In some respects Rubens and Caravaggio are unlikely bedfellows; nonetheless, their slight entanglement helped to create the heart of modern painting. It is safe to say that our sense of fullness and expansiveness which we believe to be the core of what painting is about comes from Rubens' realization of Caravaggio's promise. Caravaggio (fig. 7) fused the spatial and emotional diversity of Renaissance painting into a powerful and accessible source of pictorial energy, and Rubens (fig. 8) quickly took advantage of Caravaggio's effort. The result was painting whose sense of wholeness appeared to yield more than the sum of its parts.

In effect, Rubens actually did something about what everyone at the end of the sixteenth century was worrying about: he made something manageable and fruitful out of Roman and Venetian painting. It was not really a synthesis; it was more like an explosion of imaginatively perceived possibilities, pushing painting out in all directions. In the process of setting seventeenth-century art on course, Rubens kept Caravaggio's classicism intact; he made the inventive quirkiness of Mannerist space coherent; and he rescued Venetian materialism. This last effort was no mean feat. In fact, today many applaud Rubens' enrichment of our understanding of Titian as a significant accomplishment, confident that the best painting of the modern era can find sanctions in Venetian painterliness. Be that as it may, Rubens took Titian's late work into his own hands and calmly constrained the pulsating saturation of its vaunted brushstrokes. He put movement and physicality into the textured surface of Venetian atmosphere in a way that made the density of its glazed color accessible to the future.

However, it may turn out that what Rubens did for Tintoretto and Veronese was more important than what he did for Titian; that is, what Rubens did for the extension of Venetian pictorial space may turn out to be more important than what he did for Venetian color. Turner and Monet may owe more to Rubens' enlarged painterly space than to his rich painterly colorism.

Nor is it an accident that Rubens picked up on the bluntness and directness of Caravaggio's use of oil painting technique. More than anything Caravaggio wanted to free painting from the frescoed restraints of architecture. He wanted the canvas he worked on to define the limits of pictorial space; he wanted to create the illusion of real presence in his own "real space." Nowhere is this more apparent than in Caravaggio's painting of the young St. John in the Capitoline Museum. The compelling success of this painting touts flesh that is real and painting at the same time. Rubens could not have missed it. When de Kooning said "Flesh was the reason why oil painting was invented," he said it for the leap that Caravaggio and Rubens made as well as for the step that Raphael and Michelangelo could not quite take.

In the end, though, what unites Rubens and Caravaggio more than anything else seems to be the common inspiration both found in Raphael's work. If we add the *Transfiguration* now in the Vatican collection to the painted *stanze* already in the Vatican building, we see pictorial effort in Rome that is of such focused intensity and so fraught with painterly possibilities that it dominates most of the work that surrounded and succeeded it. Painters as wonderful as the mannerist Michelangelo, Rosso Fiorentino, Bronzino, Parmigianino, and the Carracci had a lot to say, but when compared with Raphael they somehow fail to speak to the heart of the

Figure 7 CARAVAGGIO
Supper at Emmaus (c. 1600–01)
Oil on canvas, 54¾ × 76¾ in.
Reproduced courtesy of the Trustees, The National Gallery, London

Figure 8 PETER PAUL RUBENS
Descent from the Cross (c. 1610)
Oil on panel, 13 ft. 9 in. × 10 ft. 2 in.
Koninkjijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp

matter. In many respects their efforts did not contribute as much to painting's subsequent growth as did the ideas that Caravaggio and Rubens grasped in Raphael.

In one sense Caravaggio and Rubens will always stand out: they were great builders on the past. Out of an instinctive sense of responsibility about the nature of art, they provided a firm pictorial base for their successors. Perhaps they knew that they would have to leave behind for their successors what Raphael had left for them. In this connection we have to assume Raphael's paramount importance as an influence on Caravaggio, in spite of some evidence to the contrary, especially if we are to account for the extent of Caravaggio's success and the direct communication of that success to Rubens. That is, we have to assume that both Rubens and Caravaggio got the message of Raphael's aggressive pictoriality, and that succeeding reforms and distractions in the development of sixteenth-century painting did not confuse them. Certainly the Caravaggio paintings of St. Matthew in the Contarelli Chapel have an inspired clarity that harks back to Raphael. A similar clarity in the early work of Rubens sings out with praise of Raphael.

Although Walter Friedlander soft-pedals Caravaggio's relationship to Raphael, merely noting in a discussion of the *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* that it is "evident here that Caravaggio had made a careful study of Raphael's *stanze*," we should perhaps be more aggressive about Caravaggio's debt to Raphael. While there is no doubt that the sources of the *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* are multiple, and in the opinion of many distinctly Venetian, still I think we can favor Roman over Venetian sources. Raphael's tapestry of the *Stoning of Saint Stephen,* for example, is probably a good source for some of the compositional outline of the *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew.* The two corner figures in the tapestry are much the same as the corner figures in the *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew,* and the sprawling angels occupy roughly similar positions in each work. But more important, the persistent sense of déjà vu in the Saint Matthew paintings always brings us around to Raphael.

It is not surprising that Caravaggio should quote Raphael, but it would be interesting to know how and why he looked to Raphael so often. Part of the answer might lie in the notion of perfection. Caravaggio was exceptional as a painter in every way, and he must have known early on that it was in his hands to paint perfect pictures. As he became more conscious of his ability, he must have looked around Rome. Painting there toward the end of the sixteenth century was not very strong, and Raphael would have stood out. It is easy to imagine Caravaggio looking to Raphael's ideas for excitement and inspiration, while at the same time trying to improve on them. We get a strong sense of Caravaggio running his models through Raphael's paces. It is not difficult to imagine a living tableau created in Caravaggio's studio after a visit to the Vatican *stanze,* replaying his favorite painting of that day.

It may seem presumptuous to think of Caravaggio toying with Raphael rather than emulating him, but Caravaggio, after all, was a creator and not an imitator, and it is reasonable, given Caravaggio's gifts and temperament, to see him trying to pull Raphael together while attempting at the same time to fill him out. Raphael was a great, but busy, artist. There is a disjointedness and many-handedness in a lot of his work that Caravaggio was bound to react to. On the other hand, there is a spark to Raphael's space-creating gestures that Caravaggio would never forget.

Caravaggio's basic drive was to perfect Raphael, to give coherent expression to the pictorial ideas Raphael had splashed all over Rome. In this effort, he intended to fulfill the promise of Renaissance painting and to effect the rebuilding of sixteenth-century Italian painting that seemed so necessary to everyone after the death of the divine Michelangelo. Caravaggio instigated his redevelopment program in a startling and fastidious manner: he created a visual norm for the representation of figurative reality, followed, in turn,

by an enframing technique that allowed for the coherent containment of that reality. In this regard the obvious originality of the *Narcissus* in the Palazzo Corsini and the *Conversion of Saint Paul* in Santa Maria del Popolo present themselves as ready examples.

Until the invention of photography, Caravaggio's first norm reigned as the rule for figurative representation, while his supplemental norm reinforcing pictorial coherence still bounds our painterly definitions of wholeness. This accomplishment points out that Raphael and the greatness of Renaissance painting in general were flawed in two significant ways. First, Caravaggio makes us realize that Renaissance painting had a hard time putting figures together, grouping them in a convincing pictorial way. There was a tendency to make the figures appear real one at a time, to allow them to function individually, but no effort was made to make them "real" together. The sense of figurative grouping was basically stilted, even though individual figures might appear almost natural. Second, Caravaggio found Renaissance pictorial space surprisingly awkward. It really needed a better method of enclosure: a more coherent, more generous, and more flexible container. Caravaggio saw the pictorial space in Raphael's painting as disjointed, episodic, and dangerously thin. As a successor to Renaissance painting, Caravaggio knew he would have to provide spatial boundaries for painting that would be characterized by greater coherence and freedom. He expected this emphasis on spatial coherence to provide a more convincing, more naturalistic grouping of figures and figurative action, and he expected this emphasis on spatial freedom to provide a provocative, expandable sense of pictorial space—a space that would belong truly to painting alone, that would ensure the freedom of painting's singular development: a freedom from antique sculpture, from architecture, and from (in his eyes) the misguided Mannerist search for compositional exoticism.

Raphael's *Transfiguration* in the Vatican Pinacoteca (plate 5) is an astounding, brilliant painting. It has been scrupulously cleaned and now appears overilluminated by a rhapsodic, dawn-breaking blue that reveals a mélange of figures hysterically pointing to the accomplishment of painting disguised as the transfigured Christ. As the Vatican *Transfiguration* calls our attention both to the soul of Renaissance painting and to Raphael's accomplishment, its agitation brings to mind an apt opposite—Caravaggio's *Madonna of the Rosary* in Vienna (plate 6). Although the existence of pyramidal, carousel-like qualities in the two paintings implies connection and continuity, a terrible sense of completeness accompanies the calm of Caravaggio's painting, ensuring its separateness. The aura of finality suggests that Caravaggio is about to lower the curtain not only on his own painting, but also on the accomplishments and joys of all sixteenth-century painting.

There is a wistfulness in the *Madonna of the Rosary* that acknowledges the end of the line. Caravaggio knows how far he has taken Raphael and how far he has brought himself; the world of Renaissance painting and its antique baggage have been put to rest. After 1600 returns to the antique would risk revivalism and nostalgia. These deadly twins would haunt seventeenth-century painting, and the measure of great painting in that century always had to account for their presence. In this case less was truly more, Rembrandt being, in every sense, the best example.

The *Madonna of the Rosary* is basically a Janus-like, two-faced painting. In a figurative sense its front face looks out over its past, Renaissance painting of the sixteenth century, and its rear face looks toward its future, toward Baroque painting of the seventeenth century. The reason the Madonna is able to accomplish this miracle is that a mirrored version of her face masks the back of her head. When we look at this painting we feel that if we could walk into it and move around behind the figures posing there, we would find their mirror images facing us! But we can never get

behind them; the space that presents itself to us so invitingly suddenly resists penetration. Here the nature of painting spars with the nature of perception. Naturally we would prefer the situation to be more normal, less volatile. We want to move into the painting, to walk around the figures and see what we expect to see, the backs of the figures who were facing us and the faces of the figures who were turned away. But Caravaggio makes sure that this does not happen. Outwardly he is very generous; the space is inviting, almost real, yet Caravaggio's illusionism remains elusive. The harder we press to get our bearings, the more inconclusive our readings become. By insisting on its two-facedness, the *Madonna of the Rosary* remains a surface—an ambiguous one to be sure, but still a double-sided illusion whose thinness confounds. With a surface as slick as a transparent decal Caravaggio contradicts the authority of chiaroscuro, reminding us that no matter how successful it may be, illusionism is still a one-way, dead-end street.

There is another contradiction inherent in this painting; its immense calm and composure emit conflicting signals. We would expect the serene pictorial effect of the *Madonna of the Rosary* to present a coherent message, with a warm, understandable afterglow. In the end this may actually happen, but before we can feel this we have to unscramble the painting's forward, searching glances: we have to face the unpleasant problems of architecture and sculpture. In themselves they are enough of a trial for painting, but in the sixteenth century they were weighted with the adornment of antique idealism, making the life of painting even more difficult.

In the *Madonna of the Rosary* Caravaggio faces these problems head on. The result is a beautiful base for seventeenth-century painting to build on, and nowhere is it more noticeable than in the work of Rubens. Of course, this is hardly surprising when we recall that Rubens and other painters as well helped find this particular painting a home in Antwerp.

But what is more important for us, the *Madonna of the Rosary* reaches beyond the seventeenth century, speaking directly to painting today about fullness and volume. Caravaggio must have seen that the biggest problem in Raphael's work lay in the silhouette-like character of its figuration. Raphael's figures function as trompe-l'oeil cutouts, bright on the front with a blank, black side turned away from the viewer. This means that painting before Caravaggio was a lot darker and flatter than we had perceived it to be. This realization might help to explain why we feel that in the process of rounding out painting, Caravaggio did not create anywhere near the amount of darkness that his contemporaries imagined. In fact, we are more inclined to believe that his chiaroscuro effects may have actually lightened seventeenth-century painting.

In effect, Caravaggio was trying to create a greater sense of tactile space between his figures, and at the same time to illuminate that newly created space with reflected light from the hidden but brilliantly rounded back sides of these figures. This effort creates an open, lit spaciousness in which pigment and gesture can perform without limits, a space that is real enough to allow Caravaggio's confrontational mode of address to seem plausible. This is important because even in great painting preceding Caravaggio, such as that of Botticelli and Rogier van der Weyden, silhouetted thinness and a hidden, unperceived darkness sometimes distance pictorial impact.

When Caravaggio relit the half-rounded, silhouette-like character of sixteenth-century figuration, he revealed the uniqueness of painting. Painting is always face forward, always confrontational. There is no reverse or back side to painting. Bad paintings (that is, paintings that are less than they should be) are bland and dark on the reverse, while good paintings pull themselves miraculously inside out to ensure their forward-looking presence as we imagine ourselves moving around them. Good paintings always seem to face the viewer, turning effortlessly as we try to slip behind them to test their illusionism. But more than that, from any

Plate 5 RAPHAEL
The Transfiguration (1518–20)
Oil on panel, 13 ft. 3¾ in. × 9 ft. 1½ in.
Pinacoteca, Vatican Museums, Rome

Plate 6 CARAVAGGIO
The Madonna of the Rosary (c. 1605–07)
Oil on canvas, 11 ft. 11½ in. × 8 ft. 4 in.
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Plate 7 ANNIBALE CARRACCI
The Assumption of the Virgin (c. 1600–01)
Oil on panel, 96 7/16 × 61 in.
Church of S. Maria del Popolo, Rome

Plate 8 MARATTA
Immaculate Conception (1686)
Fresco in Cybo Chapel
Church of S. Maria del Popolo, Rome

vantage point the hidden and apparently blank parts of good painting never appear lifeless or dark. Great painting creates space and spreads the light.

The background of the *Madonna of the Rosary* dominates the painting. It takes over the top third of the painting, where a huge red drape obviously alluding to antique sculpture is tied around an equally large fluted column alluding, we assume, to antique architecture. What are we to make of these allusions to the antique? Our most immediate reaction makes us wonder why the structural core of the painting refers to sculpture and architecture rather than to painting. It is true that references to the antique are bound to exclude painting, since few concrete examples of antique painting have survived, but we feel something more purposeful happening here than exclusion by circumstance.

Although it may be a little hard to see in reproductions, the molding running under and behind the red drape describes a curved wall as the painting's background. This niche clearly reinforces the sculptural emphasis of the painting and lends some support to our notion of the painting's desire to both pivot and turn itself inside out, in much the same way as a hand-held playing card bent into a cylinder might wish to spin and then to snap itself back and forth from convexity to concavity. The niche is a touch of Caravaggio at his very best, using the artificial to enhance the real. In addition, he alerts us to what has happened to painting's relationship to architecture and sculpture. Before and during the sixteenth century, painting was at the service of architecture, decorating its walls and adorning its altars. But here in the *Madonna of the Rosary* architecture appears to be a figurative rather than a literal background for the activity of painting. The message is clear: pictorial concerns come first. In fact, they may now have become the only concerns. The decorative, ornamental, and spatial encroachments of architecture are really done away with, simply absorbed into the background. The presence of architecture, once a competitive, patronizing reality, is turned into a fiction of scenic backdrops. In a way, Caravaggio put architecture back into its antique place. Roman domestic wall painting culled many of its architectural backgrounds and enframements from stage designs, and Caravaggio seems to have sensed this link; in any event it appears that he deliberately dimmed architecture with artificial lighting and moved it backstage so that it would not interfere with pictorial drama.

To put Caravaggio's argument with architecture into exaggerated relief, we simply have to compare the *Madonna of the Rosary* with almost any coherent section from the ceilings of the Sistine Chapel or the Farnese Gallery. The calm and dignity that Caravaggio won for painting, to say nothing of the uniqueness and power of its self-contained pictoriality, stand out as an eloquent statement against the frenzied, self-mutilating contortions that Michelangelo and Annibale Carracci forced painting to perform in the service of architecture. As inventive and beautiful as the ceilings are, they do not seem to have been accessible to the development of painting in the way that the *Madonna of the Rosary* was. For example, everything great in nineteenth-century French painting from David to Manet seems to have been touched by the Madonna's pointing finger and the Christ Child's pleased glance.

Again, Caravaggio's assertion is clear: illusionism is to be the servant of reality, not of illustrational virtuosity; but the quality of the competition raises doubts. Can we really dismiss Michelangelo and Annibale out of hand? There is pictorial power on the Sistine and Farnese ceilings, but it lies there inaccessible and untapped. Is this the price that painting must pay for deferring to the decorative and illusionistic needs of architecture, or is it just circumstance? Was Caravaggio merely an alternative, or did he indeed point to a better way?

Part of the answer might lie in the red drape hanging over the head of the *Madonna of the Rosary*—a stone curtain cantilevered over the head of painting. Caravaggio knew that sculpture dogged painting in much the same way that architecture did; he knew that real freedom and a real future for painting could be found only in the creation of its own space. But he also knew that within that new space, sculpture—both antique and medieval—was still making its presence felt. It seemed to be a question of making the figures in sixteenth-century painting relate to each other in a convincing, pictorial, nonsculptural way. In Raphael, for example, the figures still stand separate from each other even though there is a purposeful attempt to weave them together in a manner reminiscent of antique sculpture. We get the feeling that Raphael had the serpentine gestures of *Laocoön* in mind to tie his subjects together. This separateness in Raphael was a restatement in newer terms of a problem that had existed in, say, Botticelli and Crivelli, where we feel the individualizing presence of medieval painted sculpture so strongly.

These sculptural connections did not hurt painting in any serious way, but they did distance it from the viewer, and one suspects from its makers also. To get things right, Caravaggio made a big leap. In the *Madonna of the Rosary* he created the standards for classic composition. He must have realized that the biggest problem was not the cold hardness of sculpture, or its inertness, or its limited potential for movement and expression. Sculpture's problem, rather, was a limiting individuality, an inherent oneness, which restricted the possibilities for successful grouping. Sculpture was limited by its inability to be more than one thing, to do more than set one scene. Caravaggio could not have helped noticing that story telling in stone had to resort to relief and repetitive sequential extension. All over Rome, the sides of sarcophagi and triumphal columns revealed the narrative and dramatic inadequacies of sculpture.

But more than anything else Caravaggio must have sensed something equally inadequate about the late sixteenth century practice of painting, especially about the use of models in the studio. Something about everyday drawing from sculpture and from the model must have seemed misguided. Perhaps he was struck by the fact that it did not make much difference whether the models were flesh or stone; the results were always the same—that is, the paintings were dominated by separate images apparently compressed and juxtaposed rather than successfully woven into a whole. Paintings would inevitably be awkward and artificial if they were put together one piece, one gesture, one person, one statue at a time, especially if they had to accommodate themselves to a setting determined by measured perspective. Caravaggio sensed that the figurative action within the painting had to be coherent from the beginning. He also knew that what went on within the painting had to be plausible and engaging outside of the painting—that is, outside of its surface. He understood the projective imperative of pictorial drama. Perhaps Caravaggio was trying to highlight the differences in pictorial impact between Venetian and Roman painting by deliberately contrasting the public character of formal theater seen in Tintoretto and Veronese with the private character of cabaret theater created in his own studio.

How did Caravaggio enframe a "living theater" in which we see paint and feel flesh? We can only guess. The models seem to be crucial: Caravaggio was successful in making his models perform, making them do something more than merely pose. The result was a happy one—convincing pictorial drama emitting a powerful psychological resonance. We are easily engulfed by Caravaggio's painting because the models we see in front of us acknowledge themselves and each other. We sense a living group rather than individuals artificially assembled to tell a story. This togetherness at the expense of separateness accounts for the stunning quality of the *Madonna of the Rosary*. We feel that we can merge effortlessly into the picture, into any body that presents itself to our attention. Every glance out of the picture is inviting, and every bit of eye contact within the painting is supportive and reassuring. This is a painting of enormous stability and generosity.

Caravaggio found a way to use his models that would have impressed even Manet. The models live many roles in the *Madonna of the Rosary:* they are saints, they are themselves, they are their own creators, they are their own audience, and best of all, if we just look, they are we. Here we feel the true liberation provided by art. We can sense being something, someone, other than ourselves. We feel, as well, that if our eyes are alert and our senses are fully functional we can glean understanding, perhaps even knowledge, from painting.

Rubens was probably the greatest student of Italian painting we will ever encounter. It seems reasonable to assume that he got the basic message of Caravaggio's painting in Rome. Caravaggio said that painting in the sixteenth century, great as it may have been, was compromised by a spatial sensibility that was accommodating and artificial, rather than independent and real. Artists before Caravaggio made space in which they could tell a story or set an action, but the pictorial space only lived to tell that story or to contain that particular action. In effect, they came up with illustrational accommodations that seemed limited to each depicted event—a useful technique, but not a functional pictorial sensibility capable of flexibility and expansion. In a word, sixteenth-century Italian painting, Roman or Venetian, was always limited to the actual surface it worked on—fresco, slate, panel, or canvas. Caravaggio liberated painting from its literal surface and made pictorial space the surface for his action, for his pigmented figuration. This is the springboard for Rubens' modern painterliness. We can see it developing in the Chiesa Nova in Rome (fig. 9), where as a young man Rubens attacked the problem of establishing his painterly identity not once but twice, first on canvas and then on slate, in what now seems like a determined effort to both dissolve and surround the surface of sixteenth-century Italian painting with a holographic imprint of pigment.

Caravaggio's ability to convince us that he was able to paint on a suspended imaginary surface rather than on a literal, anchored one is probably what endears him most to our modern sensibility. Here he speaks to abstract painting. What painting wants more than anything else is working space—space to grow with and expand into, pictorial space that is capable of direction and movement, pictorial space that encourages unlimited orientation and extension. Painting does not want to be confined by boundaries of edge and surface. It knows from the experience of Caravaggio that if its working space is perceived as real and palpably present, the depicted action will have a chance—it will have room to move and breathe. This is why Caravaggio appears so casual and untroubled, and Annibale Carracci so tortured and unsure. Caravaggio knew that a live, real, extendable, and expandable pictorial space would absorb anything. The competing critical issues of the day, naturalism and idealism, did not mean so much to him; he could entertain both issues with ease. He had plenty of room at his fingertips.

If we backtrack a bit to Raphael's *Deposition* in the Borghese Gallery (fig. 10), we can see the interests of Rubens and Caravaggio coming together again. This is in many ways a typical Renaissance painting. It has an antique cast to its atmosphere and a somewhat symmetrical and linear feel to its organization, but the dominant feeling here is a very painterly one. We could do worse than guess that Caravaggio and Rubens were very attracted to this quality in Raphael's work. Certainly the most striking thing about Raphael's *Deposition* is a painterliness revealed by the sustained chiaroscuro effect of the figuration. This is a very rich painting; there is a full gestural expressiveness that sweeps back and forth across the panel. The splendor of figurative definition is augmented by a surfeit of color, and this in turn reinforces the painting's compositional armature in a refined, powerful way. The color travels from one edge of the painting to its opposite, holding up Christ's dead body on one side while on the other it successfully blends the supporting cast of figures into a blue-green landscape.

Figure 9 PETER PAUL RUBENS
Madonna among a Glory of Angels (1608)
Oil on slates
Church of S. Maria in Vallicella, Rome

Figure 10 RAPHAEL
The Deposition (1507)
Oil on panel, 72½ × 69¼ in.
Galleria Borghese, Rome

In fact, the color in this painting is so dominant and so visible that it reminds us that color was not the sole prerogative of the Venetians during the sixteenth century. This painting and the *Madonna of the Rosary* are good examples of the fact that Rubens was forcefully exposed to color in a way that was compellingly different from his early experience with Titian. It is safe to say that what might be called Roman color—the substantial color of Raphael and Caravaggio—combined with Rubens' innate fluidity is one of the things that made Rubens' early work so special. It is tempting when we grasp these influences to see Rubens as the last great Roman painter, but in the end it is probably simpler and more accurate to call him the last great Italian painter.

It is in the *Deposition*'s dramatic figurative grouping that Raphael points to the future, engaging the best of his successors such as Rubens, Caravaggio, and Géricault. In the landscaped background Raphael dismisses the Renaissance. This essentially outmoded, naively depicted area of the *Deposition* shows us something that is probably lost forever to painting—a kind of deep, soft, receding space. The foreground dirt slips like a carpet under a host of planted feet and gradually rises to the horizon, transposing itself along the way into a mossy medieval lawn. Here Raphael provides an elegant tie between foreground and background, making the weeds and wildflowers that align themselves across the bottom of the painting catch in scale the trees and crosses outlined against the horizon. It is a pity that this kind of oscillating depth and incongruous detailing have disappeared from painting; it appears we believe with Vasari that it is the drama of figurative action rather than the subtlety of spatial perception that made Renaissance painting so gripping. At least, this is what comes through in Géricault's copy of the *Deposition,* where Raphael's weeds are among the first things to disappear. Yet Rubens, untroubled by Géricault's modifications, must have sensed Raphael as a source of Caravaggio's insight that complete pictorial drama must express the integration of spatial and figurative vitality.

But somehow pictorial space is always perceived by us as a problem for Rubens. He is often damned with praise as a great designer. His facility seems almost to have been a handicap; his line and his brushstroke, as sure and as inventive as any that have ever graced a surface, seem to be able to manipulate space but not to create it. The mature figurative paintings of Rubens seem spatially conventional—all the more so coming from the hand of such a powerful artist. It is almost as if we want to hold it against Rubens that he did not paint the *Raft of the "Medusa"* (fig. 11), even though it is obvious that Géricault could not have done it without Rubens' example and inspiration. The conventional description of Géricault's painting as half-Caravaggio and half-Rubens does not entirely miss the point. Rubens really had everything necessary to make this kind of painting, but he could not quite bring himself to rack and test pictorial space the way Caravaggio and Géricault were able to when the necessity arose.

Another important aspect of Rubens' painting has to do with our perception of reality in painting. Once Rubens steps into his own domain in his middle and late paintings he begins to dig into the heart of this matter, separating himself decisively from Italian painting. In *The Miracles of Saint Francis Xavier* and *The Miracles of Saint Ignatius of Loyola* (see plates 11 and 12) a confident, purposeful "artificiality" drives painting, creating a pictorial power that challenges us but somehow fails to win us over. Perhaps this is because we are still emotionally attached to sixteenth-century Italian painting, which at its best displays moments of poignant, palpable reality that we cannot experience anywhere else.

Raphael and Caravaggio bracket artists such as Correggio, Andrea del Sarto, and the Carracci. They all have one thing in common: an ability to reach us without raising any doubts about what art or painting should be. With Rubens

Figure 11 THÉODORE GÉRICAULT
The Raft of the "Medusa" (1818–19)
Oil on canvas, 16 ft. 1 in. × 23 ft. 6 in.
Musée du Louvre, Paris

this never happens. Although he can be very moving, even provocative, we feel that he is always elaborating and controlling the action; it never just happens in front of us. For some reason Rubens stepped back at the height of his powers and took a critical look at both Italian painting and his own youthful ambitions. He then decided to move away from it all. In Antwerp, he began quietly to carve art from the granite of his own pictorial imagination rather than from the Italianate marble of real presence.

The God-like nature of creation in painting resides in the ability to make a painting that has enough lifelike qualities to keep it alive. In the best moments of sixteenth-century Italian painting, there were always enough of these moments to make it clear that projective reality was the goal of painting and that the job of the artist was to effect successful self-effacement, both of his personality and his craft. This, it seems obvious, is the nature of pictorial illusionism—to make the action surrounded and created by painting seem real, and to make the creator of that action and activity seem remote.

Painting has always wanted to be real, and by 1600 in Italy it had the means to do it. It had possession of a convincing illusionism. In the face of this accomplishment, Rubens chose to stress artificiality at the expense of reality. He deliberately called attention to himself and his craft and then set out on a desperate adventure. His endeavor was sparked by the realization that he was undoubtedly the first artist to have seen and understood enough real art, other than his own, to allow his perceptions of art to compete seriously with his perceptions of reality. He believed he could bring to the activity of painting itself an imagination that would rival the depicted reality Italian painting had brought to the experience of art. In the process of acting on his belief Rubens fulfilled the Romantic dream; he made imagination overcome truth.

Essentially Rubens came to believe that he could make painting about painting. To support his intentions he called on a pictorial imagination broader than any that had emerged from the sixteenth century (and this was not a century, we must remember, of narrow pictorial vision). He worked to create painting based on the reality garnered from other paintings and also based on what he perceived to be the reality drawn from his own activity in the process of making painting. The results of his effort have yielded much of our definition of great painting.

Painting before Rubens had a basic conventional notion of reality—the existence of a significant contemporary or historical event that painting could capture. There was never any attempt in Italian painting to suggest that ultimately the actual event depicted had not been decisively and importantly real. In Rubens this core was abandoned; the connection was broken. From Rubens on, the artist would have to carry an extra burden: meaningful expression and emotion would have to be based on an enlargement of the artist's imagination, not simply on an honest attempt at a connection to real events, coupled with a competent acknowledgment of past and recent painting. In essence, no painter would ever try again to bring Christ back in the manner of Botticelli or Caravaggio; rather, he would feel compelled to give us a "moving" picture of Christ in the manner of Rubens, Velásquez, and Manet. He would have to account expressively for the known totality of the pictorial past. We can see that this trade-off—the historical past for the pictorial past—is no great bargain for the painter: one problematic idea of the past is simply substituted for another. After 1600 reality would be doomed to revelation by inspired illustration rather than by the creation of palpable presence, and reality's pictorial future would depend on the artistic ability to raise illustration to the level of art. Here fate played into the waiting hands of Rubens; with his genius we witness illustration being raised *above* the level of art.

A nice example of what Rubens' break with the Italian sensibility meant to the future of painting can be seen in a comparison of Rubens' copy of Caravaggio's *Entombment* with Géricault's copy of the same painting. Rubens' painting is a wonderful transposition which creates a small, compact oil

sketch out of a large, dramatic tour de force. He is working with painting about painting, not with, as had been the case before, painting following painting. The first thing we notice is a difference in atmosphere and feeling. It is not that there is any lessening of emotional contact or involvement, or a wandering of religious attention; it is simply that the sources of emotion and religious feeling are taken for granted to lie in Caravaggio's painting, not in Christ's entombment. Here we see the use of artificial pictorial sources, sources based on the reality that can be found in a painting rather than on actual experience, past or present.

Géricault's work resembles what we would call a copy. But here Géricault seems to be doing something more than practicing; there is an effort to capture the intensity and drama of Caravaggio's *Entombment* for himself. Géricault feels a need to test Caravaggio's space to see if it is as real, as electric and accessible, as it seems. In a sense all artists have to do what Géricault did before they can execute the license of Rubens. They have to check back, to touch base with Italian painting; they have to make sure that they can recognize pictorial reality.

Some broad questions about painting arise from this discussion about Rubens and Caravaggio. Why should we worry so much about painting at the beginning of the seventeenth century? What can painting today hope to find in the painting of Caravaggio and Rubens? And finally, why do I put so much emphasis on the spatial character of these paintings? The answers and, in some sense, the origins of the questions themselves lie in the churches of Rome. In these churches painting makes itself felt in a way that painters—really artists of any kind—simply cannot ignore. Standing in the middle of Chiesa Nova, the artist cannot help but ask himself, "Why don't my paintings look like this—like Barocci, Caravaggio, and Rubens?"

Consider painting today—Chia, Clemente, and Cucchi; Frankenthaler, Noland, and Olitski; Francis, Kelly, and Youngerman. Are they really different from Barocci, Caravaggio, and Rubens, and more important, are the differences among them as meaningful as the differences among Barocci, Caravaggio, and Rubens? The answers are probably affirmative: yes, painters today are different, and yes, the differences among painters today are meaningful and interesting. The big difference, the one we seem to have the hardest time adjusting to, lies in the way we are forced to look at these artists—the difference between our museums and their churches. However uninspired their churches are, they are never as ugly as our museums. We become aware of something ironic in this situation: the artists we praise, the artists who helped make it possible to have an art of the museums, the artists who gave us the great art of the seventeenth century, are the ones who indirectly made an end to the church as a natural repository for art. The better the artist (for example, Caravaggio and Rubens), the more they created their own space, literally and figuratively, at the expense of the space of the church. The worse the artist (for example, Carlo Maratta or Pietro da Cortona), the more they attempted to accommodate painting to the realities of church space.

In a way, the churches of Rome prepare the way for the demise of seventeenth-century Italian painting. We can already trace in these churches the dissolution of sixteenth-century Italian painting's spatial clarity, in whose place we see a morass of illustrational muralism that almost automatically denies any possibility of real pictorial presence. The only possible presence seems to be a theatrical one. The search for pictorial drama lies at the heart of the Baroque sensibility, but in seventeenth-century Italian painting the growth of mere dramatic presence and florid illustrational technique showed just how fragile and vulnerable this sensibility could be.

It may not be a new idea that by the beginning of the eighteenth century pictorial space had become afflicted with the sores of decoration and illustration, but it is worth noting that we can see a similar pathology developing in the space of twentieth-century abstraction. The limited, difficult space of Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian, Pollock, and Newman has degenerated into the self-effacing, almost nonpictorial space of 1970s abstraction. Recent painting appears to have resolved spatial problems in such a way that various unruly elements, such as the boxy depth of Cubism, the constricted linearity of nonobjective painting, and the optical flatness of hard-edge painting, have been tidied up by a burst of illustrative superficiality. The result is an easy-to-read, inert space, refined by a heavily pigmented surface and cropped to convenient but often intensely a-pictorial shapes. As if this were not enough, whatever spatial vitality is left is rendered oppressively dull by the application of close-valued color. These paintings have surface coherence at the expense of pictorial energy.

Some of the best abstract painting of the last twenty years is beginning to betray itself as a direct descendant of the illustrative surface decoration so profusely produced by Carlo Maratta, Pietro da Cortona, and Luca Giordano. The prim, decorative presentation of acrylic paint on tidy rectangles is probably what has made so many young artists dislike what they call formalist abstraction. Their diagnosis may not be all that bad, but their suggestions for treatment seem to do little for the patient. The interesting thing is that sometimes in the midst of manipulating contrived messages, young painters create pictorial awkwardnesses that do not totally echo the compositional norms of modern painting; that is, they do with petulant, naive energy what "courageous," studied formalist experimentation is supposed to be doing. But then, most formalist abstraction is so heavily edited with the canvas shears in order to find the picture, to create that ineffable consensual sense of wholeness, that it is not hard to imagine the awkward, potentially fruitful parts being thrown away. In any event, it is painful to see some of the most powerful and promising painterly techniques of the 1960s transformed into a fashionable trompe l'oeil spatter which now merely measures the depth of pigmented gels.

Illustration has always been the easy way to enlist audience sympathy. It is the easy way to become an artist, but it is an almost impossible way to make paintings. We should bear this in mind when our excitement soars in front of the heady displays of current International Expressionism. Realist painting today is built on a retrograde base of Surrealist illusionism. The incongruity-based illustrational technique that is so deftly and so extensively wielded today in the name of realism still yields a pictorial space that is less challenging and less original than that of recent abstraction.

Nonetheless, a provincialism has crept into abstract painting in America, and those who believe that they are both right and advanced may be digging their own graves. What some foresaw as an embarrassment of riches is turning out to be a plethora of trinkets. The new, recent abstraction of the 1980s is unfortunately different from the old, post–World War II abstraction; the spatial impoverishment of the former has become a serious problem. Normally abstraction considers fluctuation in quality its only real problem, but it appears now that the whole nature of the enterprise is being subverted, undermined by a fundamental weakness.

Much of abstract painting today has lost touch with the fullness and mobility of the pictorial space of the past in a mistaken effort to locate art in the novel exclusivity of technique, thus fulfilling the most (and probably lowest) common definition of abstract painting, which suggests that knowledge of abstract painting is knowledge of how to make an interesting mess. Just as serious is the admission that today paintings are being made which are like a piece of something, an enframement of a section of a painted surface; in fact, most of the new suburban abstraction is just

that—a piece of an effort to make a painting. What we are left with is a lot of work which almost by self-definition is less than whole. In addition, this simple glorification of technique and materials feeds the growth of an academic outlook: knowledge of how to do something is substituted for knowledge of what to do. This kind of confusion just increases the difficulties for abstraction.

In a way this argument may sound ungenerous, but something emerges from the churches in Rome that speaks directly to the genius of the great painting of the seventeenth century and at the same time to the struggles of twentieth-century abstraction. The same voice that told seventeenth-century painting to stick close to the ground, to avoid the dizzying heights of illustration, exhorts twentieth-century abstraction to break out of its spatial cocoon. It suggests that Caravaggio and Rubens, for instance, threaten to overwhelm modern abstraction, noting that in one vitally important way, modern painting lags behind the seventeenth century: it is spatially underdeveloped. Nowhere do we see enough of Caravaggio's dramatic spaciousness and compositional wizardry. Nowhere do we see pigment driven to describe and manipulate space in the way that Rubens did over and over again.

By 1970 abstract painting had lost its ability to create space. In a series of withdrawals, it began to illustrate the space it had once been able to create. The space in abstract painting, in a certain sense, became more advanced—more abstract, if that is possible. It was no longer available to feeling, either emotional or literal. This fulfilled one of modernism's great dreams: the space in painting became available to eyesight alone, but unfortunately not to eyesight in a pictorial sense, but to eyesight in a literary sense. In a word, it became available to the eyesight of critics rather than that of artists, to the critical, evaluative faculty rather than the pictorial, creative faculty. This means that the tendency that developed in American abstract painting after 1970 is antithetical to everything that the great painting of the past stands for. This development is probably easiest to comprehend in spatial terms: what we are left with is illustrated space which we read; what we have lost is created space which we could feel. Put simply, the pictorial space of abstraction has acquired artificiality at the expense of reality. This is a mock echo of the genius of Rubens, who was the first painter to dare to be deliberately artificial. He raised the level of the mechanical activity and accomplishment of painting to heights which allowed it to compete with viewers' perceptions of pictorial reality. In a sense, he believed with Picasso that "art is a lie to tell a greater truth."

The biggest problem for abstraction is not its flatness, articulated by brittle, dull, bent acrylic edges and exuding a debilitating sense of sameness, unbearably thin and shallow, although this is serious enough. Even more discouraging is the illustrational, easily readable quality of its pictorial effects. What abstraction promised in the sixties, it did not deliver in the seventies. The engaging Mannerist space of Noland's offset chevrons (fig. 12) and beach chair stripes moved on to the proto-Baroque, infinitely controllable, but sometimes inert space of Olitski's Acqua Gel textures (fig. 13). This change is equivalent in quality as well as spatial dynamics to the one we see in Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome—the change from Annibale Carracci's *Assumption of the Virgin* (plate 7) to Carlo Maratta's *Immaculate Conception* (plate 8). Let us hope that the sterile fingers in Maratta's painting point the way out of the darkness. The finger pointing up to his source, Raphael, would not be a bad start: if Raphael could get Rubens and Caravaggio—and the rest of the great painters of the late sixteenth century, for that matter—off the ground, perhaps he can help us.

Part of the trouble that abstraction finds itself in today is not entirely of its own making. Abstract painting has always been flawed by spatial conservatism. As it abandoned some

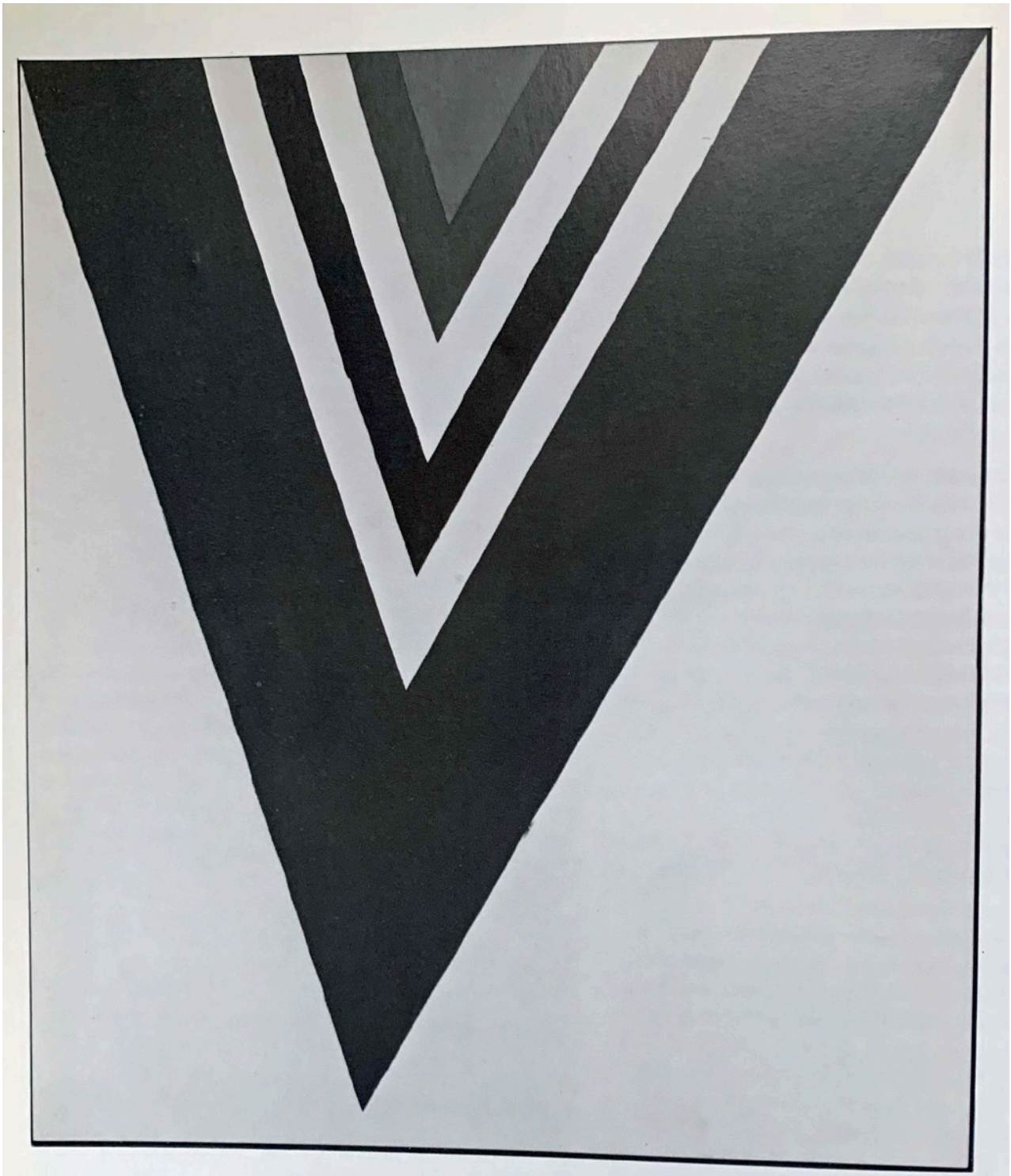

Figure 12 KENNETH NOLAND
17th Stage (1964)
Acrylic on canvas, 93½ × 80½ in.
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond
Gift of Sydney and Frances Lewis

Figure 13 JULES OLITSKI
Radical Love 8 (1972)
Waterbase acrylic on canvas, 98 × 42 in.
Private collection

of the mechanics of representation in the beginning of the twentieth century, abstraction became cautious in its manipulation of pictorial space. It did not want to look awkward or appear to be falling off the wall. It is interesting that in the churches of Rome we find none of this self-consciousness. A church like the Chiesa Nova has confident painting, characterized by spatial freedom and invention. There Caravaggio, Rubens, Barocci, and even Pietro da Cortona are a delight to our eyes, as well as to all our other senses.

The point is that abstraction today seems bound by an innate niggardliness of vision. It looks for support to Hofmann, Pollock, Newman, and Louis, and occasionally it has fits of insight which lead it all the way back to Matisse, Kandinsky, and Mondrian. But the truth is that these models have not been put to good enough use. It has become obvious that when today's abstract artist searches for a painting within the expanse of the pigment he has manipulated, he sees only the ordered, neat, and readable space that abstraction has derived from Cubism and Impressionism, two bastions of pictorial conservatism, two movements in which pictorial space is never awkward or convoluted—hence two movements in which the space is ordered and coherent, endearing itself to literary taste, which dotes on consistent, readable pictorial space. In a way, great as he was, this extraneous critical reflex is what hurt Berenson. It was not the incongruity of subject matter, as he thought, but the incongruity of pictorial space that aggravated him in Caravaggio's painting. He instinctively sensed the problematic nature of the separation of image from surface. Similarly today, abstract painting in its effort to be "advanced," to be smart, to anticipate critical accolades, has managed simply to accommodate itself to the neatness of literary taste. It cannot see the space before Impressionism. Essentially, abstract art has rendered itself space-blind in order to assure its visibility to an audience that can only read.

The trouble in which recent abstraction finds itself, its inability to project a real sense of space, is rooted in its subservience to the surface and spatial continuity implied by Impressionism. In order to guarantee itself the completeness and wholeness that defines or better delimits art, abstraction has shunned reality—that is, it has shunned real, created space in favor of artificial, illustrated space. The answer to this problem is not a return to conventional illusionistic space, to Albertian perspective; but some kind of turning around is in order. Certainly invention and inspiration are called for. In the aid of inspiration and invention, we could look in two places. One effort that needs to be reexamined is the best abstract painting of the 1950s and 1960s. The other place that would give us a good start for rethinking the essence and import of pictorial space would be the Rome of Caravaggio, Rubens, and the Carracci around 1600, in what might be called Freedberg Country.