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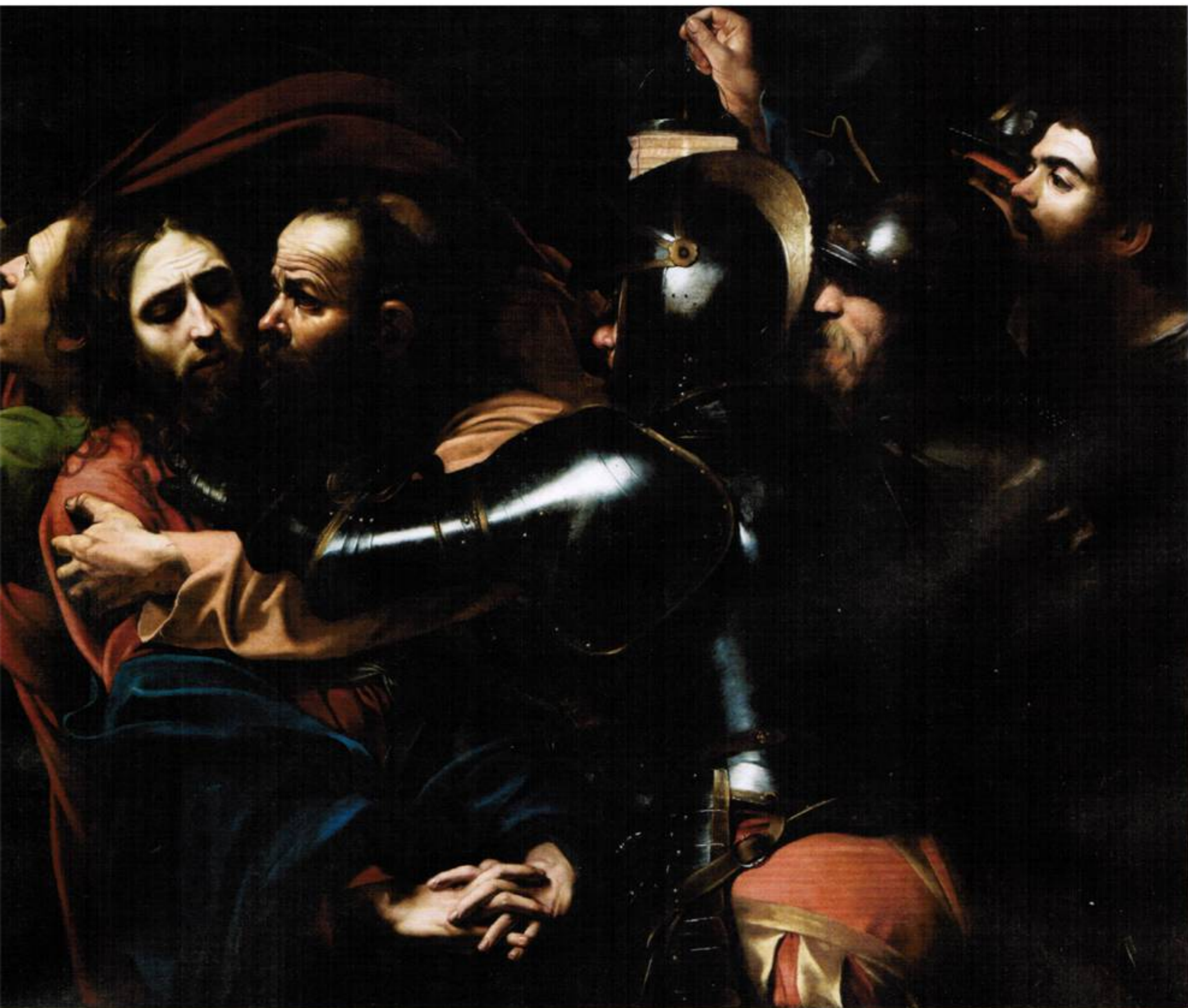
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CARAVAGGIO'S SECRETS

AS AN EXHIBITION ON **CARAVAGGIO'S** ARTISTIC INFLUENCE OPENS AT LONDON'S NATIONAL GALLERY, AMERICAN PAINTER **AL GURY** LOOKS AT HOW YOU CAN USE THE ITALIAN MASTER'S KEY PAINTING TECHNIQUES IN YOUR OWN WORK

ABOVE Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Taking of Christ*, 1602, oil on canvas, 133.5x169.5cm

The passion, faith and energy of early 17th-century Europe can be found in the great artworks of the Baroque period that employed tenebrism. Tenebrism, from the Italian word *tenebroso* (dark), is both a descriptive term and a style of painting originating in the 16th-century. The Italian painter Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610), more simply called

'Caravaggio', developed his dramatic and emotionally powerful approach to painting that employed intense light and shade contrasts (*chiaroscuro*), to create three-dimensional form.

He also used a very naturalistic realism in the drawing and anatomy of the figures in his paintings to emotionally engage the viewer and to create a more believable experience. >

CARAVAGGIO'S TECHNIQUES

While chiaroscuro was used by other painters, such as the Greek born Spanish painter Domenikos Theotokopoulos, known as El Greco (1541-1614), Caravaggio brought tenebrism and Baroque painting to dramatic new heights. Caravaggio's work, and that of his followers, was a strong departure from the highly stylised painting and sculpture that was typical of the 16th century.

Tenebrism played an important spiritual role in the Catholic Counter Reformation of the 16th century in Europe. The highly naturalistic, closely cropped scenes from the Bible were intended to help the viewers feel as though they were truly in the presence of holy figures.

Theologically, tenebrism was a strong Counter Reformation tool, especially in the hands of the artists who followed Caravaggio, such as the Italian Baroque sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680) and the Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), who were both deeply devout Catholics.

As a purely descriptive term, tenebrism is characterised by a dramatic use of chiaroscuro, or light and shade. Middle tones are minimised, and the figurative groups, usually saints and biblical figures, are enveloped in a dark, sombre, shallow space filled with deep shadow. A strong shaft of light is usually used to focus the narrative and identify the actors within it.

IN TENEBRISM, A STRONG SHAFT OF LIGHT IS OFTEN USED TO FOCUS THE NARRATIVE OF THE PAINTING, AND IDENTIFY THE ACTORS WITHIN IT



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TIP
Strong tonality, a limited colour palette and a naturalist approach to drawing creates a sense of realism

LEFT
Jusepe de Ribera, *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, 1634, oil on canvas, 104x113cm
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT
Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Boy Peeling Fruit*, 1592-3, oil on canvas, 63x53cm;
Al Gury uses tenebrism in his work *Portrait of Sarah*, oil on canvas, 35x28cm;
Guido Reni, *Lot and his Daughters Leaving Sodom*, 1615-16, oil on canvas, 111.2x149.2cm

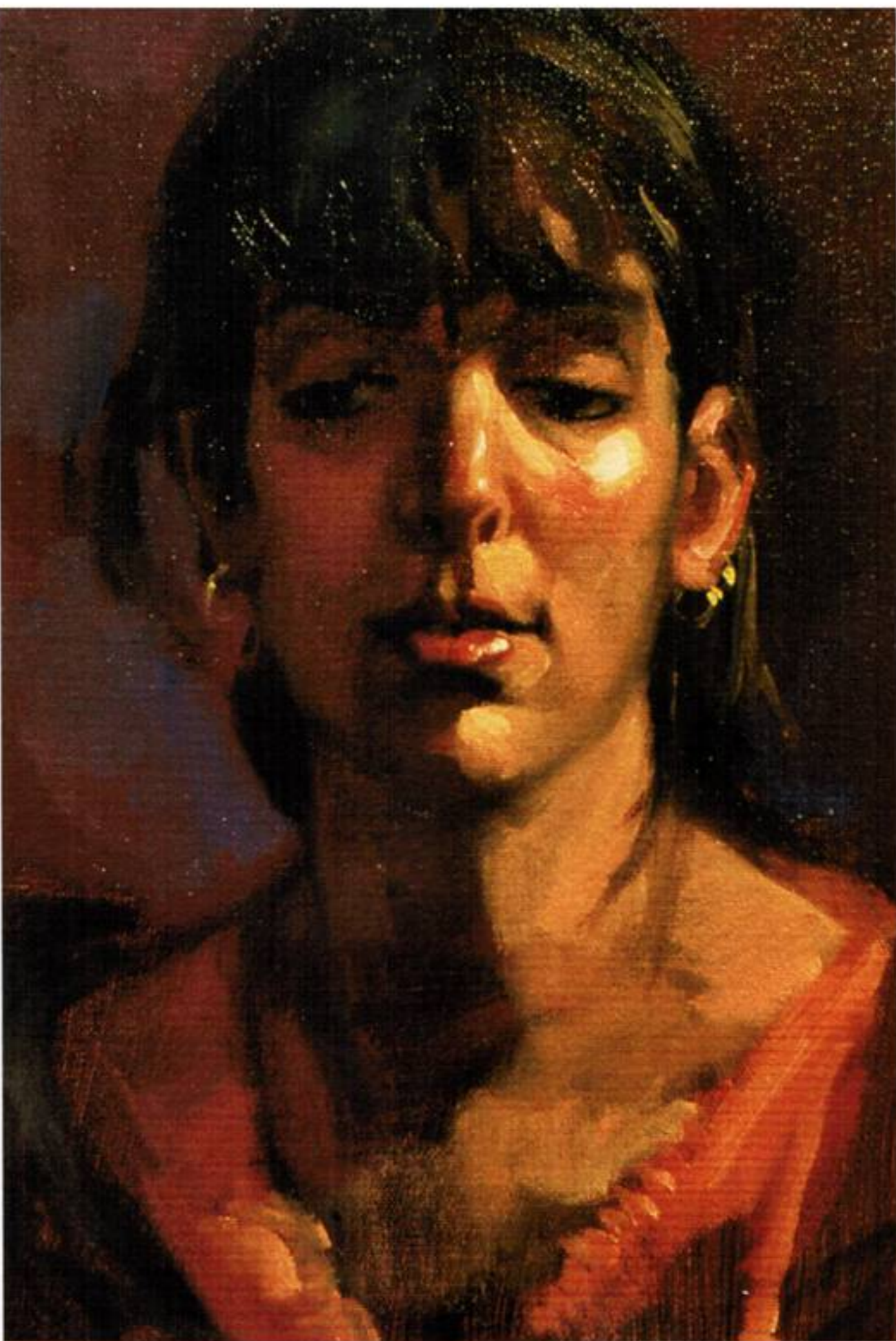
The final effect, when properly executed, is one of intensity, immediacy and realism. As a stylistic, emotional and spiritual approach, tenebrism is a way of creating, composing and narrating a powerful scene meant to strongly effect, and engage the viewer psychologically and spiritually. The deep shadow that envelops the figures is almost an emotional actor in the scene.

The clouded mood of the shading is also a strong presence that controls the character of the image and the feelings of the viewer. The other equally powerful and dramatic part of the ensemble is the stunning light that reveals the tightly organised figural group and helps create a strong sense of form, realism and spirituality.

Caravaggio used life models for his painted characters. Unlike the figures of the popular 16th-century Mannerist movement, Caravaggio focused on the gritty realism of the people in the biblical stories he illuminated, an approach he was often criticised for. To many, this realism was seen as disrespectful to holy figures.

His painting technique was direct and immediate. Unlike the artists who were rooted in the highly intellectualised processes of the High Renaissance and Mannerist movements, who often worked from drawings in the completion of their works, Caravaggio integrated each one of his life models into the composition. Lay figures, wooden or fabric lifelike mannequins, were used to drape fabrics or costumes on.

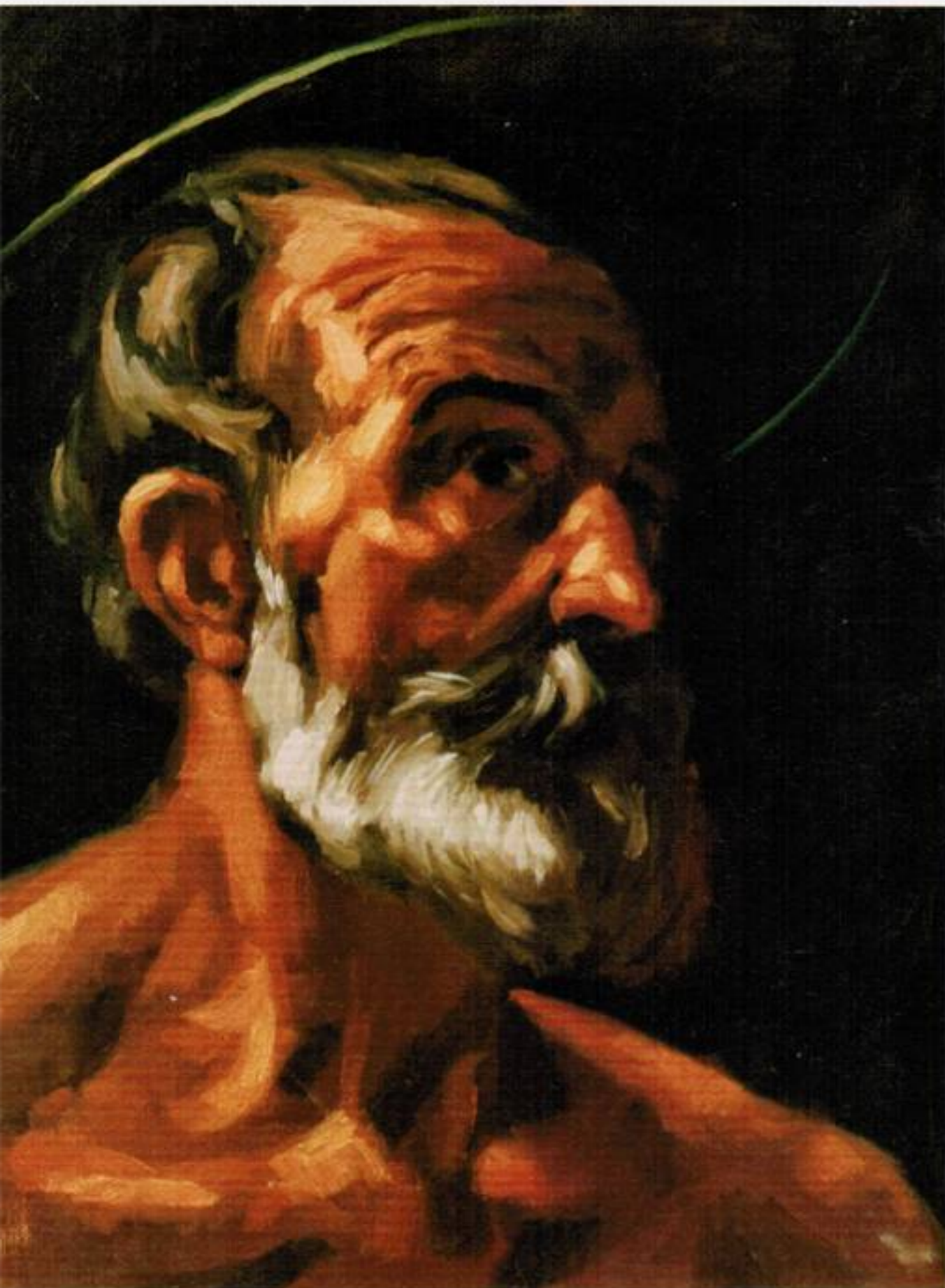
Caravaggio's paint surface was often relatively thin, and was scumbled on and modulated over a loose placement drawing in oil on a toned canvas ground. The dark brown tones of the underpainting and brown ground would show through the surface paint and create shadows. Contrary to the myth of Old Master painting



THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON

being built from many glazes, Caravaggio was a surprisingly direct painter. While his earlier work exhibits more attention to midtones and careful modulation, his later work employs very direct and bold brush work.

These later paintings also reveal more of the brown ground, scumbled paint and direct, alla prima brush work. A superb awareness of observed nature, deft drawing skill, and a



practical limited palette that was used to create a strong sense of form, all facilitated Caravaggio's direct approach.

Caravaggio's palette of Ochre, Umber, Red Oxide, Carbon Black, Lead-Tin Yellow, Vermillion, Verdigris and Lead White, was useful in creating strong forms. His approach to colour, in which each object or area is simply changed from a lighter, brighter colour/tono to a duller, darker, more neutral one is one of the most ancient and simplest strategies for creating form, strong tonality and light and shade.

For Caravaggio, this process was useful in creating the tenebrist structures he became known for. It was a colour strategy which remained dominant, in a variety of forms, in European art until the advent of Impressionism. Today it is commonly used by painters who might be more interested in content and powerful, simple tonal forms, as opposed to colourist or Impressionist approaches.

Caravaggio's painting influenced a whole generation of Baroque artists such as the Spanish painters Jusepe de Ribera (1591-1652), Diego Velázquez (1599-1660), and Italian painter Guido Reni (1575-1642).

ABOVE Al Gury, *Copy of Ribera*, oil on panel, 35x28cm;
RIGHT Al Gury, *Caravaggio Copy, The Taking of Christ*, oil on panel, 30x22cm

The legacy of tenebrism, and the work of Caravaggio's followers, also had a profound influence on the visual choices of many 19th-century French painters such as Eugene Delacroix (1798-1863) and Edouard Manet (1832-1883).

Today, tenebrism, the legacy of Caravaggio and the painters that followed, play a vital role in a variety of humanistic, realistic, social and spiritual presentations of the 21st-century human experience in art.

www.algury.com. *Beyond Caravaggio*, an exhibition of works exploring the influence of Caravaggio on the art of his contemporaries, will be on display at the National Gallery, London from 12 October to 15 January 2017. www.nationalgallery.org.uk

TENEBRISM IN ACTION

In this painting, I exhibit a tenebrist approach. Strong tonality, a limited colour palette, a naturalist approach to drawing and a close compositional focus creates a strong sense of realism.

1 Brush placement of the face is developed on a toned ground of Burnt Umber wash over light brown gesso layer. The primary tone masses of the face have been placed and described in this step.

2 Light is 'scumbled' into the placement. Here the light is not as light in value or as complex in development as it will be in the final step. Yellow Ochre, Burnt Sienna and a touch black with white has been used.

3 Highlights and final darks are added. The highest lights, darkest dark touches and modulations of the middle tones complete the dramatic form and light of the face.

