

## MASTER OF HARTFORD

Active in Rome, Italy, 1590-1610

*Still life with fruit, vegetables, and a vase with flowers on a table*  
Oil on canvas, 120 x 167 cm

## EXPERTISE

Davide Dotti, Brescia, May 2, 2023

I carefully examined the *Composition with Fruit, Vegetables, and a Vase of Flowers on a Table* owned by Mr. Lampronti and subsequently, after extensive research, drafted the present historical-critical study.

I recall that during the organization of the exhibition *The Origin of Still Life in Italy. Il Maestro di Hartford e Caravaggio* I curated in 2016 at the Galleria Borghese in Rome, I spent several days at the Fondazione Zeri in Bologna consulting the files on the various painters - from the Master of the Acquavella Still Life to Pietro Paolo Bonzi, from the Pensionante del Saraceni to Agostino Verrocchi and the Maestro della Fiasca di Forlì - whose works were to be exhibited in the noble residence of Cardinal Scipione Borghese. When I had the "Master of Hartford" folder in my hands, my curiosity was unquenchable. In Federico Zeri's seminal 1976 essay entitled *Sull'esecuzione di "nature morte" nella bottega del Cavalier d'Arpino, e sulla presenza ivi del giovane Caravaggio*,<sup>1</sup> he linked the styles of famous still lives in the Galleria Borghese (Figs. 1-2) to the name piece in the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford (Fig. 3). After sorting through the various attributions made by scholars up to that time, he proposed to identify the young Caravaggio as the author of the paintings hitherto grouped around the masterpiece in the American museum. This veritable scoop sparked a fervent, critical debate, which the recent exhibition at the Galleria Borghese finally put an end to thanks to the close comparison of Merisi's *Basket, Sick Bacchus*, and *Boy with Basket of Fruit* with no less than eight paintings by the 'Master of Hartford', which made it possible to establish that they were two distinct painters.

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<sup>1</sup> F. Zeri, *Sull'esecuzione di "nature morte" nella bottega del Cavalier d'Arpino, e sulla presenza ivi del giovane Caravaggio*, in *Diari di lavoro*, Torino 1976, II, pp. 92-103.

Reviewing the photographs contained in the folder created by Zeri, my eyes beheld works by the 'Master of Hartford' already known to critics such as the painting with *Fruit, Flowers, Vegetables, Mushrooms, Snails and Butterfly* once in the Galleria Lorenzelli in Bergamo (Fig. 4) and the pair of compositions with fruit and flower vases from the Villa Taverna Parisi-Borghese in Monte Porzio Catone, now in storage at the Galleria Estense in Modena (Figs. 5-6). But there was one painting that caught my attention: the *Natura morta con frutta, vaso di fiori e farfalle* (Scheda n. 85807, busta 0030, fascicolo 5), which Zeri catalogued in 1981, with a black and white photograph (Fig. 7), as belonging to a 'private collection'.

In fact, this large work of art represented an absolute novelty as it was completely unknown to art historians at the time, so much so that I decided to publish it - with the consent of the Fondazione Zeri - in the exhibition catalogue (pp. 132-133, fig. 7). I remember during a meeting of the exhibition's scientific committee I asked the various members to reach out to their personal contacts to help find the location of the canvas. If found, it would have a place of honor in the Mariano Rossi salon of the Galleria Borghese. Unfortunately, the search was unsuccessful. But as often happens in the marvelous and unpredictable world of art, when you least expect it, the masterpiece you had been chasing for so long suddenly re-emerges from the maze of private collections (Fig. 8). Considering the great importance of the find, it is worth retracing the complex critical story concerning the 'Master of Hartford', made particularly intricate both by the scarcity of information provided by 17<sup>th</sup> century sources and by the very rare descriptions of still life, accompanied by the author's name, in the inventories of Roman collections in the first two decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup>

It was the 4<sup>th</sup> of May 1607 when the bailiff came to Giuseppe Cesari known as Cavalier d'Arpino with an order, issued by Pope Paul V, born Camillo Borghese, to confiscate the paintings kept in his "sumptuous studio"<sup>3</sup>. In reality, it is entirely plausible that the vile act committed against the man, who at that time was the most admired and important painter of late Mannerist culture in Urbe and

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<sup>2</sup> Please see Luigi Spezzaferro "Il Caravaggio, i collezionisti romani, le nature morte", wrote in 1995 (in *La natura morta al tempo di Caravaggio*, ed. by A. Cottino, exhibition catalogue, Rome, Musei Capitolini, Naples 1995, pp. 49-58.

<sup>3</sup> As described by the biographer Giulio Mancini in *Considerazioni sulla pittura (1617-1621 circa; critical edition by A. Marucchi e L. Salerno, 1956-1957, I, p. 239).*

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appointed Prince of the Accademia di San Luca in 1599 in addition to leading a vast workshop that had secured major commissions from the Church and beyond,<sup>4</sup> was masterminded by the greedy collector Cardinal Scipione Borghese. In fact his uncle Paul V, a few months after the confiscation, precisely on the 30<sup>th</sup> of July 1607, donated the one hundred and five seized paintings to enrich his famous gallery in the making. It is not far-fetched to believe that Scipione coveted above all to possess paintings by Caravaggio, an artist at the height of his fame at the time, of which his collection was probably lacking.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps thanks to a tip from an informer, the cardinal nephew learned that there were two early masterpieces by Merisi in d'Arpino's workshop: the *Sick Bacchus* and the *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*. To possess them without spending a penny, what simpler and more immediate way than to ask his uncle, the Pope, to order a tax seizure on the pretext of keeping arms without a license?<sup>6</sup> And so it went.

It is a pity that the compiler of the list of paintings confiscated from the Cavalier d'Arpino in his atelier, where the master also traded in ancient and contemporary works of art and made considerable profits,<sup>7</sup> did not specify the names of the authors alongside the summary descriptions of the subjects. And it was precisely because of this documentary lacuna that critics, after the first studies by Charles Sterling, Ferdinando Bologna, Carlo Volpe, and Mina Gregori, felt the need to create the new artistic personality of the 'Master of Hartford', named after the American city in which the most representative work from his meagre catalogue is kept.

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<sup>4</sup> Mancini (*op. cit.*) says “*onde acquistando fama, da quel tempo in qua non è uscito opera pubblica o d'importanza dove egli non habbi avuto partecipazione o soprintendenza*”.

<sup>5</sup> In few years Scipione Borghese became one of the most important collectors of Caravaggio's paintings, owning several canvases still at the Galleria Borghese today. Perhaps only the *Saint Jerome*, dated 1605-1606, was in his collection before the seize. Scholars are not unanimous about this point, see M. Marini, *Caravaggio pictor praestantissimus*, Roma 2001, pp. 504-505, n. 74.

<sup>6</sup> It is not yet clear why the seize was ordered, but it is worth reading what the biographer Giovanni Paolo Bellori wrote in a note to the *Vite* by Baglione (copy in the Accademia dei Lincei, 31-E-15) “[...] *nel tempo di Paolo V furono trovate le pistole in camera del Cavaliere fu carcerato et poi liberato come huomo segnalato nella pittura*”, which seems to be connected to keeping arms without a licence.

<sup>7</sup> On this topic see R. Spear, *Dipingere per profitto. Le vite economiche dei pittori nella Roma del Seicento*, Campisano 2016, pp. 98-100.

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The first to shed some light on this topic was Aldo De Rinaldis back in 1936. In his article published in the "*Bollettino d'Arte*",<sup>8</sup> the scholar analyzed the *Nota de' quadri portati a Palazzo dalla Casa del Cav. D'Arpino presi dal fiscale di Paolo V*, which he discovered in an archive, recognized Caravaggio's *Sick Bacchus* and *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* in the Borghese in numbers 54 and 56 of the list. De Rinaldis noted that not all the paintings were owned by Cavalier d'Arpino or came from his brush, "*think of the numerous paintings of fruit and flowers, dead game, landscapes with shepherds, landscapes with Roman ruins that are found on the list as works by his hand*".<sup>9</sup> He went on to observe: "*it must be admitted that the knight, out of a collector's taste or for reasons of occasional shop*" had collected "*paintings by Italian and Flemish artists of his time or older*". Regarding the seven still lifes out of the one hundred and five paintings seized - four of which, as we shall see later, were by the 'Master of Hartford' - De Rinaldis cautiously suggested the name of Caravaggio without hypothesizing a connection with existing works. In 1952, on the occasion of the pioneering Paris exhibition *La nature morte de l'antiquité a nos jours*, Charles Sterling<sup>10</sup> analyzed the extraordinary painting owned by the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford (Fig. 3), purchased by the American institution in 1942 with the attribution to Fede Galizia<sup>11</sup>, tracing it to Caravaggio's sphere and dating it to the second half of the second decade of the 17<sup>th</sup> century while noting a certain relationship with the earliest generation of Flemish florists, not excluding the hypothesis that it might have been a copy taken from a lost original by Merisi.

Thanks to the studies of various scholars, in the 1960s and early 1970s, a small group of stylistically and formally related paintings was created around Hartford's eponymous work including the *Vase with flowers, snails, lemon and vegetables on a table* (Fig.4), that was exhibited in the 1964-1965 Zurich exhibition "*Das Italienische Stilleben*"<sup>12</sup> and in the 1968 Bergamo exhibition "*Natura in posa*"<sup>13</sup>, the pair

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<sup>8</sup> A. De Rinaldis, *D'Arpino e Caravaggio*, in "*Bollettino d'Arte*", 39 (1935-36), pp. 577-581.

<sup>9</sup> From the descriptions in the list, it is possible to understand that most of the pictures, including the *Sick Bacchus* and the *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, were without frame probably because they were ready to be sold.

<sup>10</sup> *La nature morte de l'antiquité a nos jours*, ed. by C. Sterling, exhibition catalogue (Paris, Musée de l'Orangerie), Paris 1952, ed. 1985, pp. 55-65, 87.

<sup>11</sup> M. Cinotti, *Caravaggio*, in *I pittori bergamaschi. Il Seicento*, Bergamo 1983, I, p. 567.

<sup>12</sup> *Das italienische Stilleben von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, exhibition catalogue (Zurigo, Kunsthaus), Milan, 1964, n. 33.

<sup>13</sup> *Natura in posa. Aspetti dell'antica natura morta italiana*, ed. by F. Bologna, exhibition catalogue (Bergamo),

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of canvases with fruit, vases of flowers and butterflies (Figs. 5-6) already in the Villa Taverna Parisi-Borghese in Monte Porzio Catone, published by Carlo Volpe,<sup>14</sup> and the *Allegory of Spring* (fig. 9) formerly in the Galleria Manzoni in Milan, in which Volpe<sup>15</sup> was the first to recognize the Master of Hartford's intervention in the refined floral score.

The true turning point was marked by Federico Zeri's 1976 essay *Sull'esecuzione di "nature morte" nella bottega del Cavalier d'Arpino, e sulla presenza ivi del giovane Caravaggio*.<sup>16</sup> First, Zeri, rejecting the misleading attributions proposed by Adolfo Venturi<sup>17</sup> to Karel van Vogelaert and Arcangelo Resani for the *Vaso di fiori, frutta e ortaggi* and for the *Cacciagione da penna e civetta* of the Galleria Borghese respectively (Figs. 1-2), linked the Roman pendant to the name piece of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford on stylistic grounds (Fig. 3), thus establishing the identity of the hand. Subsequently, based on Paola Della Pergola's intuition<sup>18</sup>, who was the first to identify the Borghese's *Cacciagione da penna e civetta* with number 38 on the list of works seized from the Cavalier d'Arpino, he proposed to recognize the *Vaso di fiori, frutta e ortaggi* from the Roman museum in number 39, described as "Another painting with various fruits and flowers without frames". Zeri thus succeeded in establishing a certain and fundamental chronological *ante quem* date (4<sup>th</sup> of May 1607) for the execution of these paintings, effectively nullifying the hypothesis put forward a few years earlier by Carlo Volpe<sup>19</sup> and supported by Mina Gregori<sup>20</sup>, by recognizing the Marquis and painter Giovanni Battista Crescenzi in the mysterious Master of Hartford due to chronological incompatibility.

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Galleria Lorenzelli), Bergamo 1968, tav. 10. Bologna underlines the relationship with the compositions of the young Caravaggio executed in Cavalier d'Arpino's workshop.

<sup>14</sup> C. Volpe, *Mostra di dipinti dal XIV al XVIII secolo*, Milan 1972, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> C. Volpe, *Annotazioni sulla mostra caravaggesca di Cleveland*, in "Paragone", XXIII, n. 263 (1972), pp. 73-74. The canvas, attributed to Guido Cagnacci by Giovanni Testori in 1967 (*33 opere del '600*, ed. by G. Testori, exhibition catalogue, Milan, Galleria Manzoni, Milano 1967, n. 17), was later attributed to Carlo Saraceni in relation to the two female figures by Anna Ottani Cavina (A. Ottani Cavina, *Carlo Saraceni*, Milan 1968, p. 105).

<sup>16</sup> F. Zeri, *Sull'esecuzione di "nature morte" nella bottega del Cavalier d'Arpino, e sulla presenza ivi del giovane Caravaggio*, in *Diari di lavoro*, Turin 1976, II, pp. 92-103.

<sup>17</sup> A. Venturi, *Il Museo e la Galleria Borghese*, Rome 1893, pp. 60-61, 152-154.

<sup>18</sup> P. Della Pergola, *La Galleria Borghese. I dipinti*, Rome 1959, II, p. 170.

<sup>19</sup> op. cit., pp. 73-74.

<sup>20</sup> M. Gregori, *Notizie su Agostino Verrocchio e un'ipotesi per Giovanni Battista Crescenzi*, in "Paragone", XXIV, n.275 (1973), p. 46.

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Continuing his relentless critical examination, the scholar suggests that the Wadsworth Atheneum work (no. 47: "*A painting full of fruit, and flowers with two Carafes...*") and the one formerly owned by the Galleria Manzoni in Milan (no. 96: "*Un quadro con una Caraffa di fiori et altri fiori non compito*") were part of the list of seized works, and illustrates for the first time the *Composizione con fiori, frutta, ortaggi, farfalla e lumaca* (109 x 147 cm; Fig. 10) that "I saw years ago at Fritz Mont in New York"<sup>21</sup>. After proposing a chronological sequence of the reunited canvases, he then poses the crucial question: "With whom can one identify a personality such as this, who was active before 1607 and whose products denote the surpassing of the Manner, large and small?". Discarding 'for chronological reasons the name of Crescenzi', Zeri shifts the focus 'to the environment of Cavalier d'Arpino' and focuses on the artists devoted to the subject of still life who frequented Cesari. Therefore, working by exclusion, he eliminates the name of Floris Claesz van Dyck as his signed works 'have nothing to do with the culture or technique of the paintings discussed here', and identifies the young Caravaggio as the author of the paintings grouped until then around the name piece in the Hartford Museum.

The reasons he cites to support his thesis are not so much connected to the fact that "the two largest numbers of the entire group came from Cesari's collection at the Borghese Gallery together with the two oldest paintings by Caravaggio known so far, the *Sick Bacchus* and the *Boy with Basket of Fruit*"<sup>22</sup>, but rather linked to the testimonies provided by ancient sources, to which he gives great credit. The professor relies on the famous passage by Giovanni Pietro Bellori:<sup>23</sup> "[Caravaggio] was forced by necessity to serve Cavaliere Giuseppe d'Arpino, by whom he was applied to painting flowers and fruit that were so well counterfeited, that they came to be associated with that greater vagueness, which is so pleasing today. He painted a jug of flowers with the transparencies of water, and of glass, and with the reflexes of the *fenestra* (window) of a room, scattered with flowers of the freshest dews, & other paintings he excellently made of similar imitation". Regarding this last sentence, he believes that Bellori 'was referring to something not unlike the canvas later completed by Saraceni'. Continuing in his argument, he first asserts that 'Caravaggio, having entered Cesari's workshop, devoted himself to the execution of still lives in 1593, perhaps during the second half of that year';

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<sup>21</sup> Zeri, 1976, op. cit., II, p. 98.

<sup>22</sup> Zeri 1976, op. cit., II, p. 99-100.

<sup>23</sup> G.P. Bellori, *Le vite de' pittori scultori et architetti moderni*, Rome 1672, p. 202.

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he subsequently firmly denies that the Master of Hartford is an epigone of Merisi in that "the existence of a close follower of his at such a high period sounds absurd"; finally, he reinforces his conviction by pointing to stylistic elements by noting how "in the *Fiori e frutti* of the Galleria Borghese, and in the two canvases of Hartford and ex-Mont, the description of the wicker basket is so similar to what one reads in the *Ragazzo* of the Galleria Borghese as to verge on the superimposable".

At the conclusion of the essay, Zeri forcefully reiterates the validity of his reconstruction, pointing out that "in Caravaggio's career, the series illustrated here stands at the beginning of the Roman chapter; most likely in the second half of 1593, certainly at the time he was employed by Cavalier d'Arpino, and before the works known so far as the earliest ones. From the recovery of this initial phase of Merisi's work, the question of his training, which, in the genre of still life, extends from the Cremonese school of the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the Flemish and, who knows, perhaps even to Giovanni da Udine, and the comparison of this aspect of the great painter's beginnings with the *Cestina* in the Ambrosiana illuminates another side of the process of extraordinary synthesis thanks to which [...] Caravaggio latched on directly to the most straightforward values of the Renaissance"<sup>24</sup>. The disruptive force of Zeri's disorientating thesis of turning the debate on the birth of the still life genre in Italy on its head and proposing a solution to the enigma of the young Caravaggio's Roman beginnings, imagining an experimental path not immediately oriented towards figure painting, provoked discordant reactions from scholars.

Few were actually his supporters, more or less convinced, including Giuliano Briganti,<sup>25</sup> Claudio Strinati,<sup>26</sup> Charles Sterling<sup>27</sup> and Mina Gregori<sup>28</sup>; many, on the other hand, were his opponents, the

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<sup>24</sup> Zeri 1976, op. cit., II, pp. 102-103.

<sup>25</sup> In the article *Due dipinti in attesa di processo* apparso sul quotidiano *La Repubblica*, 17 February 1979, Briganti writes: "Personalmente sono propenso, pur con qualche perplessità, a dare credito alle argomentazioni di Zeri, e soprattutto a riconoscere l'alta qualità dei dipinti".

<sup>26</sup> Catalogue entry, in *Quadri romani tra '500 e '600. Opere restaurate e da restaurare*, ed. by C. Strinati, exhibition catalogue (Rome, Museo Nazionale del Palazzo di Venezia), Rome 1979, pp. 62-65.

<sup>27</sup> In the preface of the new English edition of the core text on still life (*Still life Paintings from Antiquity to the 20th Century*, New York 1981) first edited in French in 1952 (op. cit.), the scholar agrees with the identification of the Master of Hartford with the young Caravaggio saying it "is to be considered very seriously".

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fiercest of whom was Maurizio Calvesi<sup>29</sup> who on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February 1979, three years after Zeri's essay, published an article in *L'Espresso* in which he attacked Zeri directly, describing the paintings in the Galleria Borghese as "two *opericciolo*", "two ungrammatical paintings", which were at that time on display in an exhibition at Palazzo Venezia in Rome from which they were withdrawn at the behest of Superintendent Dante Bernini following Calvesi's essay.

Prior to this journalistic encroachment that deeply wounded the professor,<sup>30</sup> Maurizio Marini, on the publication of the edited volume *Michael Angelus Caravaggio Romanus* in 1978,<sup>31</sup> had suggested for the *Cacciagione da penna e civetta* a hand "educated in the Tuscan-Flemish orbit (Antonio Tempesta?)." While for the *Vaso di fiori, frutta e ortaggi* "the collaboration of at least three hands," which he identified as the Master of Hartford in the entire right-hand area, in "a considerably more evolved hand akin to Bonzi" in the left-hand area, and in "yet another, undoubtedly the best, which I would not exclude to be by Caravaggio" in the central area. The critic returned to the subject several times with new clarifications: in 1981,<sup>32</sup> again regarding the two canvases in the Galleria Borghese, he proposed unbinding the *Vaso di fiori* from the *Cacciagione*, only supporting the name of Caravaggio for the former, assisted in its execution, which took place in d'Arpino's workshop, by Francesco Zucchi and Bernardino Cesari. In 1984,<sup>33</sup> he repeated this thesis and assigned the *Composizione con*

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<sup>28</sup> *Caravaggio e il suo tempo*, ed. by M. Gregori, exhibition catalogue (Napoli, Capodimonte), Milan 1985, pp.206-211.

<sup>29</sup> M. Calvesi, *Nature morte risuscitate*, in "L'Espresso", 11<sup>th</sup> of February 1979.

<sup>30</sup> For further information on the affair that shook the world of art criticism at the time and deeply embittered Zeri who, in a private typed sheet today preserved in the Foundation that bears his name, vented all his indignation by writing "The removal of the paintings from the exhibition constitutes a very serious episode of intolerance and an attack on freedom of expression and information, reminiscent of what was happening in Dr. Göbbels' Germany and Zdanov's Russia", see: Federico Zeri. *Dietro l'immagine*, edited by A. Ottani Cavina, exhibition catalogue (Bologna, Museo Civico Archeologico), Turin 2009, pp. 80-81, and p. 84, footnote 23.

<sup>31</sup> M. Marini, *Michael Angelus Caravaggio Romanus. Rassegna di studi e proposte*, Rome 1978, p. 43, nota 128.

<sup>32</sup> M. Marini, *Gli esordi del Caravaggio e il concetto di "natura" nei primi decenni del Seicento a Roma*, in "Artibus et Historiae", 2 (1981), pp. 39-83.

<sup>33</sup> M. Marini, *Fingere e dipingere la natura*, in *Proscenio. Immagini della natura morta europea tra Seicento e Settecento*, Rome 1984, pp. 13, 17 (the texts in this volume are originating from the conference *Caravaggio e il problema della natura morta* which Marini attended on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March 1983 in Rome, Sodalizio tra studiosi dell'arte). As it has already been noted by Albeto Cottino (*La natura morta al tempo di Caravaggio*, ed. by A. Cottino, exhibition catalogue, Rome, Musei Capitolini, Naples 1995, p.



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*vaso di ceramica con fiori, frutta e due farfalle* from the Pinacoteca di Spoleto to the Master of Hartford. In his monograph on Merisi in 1987,<sup>34</sup> referring back to an idea of a few years earlier,<sup>35</sup> he hypothesized the presence of three hands (Bernardino Cesari, Francesco Zucchi and Caravaggio, who would only be responsible for the basket of fruit and the violet figs on the table) in the Hartford Museum work as well, thus reiterating the concept of "collegial execution" already made explicit in 1981 for the *Vaso di fiori, frutta e ortaggi* at the Borghese, attributing the *Cacciagione da penna e civetta* to Zucchi alone. Finally, in the 2001 edition of the same volume,<sup>36</sup> he confirmed what had already been argued in previous articles, namely that the group ascribed to the Master of Hartford is heterogeneous and is the result of different artists active in the workshop of Cavalier d'Arpino. In addition to Marini, other scholars have tackled the thorny subject, providing contributions and new insights to support their point of view and putting forward new proposals on the identity of the mysterious still life painter.

In 1983 John Spike<sup>37</sup> and Mia Cinotti<sup>38</sup> agreed on considering the Master of Hartford a precocious follower of Caravaggio. The following year Luigi Salerno<sup>39</sup> cautiously accepted Marini's idea of calling Francesco Zucchi into question on the basis of the biographer Giovanni Baglione's passage<sup>40</sup>; in 1985 Mina Gregori,<sup>41</sup> after an in-depth analysis of the problem, came to the conclusion that Zeri's hypothesis was difficult to endorse given the state of knowledge at the time: "The reference to the

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122, fig. 20) the Spoleto canvas, displaying a harsh style, has to be ascribed to the circle or workshop of the Master of Hartford.

<sup>34</sup> M. Marini, *Caravaggio "Pictor praestantissimus"*, Rome 1987, p. 357, n. 1.

<sup>35</sup> M. Marini, *Nature morte italiane a spasso per l'America*, in "Il giornale dell'arte", 3 (1983), pp. 1, 5.

<sup>36</sup> M. Marini, *Caravaggio "Pictor praestantissimus"*, Rome 2001, pp. 24, 369-370.

<sup>37</sup> *Italian Still Life from three centuries*, ed. J.T. Spike, exhibition catalogue (New York, National Academy of Design; Tulsa, Philbrook Art Center; Dayton, Dayton Art Institute), Florence 1983, p. 44.

<sup>38</sup> M. Cinotti, *Caravaggio*, in *I pittori bergamaschi. Il Seicento*, Bergamo, 1983, I, p. 567-568.

<sup>39</sup> L. Salerno, *La natura morta italiana, 1560-1805*, Rome, 1984, pp. 46-54.

<sup>40</sup> G. Baglione, *Le vite de' pittori scultori architetti ed intagliatori*, Rome, 1642, p. 102: "[...] nelle tele inuentò di comporre, e colorire le teste delle quattro Stagioni co' loro frutti, fiori, & altre cose, che ne' tempi di quella Stagione, sogliono dalla Natura prodursi; e sì bene, le diuisaua, che fuori ne faceva apparire tutte le parti, come per l'appunto nelle teste humane da noi si scorgono; e numerosi da per tutto si vedono i ritratti di questa sua inuentione". See also A. Cottino, "Dipingere fiori e frutti sì bene contrafatti...": *la natura morta caravaggesca a Roma*, in *La natura morta al tempo di Caravaggio*, ed. A. Cottino, exhibition catalogue, (Rome, Musei Capitolini), Naples, 1995, p. 60.

<sup>41</sup> *Caravaggio e il suo tempo*, ed. M. Gregori, exhibition catalogue, (Naples, Museo di Capodimonte), Naples, 1985, pp. 206-208, 211

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young Caravaggio is hard to accept [...] but it could prove to be the fruit of our prejudice in the future"; Alberto Cottino,<sup>42</sup> on the occasion of the publication of the two volumes on *Still Life in Italy* edited by Zeri in 1989, left an opening regarding the possibility of identification with Merisi: "[...] it is clear that the name of the young Caravaggio in the current state of studies appears to be the most reliable, also due to the somewhat experimental nature of the Hartford group, as witnessed by the progress that can be seen between the first and last canvases, which is typical of a painter in rapid maturation". Following Ferdinando Bologna's intervention in 1992,<sup>43</sup> a convinced supporter of the idea that the group of collected works was too uneven to be by a single hand, none of which could in any case be associated with the name of Caravaggio. Cottino<sup>44</sup> was more cautious about Zeri's proposal, pointing out the Caravaggesque matrix of the Hartford group and circumscribing the birth of Roman still life in the workshop of Cavalier d'Arpino.

A similar attitude was taken by Mina Gregori who, after the initial opening in 1985 already mentioned, had second thoughts (2002)<sup>45</sup> that led her to formulate the hypothesis according to which the Master of Hartford met Caravaggio in the workshop of Cavalier d'Arpino, who "would have given him suggestions and perhaps some more substantial help". Meanwhile, from his villa in Mentana, Federico Zeri watched the critical debate from the side-lines, limiting himself to continuing his research in private. In fact, after the bitterness experienced following the fierce controversy provoked by the publication of his 1976 essay, the professor decided not to write another line on the subject. As testified by a letter recently published by Anna Ottani Cavina,<sup>46</sup> he remained true to his position to the end: "Today [it is the 10<sup>th</sup> of February 1997] I think it is a very valid hypothesis, more and more logical and well-founded, also due to the discovery of other canvases, which can be attributed with certainty to the same group and which often show the typical technical, chromatic and formal symptoms of Michelangelo da Caravaggio". Since Zeri's death in

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<sup>42</sup> A. Cottino, *Maestro di Hartford*, in F. Zeri, *La natura morta in Italia*, Milan, 1989, II, p. 691.

<sup>43</sup> F. Bologna, *L'incredulità di Caravaggio* [Torino 1992], nuova edizione accresciuta, Torino 2006, pp. 287-290. The scholar, in regard to the *Vaso di fiori, frutta e ortaggi* in the Borghese, thinks that "spendibile il nome dell'amico e settatore di Giovanni Baglione, Tommaso Salini?".

<sup>44</sup> *La natura morta al tempo di Caravaggio*, ed. A. Cottino, exhibition catalogue, (Rome, Musei Capitolini), Naples, 1995, pp. 59-60.

<sup>45</sup> *Natura morta italiana tra Cinquecento e Settecento*, ed. M. Gregori, J.G. Prinz von Hohenzollern, exhibition catalogue (Kunsthalle der Hypo-Kulturstiftung), Milan, 2002, p. 30.

<sup>46</sup> *Federico Zeri. Dietro l'immagine*, ed. A. Ottani Cavina, exhibition catalogue (Bologna, Museo Civico Archeologico), Turin 2009, p. 84, note 25.

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October 1998, there have been new stimulating contributions, some by art historians who had never addressed before the intricate issue. In an article from 2000 collecting insights and reflections on the 1995 exhibition "*Still Life at the Time of Caravaggio*", Vittoria Markova<sup>47</sup> further complicates the picture by creating the "Pseudo Master of Hartford," to whom the pair formerly in the Villa Parisi in Frascati, the painting already in the Mont collection in New York and the *Composizione con vaso di ceramica con fiori, frutta e due farfalle* in the Pinacoteca di Spoleto would belong. This would define him as an eclectic painter active in the circle or workshop of the 'true' Master of Hartford, author of the eponymous canvas in the American museum. According to the Russian scholar, the two works in the Galleria Borghese would instead belong to the hand of an anonymous artist who 'has a different conception of space and possesses a finer technique in the details, in the transitions from shadow to light, in the colors and is also more elegant in the final result'. The conclusion she comes to is that: the Master of Hartford 'was not an innovator and pioneer of still life, but an archaizing imitator who assimilated Caravaggio's innovative lexicon and interpreted it in a predominantly innovative key'. Worthy of attention is the position of Claudio Strinati:<sup>48</sup> "The Master of Hartford is a remarkable painter who takes up Caravaggio's inventions almost directly, which would confirm his extreme chronological proximity [...]. It is not possible to think otherwise [...], because even admitting the doubts that hang over Caravaggio's chronology, the youthful still lifes such as the *Ragazzo morso dal ramarro* are already perfect and defined by a constantly growing creativity, while the Master of Hartford's intention to build on an already formulated repertoire is evident'. Strinati advances the name of Prosperino Orsi known as Prosperino delle grottesche, a hypothesis later taken up by Clovis Whitfield.<sup>49</sup> Despite the fact that Keith Christiansen,<sup>50</sup> in a letter date 23<sup>rd</sup> of July 2009, also expressed scepticism on the identification of the Master of Hartford with the young Caravaggio ("[...] All I would say is that the fruit in the *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* - another picture seized from

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<sup>47</sup> V. Markova, *Il pomo del mistero. Complemento titolo la complicata storia della natura morta in Italia; attraverso i gruppi cruciali del "Maestro di Hartford" e del "Maestro della natura morta di Acquavella", di Salini, di Verrocchi e del "Pensionante del Saraceni"; ed una proposta per Vermeer*, in "Quadri & Sculture", 8 (2000), pp. 52-55.

<sup>48</sup> C. Strinati, *La natura morta in Roma dopo Caravaggio*, in *L'anima e le cose. La natura morta nell'Italia pontificia nel XVII e XVIII secolo*, ed. R. Battistini e B. Cleri, exhibition catalogue mostra (Fano, ex scuola Luigi Rossi), Fano 2001, p. 16.

<sup>49</sup> C. Whitfield, *Prospero Orsi, interprete du Caravage*, in "Revue de l'Art", 157 (2007), pp. 9-19; Id., *Correspondance dans mon récent article*, in "Revue de l'Art", 155 (2007-1), p. 74.

<sup>50</sup> The quotes come from a letter dated the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July 2009. See *Federico Zeri. Dietro l'immagine*, ed. A. Ottani Cavina, exhibition catalogue (Bologna, Museo Archeologico), Turin 2009, p. 84, note 36, 38.

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Arpino - seems to me somewhat differently rendered from the fruit in the Master of Hartford's paintings. It's a question of chronology, iconography or authorship?"), Anna Ottani Cavina<sup>51</sup> attempted to rehabilitate Zeri's thesis by publishing, in the volume *Prospettiva Zeri*, three still lifes recovered from the scholar's photo library in the folder entitled "*Caravaggio 2, Master of Hartford*", paintings which, as Alberto Cottino<sup>52</sup> has rightly pointed out, are not autographs of the Master of Hartford, but should be traced back to the Spanish painter Giovanni Quinsa, active in Naples around the middle of the 17th century.<sup>53</sup> In the same paper, Cottino expresses an unprecedented position compared to the possibilist position he held in his interventions of 1989 and 1995, confessing that "I am increasingly doubtful about the Hartford group being attributed to the early Merisi". And he points out: "The Hartford Master, therefore, is a painter who certainly worked in or near the workshop of the Cavalier d'Arpino"; he is "a follower of the very early days (but active at the turn of the century) who takes his cue more from the Merisi of his early maturity than from that of his youth [...]". Lastly, the recent reflections of Franco Paliaga<sup>54</sup> should be noted, who, linking up with what was first hypothesised by Marini, circumscribes the question within Cesari's workshop where the Master of Hartford would have been active in the production of still lifes at the instigation of his own patron.

To have been able to bring together eight works by the Master of Hartford in the enchanting setting of the Galleria Borghese for the 2016 exhibition offered a unique and unrepeatability opportunity to conduct an in-depth technical and stylistic analysis in order to formulate a chronology that sees the

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<sup>51</sup> A. Ottani Cavina, *Prospettiva Zeri*, Torino 2009, pp. 116-130; *Federico Zeri. Dietro l'immagine*, ed. A. Ottani Cavina, exhibition catalogue (Bologna, Museo Civico Archeologico), Turin 2009, pp. 78-90.

<sup>52</sup> A. Cottino, *Riesaminando il Maestro di Hartford. Riflessioni a margine di mostre e convegni*, in "Valori tattili", 00 (2011), pp. 24-33.

<sup>53</sup> It is surely by Quinsa the *Natura morta con coppa di fiori* (cfr. A. Ottani Cavina, *Prospettiva Zeri*, Turin 2009, p. 130, fig. 23) that Zeri, in his notes on the verso of the photograph now in his photolibrary, says to be "sicuramente il pezzo più antico e va datato verso il 1590, forse anche nel 1588/90: si tratta di un vero e proprio archetipo della natura morta italiana, di grande importanza storica"; attributed to the same Spanish artist are the *pendant* with fruit, flowers, and vegetables on stone tables (Ottani Cavina, op. cit., p. 127, figg. 18-19). Quinsa counts two paintings that are signed and dated: the *Natura morta con fichi, salame, fragoline, fiasca e pani*, Finarte auction, Milan, 20<sup>th</sup> April 1972, lot. 133, inscribed "Gio Quinsa Spa. g.F1641", and the *Vaso di ceramica con fiori e frutta su tavolo*, Sotheby's, London, 9<sup>th</sup> of December 2004, lot. 197, signed "Giovanni Quinsa S.../P" and dated "1643".

<sup>54</sup> F. Paliaga, *Caravaggio nella bottega di Giuseppe Cesari e la nascita della natura morta*, in *Natura in vetro. Studi sulla caraffa di fiori di Caravaggio*, Rome 2012, pp. 31-68.

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canvas with *Fruit, Flowers, Vegetables, Mushrooms, Snails and Butterflies* from the Galleria Lorenzelli in Bergamo (Fig. 4) and the pair of *Compositions with Fruit and Flower Vases* from the Villa Taverna Parisi-Borghese Monte Porzio Catone, now in storage at the Galleria Estense in Modena (Figs. 5-6), as the beginnings of the artist's production being works characterised by a marked archaism of composition evident in the rigid, paratactic arrangement of the elements, which sometimes overlap one another in a rather naive manner.

In a later and more mature phase of the Master's career it should be placed a group of four canvases of large format that are extremely consistent in stylistic terms, presenting a raised and recessed viewpoint with respect to the table, a studied luminist direction and a similar layout scheme: a table covered with a precious Anatolian rug over which is spread a white linen tablecloth on which there are a glass jugs crossed by beams of light filled with flowers, finely woven wicker baskets with fruit and artichokes, metal stands with figs and piles of pears, plums, peaches, apples, apricots and cherries scattered here and there on the table top.

The sequence could be opened by the still life in question (fig. 8) in which, compared to the three more archaic canvases mentioned above (figs. 4-5-6), there is a new and more meditated spatial articulation played out in the rhythmic arrangement of the small groups of fruit, some of which are placed at the edge of the table from which the twigs and leaves fall with an illusionistic *tromp l'oeil* effect. A similar architecture is found in the canvas sold at Fraysse auction house in Paris on the 5<sup>th</sup> of December 2012, lot no. 47 (fig. 11), showing the two same butterflies described with entomologist precision - the one with the white front wings edged in black with two dark dots is a female greater spider moth (*Pieris brassicae*) - which, attracted by the scent of the flowers, flutter towards the lush bouquet on which the splendid irises stand out; in the work formerly in the Mont collection in New York (fig. 10), which presents a woven wicker basket filled with cherries and artichokes similar to ours and the 'signature motif' of the snail; and in the painting of a private Irish collection (fig. 12), in which we find the pile of apricots placed at the edge of the table, a canvas that manifests a more complex definition of spatial relationships, governed by the triangulation delineated by the vase on the left, the riser in the center and the basket on the right. This attentive and sensitive taste for volumetry, which reveals a way of thinking and composing akin to Caravaggio's, finds its greatest expression in the masterpiece in the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum

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of Art in Hartford (Fig. 3) where the master's most up-to-date aesthetic research is condensed. It is a work of astonishing painterly quality that undoubtedly represents the apex of the painter's limited production, datable to a chronological height close to that of the Borghese seizure in May 1607. Our Composition with *Fruit, Vegetables and Vase of Flowers on a Table*, on the other hand, dates from an earlier period, hypothetically around 1602-1605, in any case after the *Supper at Emmaus* that Caravaggio painted for Ciriaco Mattei (Fig. 13). In fact, from the masterpiece now in the National Gallery in London, which the critics date to 1601-1602, the Master of Hartford borrows the idea of covering the table with the white tablecloth spread over the geometrically patterned carpet, the point of view set back and raised above the edge of the table to emphasize its depth, the dense, full-bodied shadows stretched across the tablecloth and the new way of understanding light both analytically and volumetrically.

This demonstrates unequivocally that the origin of still life in the Roman context was under the banner of Caravaggio's revolutionary naturalism, which overturned the tired stylistic features of late Mannerism with the disruptive force of the direct gaze on reality so dear to Merisi, based on a luminism capable of suggesting matter. The innovative aesthetic language of the genius from Lombardy was understood and gradually assimilated by the Master of Hartford, most likely the first artist in Rome at the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries to create autonomous still lives with a strong decorative value, i.e. without the sophisticated symbolic implications of the *Ambrosian Canestra*, which remains unrivalled in the European panorama of the late 16<sup>th</sup> century - destined to decorate the sumptuous salons of Roman residences. He was certainly a specialist and pioneer in the field of still life, but it is not known whether he also applied himself as a figure painter in the same way as the other masters who, as ancient sources attest, ventured into the still life genre in the first decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Any attempt to assign a first name and surname to our painter - who it is likely to be believed to have worked in the entourage or even within the workshop of Cavalier d'Arpino, constantly drawing inspiration from Caravaggio's production - appears unrealistic, because it is the result of momentary suggestions, in no case supported by documentary evidence.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> The last suggested names are that of Cesare Rossetti (A. Melorio, *Cesare Rossetti*, in *Roma di Sisto V: le arti e la cultura*, ed. M.L. Madonna, Roma 1993, p. 543; A. Cottino, in *La natura morta al tempo di Caravaggio*, cit., p. 60); Pietro d'Asaro detto Monocolo di Racalmuto, who Maurizio Marini says, in *Caravaggio «pictor praestantissimus»*, Roma 2005, p. 369), that “in talune opere [...] mostra dettagli naturamortistici affini a quelli di artisti delle tele del gruppo facente capo al Maestro della Natura

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Leafing through the inventories of the Roman aristocratic collections of the first decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, one comes across descriptions of still lives that recall those of the 'Master of Hartford' without indicating their creator or mentioning the names of now completely unknown still life artists to whom it is very difficult to associate anonymous paintings. Perhaps it is precisely in this area that has not been fully explored that future research should be focused in order to attempt to find the 'litmus test' that would finally allow a precise historical identity to be conferred on the 'Master of Hartford'.

A painter who, more than four hundred years after the Borghese seizure, continues to be one of the great mysteries of Italian art history, and who does not fail to hold surprises in store for collectors and art historians alike, as demonstrated by the unexpected discovery of the painting that is the subject of the present historical-critical study, to be counted without a shadow of a doubt among the best evidence of the limited production of the elusive still-life painter.

Davide Dotti

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Morta di Hartford”; Antonio Tanari, “[...] figura poco nota, ma che nelle pochissime opere conosciute appare abbastanza vicino allo stile del Maestro di Hartford” (A. Cottino, *La natura morta caravaggesca, in Caravaggio and his time: Friends, Rivals and Enemies*, exhibition catalogue, ed. R. Vodret, Y. Kavase, Tokyo, The National Museum of Western Art,, Tokyo 2016, pp. 283-284).