

IL MARTIRIO DI SANT'ORSOLA [THE MARTYRDOM OF SAINT URSULA] BY CARAVAGGIO



Caravaggio (Michelangelo Merisi)

Milan 1571 - Porto Ercole 1610

Martirio di sant'Orsola [Martyrdom of Saint Ursula], 1610

oil on canvas, 143 x 180 cm

Intesa Sanpaolo Collection

Gallerie d'Italia – Naples

IMAGE AT THE LINK:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/9y9j1j8rxak7983/AACyYhf39xrwDOsZQoGwwpgQa?dl=0>

THE HISTORY

Il *Martirio di sant'Orsola* [The Martyrdom of saint Ursula] is an oil painting on canvas (143 × 180 cm) executed in 1610 by Caravaggio and preserved at the Gallerie d'Italia – Naples, the museum headquarters of Intesa Sanpaolo.

The work is in fact Merisi's last painting, having been made just over a month before his death. Commissioned by Prince Marcantonio Doria (whose family had saint Ursula as its patron saint), the painting was executed by Caravaggio very quickly, probably because he was about to leave for Porto Ercole, where he would have to complete the formalities to be pardoned from the capital ban. It is well known that during that trip the painter met his death. The haste was such that the canvas left the painter's studio still freshly varnished and,

since it was not yet completely dry when it was delivered, some incautious servants exposed it to the sun, a circumstance that caused its difficult conservation.

The work returned to Naples in the first half of the 19th century, coming by inheritance to the Doria branch of the princes of Angri and then, about a century later, to the barons Romani Avezzano d'Eboli, to be finally purchased, as a work by Mattia Preti, by the Banca Commerciale Italiana in 1972.

After a sequence of attributive events, the real authorship of the work and its fundamental historical position were definitively clarified only in 1980, thanks to the discovery, in the Doria D'Angri archives, of a letter written in Naples on 1 May 1610 by Lanfranco Massa, a Genoese citizen and prosecutor in the Neapolitan capital of the Doria family, and addressed to Genoa for Marcantonio Doria, son of Doge Agostino: *"I was thinking of sending you the painting of saint Ursula this week, but to make sure that it was well dried, I placed it in the sun, which rather than drying the varnish it made it even thicker: I want to go to Caravaggio again to get his opinion on what to do so that it does not spoil"*.

The troubles suffered by the canvas over the centuries—damage, enlargements, repainting, which had profoundly altered its legibility and iconographic clarity—were finally remedied by the important restoration promoted by the Bank and conducted between 2003 and 2004 at the Istituto Superiore per la Conservazione ed il Restauro in Rome, which restored the original coherence of the image, now more faithful to the author's intentions. Among the main innovations brought by this complex intervention in the reading of the painting we see the recovery of the arm and of the outstretched hand of a character who tries in vain—with a strong accentuation of the dramatic force of the scene—to stop the arrow shot by the executioner; secondly, the presence, in the background, of a curtain, suggesting a setting in the camp of the Hun king; finally, the silhouettes of a couple of heads behind the plane of the saint.

DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK

As is his custom, Caravaggio departs from the traditional iconography of saint Ursula, generally portrayed only with the symbols of martyrdom and in the company of one or more of her virgin companions. Instead, he chooses to depict the very moment in which the saint, having refused to give herself to the tyrant Attila, is pierced by him with an arrow, giving the scene an exquisitely dramatic tone. The painting is set in Attila's tent, barely discernible thanks to the drapery in the background, which acts almost as a theatrical backdrop. The entire environment, as is customary in Caravaggio's paintings, is permeated by a complex interplay of light and shadow. In this last painting, however, the artist seems to give more advantage to the latter than to the former: it is a mirror of the troubled period that the author was experiencing in the final part of his life.

The first character on the left is Attila himself, depicted in 17th-century clothing; the barbarian has just shot the arrow and seems to have already regretted his gesture. He almost seems to loosen his grip on the bow and his face is contracted in a grimace of pain, almost as if to say, "What have I done?". Not far from him is saint Ursula, pierced by the arrow barely visible on her breast: she is bending her head in that direction, and with her hands she pushes back her chest as if to better see the instrument of her martyrdom. She doesn't seem to feel pain, rather a selfless resignation, but her face and hands—very white compared to those of the other characters—foreshadow her immediate death. In fact, three barbarians, also dressed in modern clothes (one of them even wears iron armour), are rushing to support saint Ursula, and they themselves seem incredulous in front of the sudden and impulsive gesture of their leader. In the features of the one of them who stands behind the saint, Caravaggio has depicted himself with his mouth open and a painful expression: he seems to receive the wound together with her.