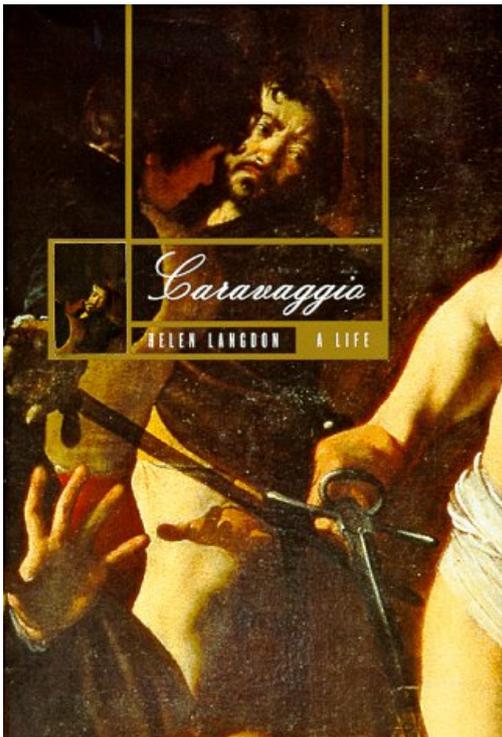


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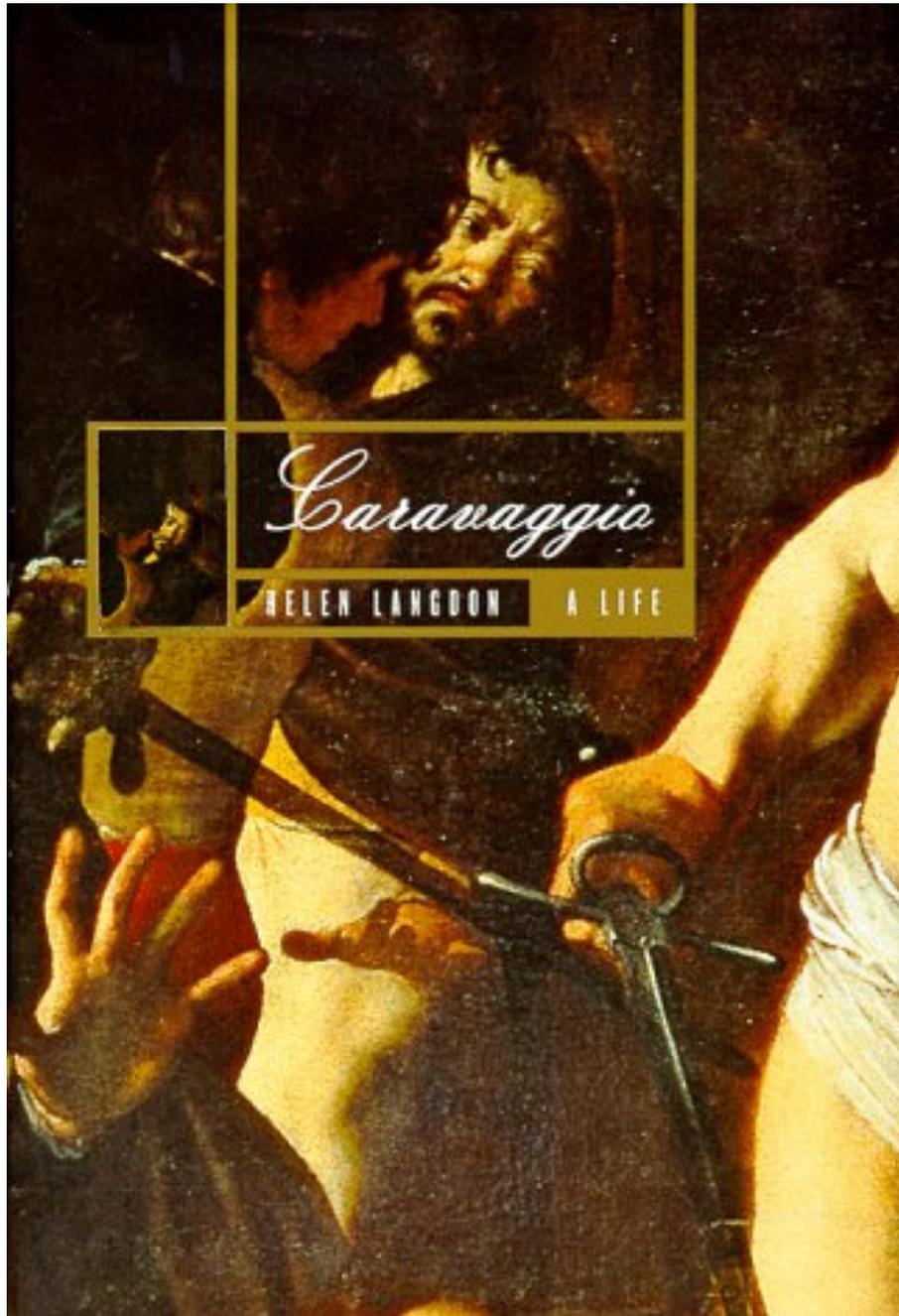
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Amazon.com Review

Seventeenth-century painter Nicolas Poussin once said that Caravaggio came into the world to destroy painting. Helen Langdon's marvelous biography suggests that rather than destroying painting, the Milanese artist gave it a new lease on life. Upon his arrival in Rome, Caravaggio ended a tradition of Italian Renaissance painting with his radically new naturalistic style, which continues to dazzle and influence viewers today. Beautifully poised between biographical scholarship and artistic appreciation, Langdon's book provides the reader with a complex, fascinating portrait of Caravaggio, still the rebel and outsider of the popular imagination, but also immersed in the Roman world of art, politics, and patronage. Some of the finest sections of the book vividly evoke the streets and brothels of early 17th-century Rome, which provided Caravaggio with the inspiration for many of his early works. By contrast, the later sections--which deal with Caravaggio's exile and commissions in Naples, Malta, and Sicily--seem rather brief and truncated, giving the final third of the book a rather unbalanced feel. This is, however, partly due to the elusiveness of Caravaggio himself--with little direct contemporary documentation on the painter, he often slips into the shadows, evading the scrutiny of even the most persistent biographer.

Langdon's achievement here is to produce a compelling portrait of the artist that throws new light on his paintings. Here is a painter who was proud, difficult, and arrogant, yet highly intellectual in his appreciation of the changing face of both Catholicism and scientific enquiry. Written with great historical clarity, and supplemented by 42 magnificent color illustrations, Helen Langdon's Caravaggio is a worthy contribution to scholarly study of this artist. --Jerry Brotton

From Publishers Weekly

At once more scholarly and less polemical than Desmond Seward's 1998 *Caravaggio: A Passionate Life*, Langdon's study of the Renaissance painter conveys a picture of Michelangelo da Caravaggio (1573-1610) as an artist amid rivals and intrigues without losing sight of his work and its significance. Not that Langdon downplays the juicy bits: she offers documented details on the scandals and rivalries, but does so without sensationalism or dependence on conjecture. While Seward railed against homoerotic interpretations of Caravaggio's works, and seemed particularly hostile to Derek Jarman's highly speculative 1987 film, *Caravaggio*, Langdon is unfailingly even-handed. In keeping with her focus on Caravaggio the artist (as opposed to Seward's man of faith), Langdon presents the relationship with Cardinal Francesco del Monte, for whom he served as artist-in-residence, in terms of career significance rather than personal relationships. Through del Monte, Caravaggio made contacts with church officials and patrons, and also with other painters, many of whom became rivals or detractors. The last section of the book is a balanced account of

Caravaggio's induction into the Catholic order of the Knights of Malta (an honor seemingly requiring him to have lied about his family's lineage), his imprisonment in a Maltese dungeon for dueling with a Knight of higher rank and his legendary escape. Without downplaying Caravaggio's personal oddity and violent tendencies, Langdon approaches her subject with a sympathetic yet almost clinical eye. She scours the archives, examining police documents and bringing court records to light. In the end, she produces a finished view of an artist who helped redefine realism in art, even as his increasingly humbling depictions of people alienated him from painters and patrons, and fed his public image as a scoundrel and madman. 56 b&w illustrations, 42 color plates. (June)

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From Library Journal

British scholar Langdon's masterly achievement is to integrate Caravaggio's art and life in a convincing and vividly delineated re-creation of his world. The themes of artistic patronage and practice, politics, religion, and criminality are effectively woven together to illumine the artist's work and behavior. Not only has Langdon synthesized an unprecedented amount of material to evoke the world within which Caravaggio labored but she has simultaneously created a freshened and deepened appreciation of his paintings. While occasionally venturing a bit far afield in the pursuit of a more fully rounded picture of his social milieu, she never fails the works themselves. Even readers already immersed in Caravaggio scholarship cannot fail to savor this brilliant conjunction of the formal and iconographic with the contextual, intellectual, spiritual, and social preoccupations of the moment. No previous English language work has so compellingly situated this artist in the ethos of his epoch. Art collections beyond the elementary level will need to acquire this informed, insightful, and eloquent opus.

ARobert Cahn, Fashion Inst. of Technology, New York

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