the relationship between immediate visual experience of the city and knowledge presented in this vast, suggestive literature. Sometimes the extensive use of quotations can seem distracting when the goal is to develop a focused analysis. But once we realize that our knowledge of art and history is a collective creation, the product of generations of scholars, then we should recognize that presenting such textual references are the best way of acknowledging this basic fact. In order to develop your own

distinctive analysis, it is best that you first know these prior options. To understand this complicated city, you need both to look closely and to read widely about its history and visual culture; a traveler needs also to spend serious time in the library. As Peter Robb notes:

Anyone looking—however casually—into the long, long past of Naples owes incommensurably much to the historians, archivists and chroniclers who over the years and the millennia have set it down.³

Right: John Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Seven Works of Mercy*, 1606-1607. Oil on canvas, 390 x 260 cm (12 feet 9 inches x 8 feet 6 inches). Pio Monte della Misericordia, Naples. Public domain: Creative Commons/Wikimedia.



Our practice will make explicit that debt. Naples is a great walking city, and it's often useful to describe what you see as you move between the churches. Read a lot and then look around and trust what you yourself see, that's the goal; with ample patience and plenty of time it's possible to balance library learning with immediate personal experience.

Caravaggio's Seven Acts of Mercy

We're looking at a strange street scene, which includes fourteen figures, some barely visible, while others are partly obscured from view. At the right, a woman suckles a starving old man, her father, who is behind the prison bars. Behind her a man holds some large lit candles, their light allowing us to see the feet of a dead man who is being carried. In the left foreground, a naked man lies on his back while an obviously privileged standing youth facing us divides his cloak to clothe him. Behind them in the background, a man drinks from the jawbone of an ass. Finally, in the heavens above this crowded tangle of figures there are two muscular angels who hold aloft the Virgin and the Christ child. One of these angels reaches down towards the crowd. A great deal is happening in this crowded dark space.⁴

We are looking at the greatest painting in Naples, *Seven Acts of Mercy*. Inspired by a recent presentation of *tableaux vivants*, in which twenty-three paintings by Caravaggio were 'performed' by a group of eight actors on the stage, just North of the Duomo, at the Diocesan Museum, I describe the image as if it were a real scene.⁵ You can learn much about *Seven Acts* by thinking of it as one image in such a theatrical performance. Caravaggio came to Naples in 1606, fleeing from Rome because he had killed a man in a duel. He painted *Seven Acts* quickly, in a matter of months, in late 1606, and so it was paid for and installed in early 1607. It was so highly valued that it was officially prohibited

from ever being sold or loaned outside of the city. Naples, a far more crowded city than Rome, with a rich, but less sophisticated art world, had a much larger population. And this painting responds to that setting. There is a great deal of important Renaissance art in Naples. That said, it's not an exaggeration to write the history of Neapolitan painting as a story of before and after Caravaggio. Before Caravaggio, there were a number of major commissions, some given to foreign visitors, but not a true tradition; after Caravaggio, for a long time most of the major painters working in Naples responded, positively or critically, to his art. As one recent historian writes: "Although prior to Caravaggio's passage through Naples there was no such thing as a 'Neapolitan school of painting,' subsequently it flourished through emulation and creativity."⁶ And, I would add, sometimes also through rejection of his ways of visual thinking. His two brief visits had an enormous effect for a surprising long time. The title of Sybille Ebert-Schifferer's essay for the recent Wiesbaden exhibition catalogue *Caravaggio in Neapel* says it all: "Kurze Zeit, grosse Wirkung" (short time, great impact).⁷

Caravaggio's text for *Seven Acts* is Matthew (25:35-36):

*For when I was hungry, you gave me food;
when thirsty, you gave me drink;
when I was a stranger you took me in to your
home, when naked you clothed me;
when I was ill you came to my help, when in
prison you visited me.*

Seven Acts was painted for a chapel, Pio Monte della Misericordia, which is very near the cathedral. In the mid-seventeenth century, it was rebuilt; the painting remains on the main altar, in a place close to and similar to its original setting.⁸ (Caravaggios have become too valuable to be safely left in unguarded churches. His *Adoration of the Shepherds* was stolen in Palermo in 1969.) The six other good paintings on the ground

floor in this octagonal building, of which Battistello Caracciolo's *Liberation of St. Peter* (1608-9) is one, that show the various individual acts of mercy, and the collection of works in the second-floor galleries, are totally outclassed by this masterpiece.

When you turn away from *Seven Acts* to the other paintings on the ground floor, it's as if you see that work decompressed, permitting you to focus on the individual acts of mercy. Caravaggio's painting (and its setting) were paid for by a group of rich young men who practiced works of mercy. But of course, they weren't political activists—they didn't believe (or hope) that the social order, which kept most Neapolitans dirt poor, should or could be radically transformed.

Every time I return to Pio Monte della Misericordia, it takes me a surprisingly long time to identify the various actions in *Seven Acts*. Sometimes I need help from the recently installed audiovisual presentation, which unpacks the narrative. There are no true precedents for this image, which includes all six acts of mercy listed by Matthew, and one more, burying the dead (added by the medieval church), in one picture. However long one looks, the composition retains its hallucinatory quality. Some years ago, I published an essay on the rhetoric of art history writing about Caravaggio.⁹ Here I find it instructive to again consult this literature, now much larger, for it reveals how elusive this composition is. Michael Fried speaks of "abrupt juxtapositions of figures and actions of a sort that positively defies ordinary considerations of pictorial unity."¹⁰ Eberhard König also gets something right:

*Caravaggio does something unknown in the rest of his work—he brings an exceptionally large number of figures together in such a way that a dynamic quality replaces the usual dramatic element.... the artist has developed a pictorial unity which bursts the bounds of the imagination.*¹¹

Mina Gregori says:

*In a dark street in Naples is gathered a most desperate crowd of people, whose actions illustrate the different acts of mercy, but who, in fact, make up a colorful and—it may be imagined—a noisy assemblage.*¹²

And John and Michèle Spike accurately identify the relationship between the two parts of the picture:

*The upper register... an excited entanglement of cascading angels carry on their backs the Madonna and Child... The lead angel thrusts forth his arms, his right hand opened wide as if to encompass or perhaps send a message to the restless humanity in the street. No one is aware of this divine apparition although it is paradoxically so real as to cast a large shadow on the front of the prison.*¹³

Roberto Longhi, who played a key role in the twentieth-century rediscovery of Caravaggio, says that the Madonna is a quotation of Raphael's famous *Madonna della Seggiola*.¹⁴ But this figure looks different; for one thing, unlike Raphael's Madonna, she does not catch your eye. Giorgio Bonsanti rightly notes "the artist's power of synthesis, which concentrates a conceptual content that is potentially quite dispersive, in the model behavior of a few figures."¹⁵ This radically condensed grouping of diverse visual narratives is unlike that in any other earlier or later Caravaggio. The seven acts were a rare subject; the Northern precedents showing them all in one picture were not known to Caravaggio, who "is certainly the first painter to attempt a juxtaposition of all the acts in a unified monumental composition."¹⁶

And yet, there's more to this story. Our intellectual awareness that we are shown the seven acts of mercy, which are presented in diverse actions, does not *visually* unify the picture. What, then, is the principle of unity here? Imagine that you see only the bottom half of *Seven Acts*. You would view a crowded street scene, the setting for a genre painting.

City dwellers are familiar with this ambiguous pleasure, in a café, on the street, or in the subway, of a close proximity to strangers. Or, alternatively, suppose you could only look at the top half. You would see a sacred scene—angels and the Madonna. As it is, you look at an odd combination of scenes, with a slight overlap because the lower angel’s right hand extends down into the terrestrial world. In Caravaggio’s painting there is not even an apparent connection between heavenly and terrestrial worlds. The heavenly observers look down, but no one looks up to them. The long outstretched right hand of the lower angel descends, but he, unobserved by anyone below, does not act on the human world.

Caravaggio’s picture poses two questions: What, when we act mercifully, are human relationships? And, what is our moral relationship with the higher sacred world? He believes that there is a higher realm—unlike his successor, Courbet, Caravaggio was not an atheist. But his holy figures above have no causal connection with this earthly world. To understand this lack of connection between the holy and the earthly, consider the contrast that Arthur Danto draws between two modes of human experience: knowledge and action. Our concepts “of knowledge and action,” he argues, are “mirror-images of one another....”¹⁷ *Seven Acts* illustrates that contrast. In the bustling terrestrial world, humans act, performing acts of mercy; above, the angels and the holy family observe, without intervening. In just four pages of his massive treatise, the *Summa Theologica*, St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), who was Neapolitan, presents, in meticulously detailed scholastic fashion, the intellectual foundations for this medieval Catholic doctrine of Mercy.

*A person is called merciful because he has a heart with misery, and is affected with sadness for another’s plight as though it were his own. He identifies himself with the other, and springs to the rescue; this is the effect of mercy.*¹⁸

Mercy is heartfelt sympathy for another’s distress, impelling succor if possible. It is not the greatest virtue, “since for him that has anyone above him it is better to be united to that which is above than to supply the defect of that which is beneath.” Charity unites us to God, and so is a greater virtue than mercy, which relates to the defects of our neighbors. “But of all the virtues which relate to our neighbor, mercy is the greatest... since it belongs to one who is higher and better (able) to supply the defect of another, in so far as the latter is deficient.” God, who has no defects, doesn’t need our mercy, but our neighbors do.

Many commentators say that Caravaggio was inspired by Neapolitan street life. Here, again, comparing the accounts is suggestive. Helen Langdon’s very good commentary says:

Caravaggio sets the scene in a rough Neapolitan street....

*He shows... the brutal contrasts between extreme poverty and luxury, of a Neapolitan crossroads, with its tall buildings, deep shadows, its noise... and overcrowding; there is a confusing tangle of gesticulating hands and legs, of movement and gesture.*¹⁹

Another scholar writes: “This scene, in which the protagonists are arranged as though on a stage, is an effective picture of Neapolitan life, and is set in a narrow street in the vicinity of the spot where the artist was attacked in 1609.”²⁰ Ellis Waterhouse is dismissive, calling the picture “an anthology of realistic motives rather oddly combined....”²¹ And yet another historian claims: “He set the Acts... in a little *piazza*, perhaps in front of the same Taverna del Cerriglio where three years later he was attacked.... It is... a slice of the kind of life still observable outside the church in the old central-city slum....”²² Other commentators develop this basic idea. This allegory, Manuel Jover tells us, “is given the look of a street scene, with characters seemingly

straight from some dark, swarming Naples alley... the figures are drawn solely from the working classes and the world of the street.”²³ And Troy Thomas writes: “Caravaggio’s innovation was to imagine a unified tableau bringing together all the acts of mercy in an outdoor night setting, as if happening on the corner of a narrow Neapolitan street.”²⁴

The problems shared by all of these suggestive accounts are revealing. No doubt linking Caravaggio’s art with his experience of Naples is legitimate. How else can we explain how different this composition is from that of his earlier pictures—or understand the visually obvious relationship of the picture to the crowded street life in that city? That said, there was no reason for him to imagine that in 1606 he would be attacked in Naples—and attacked outside this tavern. And while it’s true that the picture depicts a crowded gathering including many contemporary figures, it also shows the woman nursing her father, Samson, Saint James and, possibly, also Christ as an adult; and of course above the Virgin, the Christ child and the two angels, none of them figures to be found on the streets.²⁵ Still, these commentators are onto something. Since *Seven Works*, a very distinctive painting shows crowds like those found in Naples, it’s natural to conclude that it responds to the artist’s very recent experience of the city. Peter Robb’s measured analysis gets this right: Caravaggio “did the *Seven works of mercy* as street life and as theatre.”²⁶ As he adds: in Naples “reality wasn’t necessarily what it was elsewhere.”²⁷

At the start, we focused on Caravaggio’s *Seven Acts* seen in isolation, as if it were in a museum. But in fact, we encounter it in the historic center of Naples, in Pio Monte della Misericordia, an octagonal church on Via dei Tribunali, a short distance west right off of via Duomo, just south of the cathedral. The building, which on first visit takes a little

time to locate (nowadays its façade is marked with a banner) is surprisingly humble on either side are ordinary shops; however, the *Guglia di S. Gennaro*, a towering column topped by a statue of the saint in Piazza Riario Sforza does stand opposite.²⁸ You walk through the gate on the left side, go through to the ticket office, purchase your ticket, and enter the church on the far side, some distance away from the street. The painting is on the high altar. This interior itself deserves some attention: “The openings of the altar recesses and the galleries have a curious form with quadrant curves at the corners leading to a higher flat section in the middle....”²⁹ And do look at the inlaid marble in the altar beneath *Seven Acts*. This is a posh setting. The ground floor of this chapel contains only the seven paintings devoted to the acts of mercy; if you go upstairs, there you see some additional artworks, and also you get another view, looking down, on *Seven Acts*. Downstairs you are in one large octagonal room—with art on all of the altars, it feels like an art gallery. It is a very high-ceilinged church, whose interior contains striking color only on the inlaid altar-frontals and the floor tiles; it’s natural to focus primarily on the Caravaggio, especially since the chairs all face it.³⁰

Just to the right of *Seven Acts* there is an important picture showing just one act of mercy, Battistello Caracciolo’s *Liberazione di San Pietro* (1613), a painting much influenced by Caravaggio’s masterpiece. A famous, very influential work in its day, it shows a young angel in white guiding the elderly saint out of jail, past sleeping guards, including one Caravaggesque backturned figure clad only in a loincloth.³¹ “From 1607-14,” one commentator says, Caracciolo “assimilated Caravaggio’s style completely, imitating his compositions and subject matter.”³² In my experience, this painting, which is totally outclassed by *Seven Acts*, is oddly difficult to read. The angel’s right hand moves forward,

while Saint Peter, eyes closed, gropes forward seemingly without guidance, as if he were a blind man.

We need to learn more about Caracciolo. Let us walk fifteen minutes Southwest across the Corso Umberto I, just out of the historic center to the Chiesa della Pietà dei Turchini, to look at what I think is a more challenging Caracciolo, his *Earthly Trinity* (1617).³³ This relatively small narrow church with an unimpressive façade, next to an orphanage, is named after the turquoise tunics given to these children; to the right of the main altar, you see a sculpture of the Madonna dressed in a turquoise cape.³⁴ Peter Robb's account drew my attention to this work, which is on the right, in the third chapel, the Cappella di San Giuseppe, in a heavy golden gilt frame. Like some other Neapolitan works in their original sites, it could use a restorer, and, also, better lighting. Robb's analysis is helpful: "Unlike Merisi's *Seven Works* and its strangely compelling unity of higher meaning and very low reality, the *Earthly Trinity* was cut clean in two between top and bottom."³⁵ (Merisi is Robb's eccentric name for Caravaggio, whose full name was Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, i.e. Michelangelo Merisi from Caravaggio, a small town near Milan.) And he goes on to speak of the tension between the "lower earthly part and the impending proletarian energy and confusion of the heavenly part just overhead."

As in *Seven Acts*, in *Earthly Trinity* the heavenly and earthly worlds are separated, here with five (or six?) muscular angels in the heavens. But instead of presenting the Virgin above, Caracciolo shows God the father; the Holy Ghost flies between heaven and earth, and the adolescent Christ, holding his parents' hands, walks while looking up. A number of Caracciolo's other early pictures employ somewhat similar vertically divided compositions. But while I find *Seven Acts*

initially confusing (even after many repeat visits to Pio Monte!), *Earthly Trinity* is essentially confused, in ways that perhaps reveal how Caravaggio's influence was problematic. Partly, as I see it, the problem lies in the composition of the heavens above, where two of the angels, on the far left, toss roses, an oddly marginal action; partly, also, the problem is on the earth below, where the holy family is awkwardly grouped; and, finally, also the relationship between above and below is puzzling, in a way that it isn't in *Seven Acts*. Caracciolo shows Christ looking upwards, thus connecting earth and heaven in what otherwise appears an unresolved picture.

As an art historian describing paintings, you train yourself to focus on art, not its surroundings. And so at Pio Monte you focus on *Seven Acts*, not the wall behind it or the floor. After all, when you're engaged in conversation you face the person to whom you are talking, not behind them or to the side. But then, in turn, architectural historians like Anthony Blunt focus on the buildings, not the artworks they contain; in his book on architecture in Naples, he rarely describes the paintings in these churches. In any event, it's only possible to focus on a certain portion of your field of vision—a wandering eye means that you aren't looking closely at what matters. And so, a certain act of will is needed to look around the artworks. But that is why we must not only look closely at the artworks, but also with focused attention attends to what surrounds them inside the churches of Naples and, also, outside on the streets. With experience, I have found, practicing this form of looking gets easier—it's a habit worth cultivating. We need to look at boundaries, focusing on experiences of in-betweenness, especially those in between street life and church interiors, which visitors are familiar with, but to which too often we don't give our full attention.

Pio Monte is grand once you get inside—and always on my recent visits there are a number of art tourists; I've never seen anyone come to pray; after all, it's not a parish church and, also, you do have to pay to enter. Pietà dei Turchini, by contrast, is a relatively humble church, though now there is an ID plaque outside; in recent years, it's been open with regular hours, but I've never seen any other foreigners inside. Its entry in *Napoli e dintorni* is relatively brief, only just over a page; it does contain a rich array of art, with twenty-seven works besides our Caracciolo, but the church isn't of any special architectural interest.

It's relatively easy for me to focus on individual paintings, like this great Caravaggio, because that's the usual practice of art historians. Identifying the sites of artworks, the city streets outside and the church interiors inside, takes a little work, because it's not my familiar practice. Doing that is, however, made easier by the many readily accessible photographs on Google and videos on YouTube. When you come to Pio Monte you come most likely, initially, to look at the Caravaggio, even if you are an architectural historian. It takes some effort to stand back and look at the setting of this picture. But, as I have said, that's worth doing. We have quoted some of the many commentators who say (rightly!) that *Seven Acts* draws on Neapolitan street life. Since these scenes were directly outside of Pio Monte della Misericordia, let's better understand this Caravaggio by walking on these streets.

Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis offer a great introduction to our walks:

The typical Neapolitan church does not ostentatiously occupy a vast square, visible from afar, with transepts, gallery, and dome. It is hidden, built in; high domes are often to be seen only from a few places.... The inconspicuous door... is the secret gate for

*the initiate. A single step takes him from the jumble of dirty courtyards into the pure solitude of a tall, whitewashed church interior. His private existence is the baroque opening of a heightened public sphere.*³⁶

They didn't spend a long time in Naples, but they do identify some crucial features of the city.

What distinguishes Naples from other larger cities... each private attitude or act is permeated by streams of communal life. To exist—for the northern European the most private of affairs—is here... a collective matter.... the street migrates into the living room.... Poverty has brought about a stretching of frontiers that mirrors the most radiant freedom of thought.

When you approach a major church in Florence, Rome, or Venice typically you enter the main doors via an open space, often large, in front of that building. In Naples, however, usually you move from crowded streets into vast interior spaces. And so for someone familiar with these other Italian cities, coming into a Neapolitan church can be a shockingly dramatic transition. Travelers were always aware of how unusual the city is. Thomas Martyn's 1791 guidebook *A Tour Through Italy* describes this effect: "Of 300 churches and upwards, there is not one with a front or portico which has any merit: many of them indeed present nothing but a bare wall. They endeavour to make amends by abundance of interior decoration...."³⁷ Because building outside the city walls was forbidden, space was at a premium.

A recent tourist guide writes: "Naples could well be defined as an astonishing city full of extreme contrasts: luxurious neighborhoods, impoverished side streets, breathtaking views and harsh everyday realities."³⁸ You experience surprising transitions when you walk from the narrow Neapolitan streets, with flapping laundry hanging between the tall, densely populated tenements, into the high ceilinged churches.

These noisy streets are generally grubby, but the quiet churches are immaculately clean. Poverty and luxury thus are crowded close together. When you enter the churches, there is a dramatic change in lighting, especially on a bright day when it takes a few minutes for your eyes to adjust. And in summer, you need to bring along a coat, for you move from the hot streets into cool church interiors. In these churches you usually deal with serious overabundance, with much more visual art than we can readily identify or recollect.

I've never visited a Neapolitan church that wasn't immaculately clean—nor walked on a street in the historic center that wasn't in serious need of cleaning. On those streets graffiti is everywhere, even—as is not the case generally elsewhere in Italy—on the exteriors of churches and the walls of art museums. And in Naples you are always aware of the difference between walking on aggressive slum streets, where you need to be a little watchful, and sitting inside, where you relax, slow down and focus on the art, with the aid of your guidebooks. The streets are mostly crowded—the churches, often largely empty though sometimes, of course, you do see priests and worshipers. Even in an art museum, where usually there is a good deal of blank wall space between the works,

most of us devote selective attention to the art on display. It's much harder to focus on the very numerous individual works in typical Neapolitan churches, where there is also decorative art to see, and, usually, no wall labels; where much of the art is displayed high above us or on the ceiling; and where often the lighting is dim. Look straight ahead and to both sides; look up, for often there are paintings on the ceiling; and look down at the decorative floor marbles.

In Pio Monte della Misericordia, which is in part an exception to these generalizations, the Caravaggio is isolated on the main altar—it's *the* work that people come to see. But this, too, is a church not a museum. I can think of no better introduction to this extraordinary singular visual culture of Naples than Caravaggio's *Seven Acts*. If someone who had never visited asked me to explain why this city is so extraordinary, I would tell them: look closely at a good reproduction of this picture. But take care, I would add, because the painting is not a literal image of any Neapolitan site. To understand the relation of this picture to the city of Naples, you must go there and unpack your experience of this picture. Let's follow that advice ourselves. To discover how the city inspired *Seven Works* and *Earthly Trinity*, we need to go into the streets and learn its history. A

Endnotes

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4. This account owes a debt to Michael Fried, *After Caravaggio* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), Ch. 3, "An Almost Unknown Masterpiece: Cecco del Caravaggio's *Resurrection*."
5. See www.napolidavivere.it/2018/04/21/tableaux-vivants-caravaggio-donnaregina-al-museo-diocesano-napoli. There is a fully illustrated catalogue, with a map, for this museum: *Il Museo Diocesano di Napoli. Guida al Percorso Museale* (Napoli: Elio de Rosa, 2009).
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8. See Maria Grazia Leonetti Rodinò, *il pio monte della misericordia di Napoli. Quattro secoli di pietas* (Napoli: arte'm, 2012).
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35. Robb, *Street Fight in Naples*, 178.
36. Benjamin, 166. On porosity and “the defining feature of the city,” for Benjamin, see: Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2014), 211.
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