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Pensionante del Saraceni
(active in Rome during the second
decade of the 17th century)

*A boy being bitten by a
freshwater crayfish*

oil on canvas

102.2 x 79.1 cm.;

40 1/4 x 31 1/8 in.

Provenance

Thought to have been acquired in France before 1967;

Giancarlo Baroni (1926 – 2007), Switzerland;

His posthumous sale, New York, Sotheby's, 29 January 2013, lot 10, where acquired by the
present owner.

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Pensionante del Saraceni ('boarder / lodger of Saraceni') is the name given to the unidentified artist whose style derives from Carlo Saraceni (1579 – 1620) and other Caravaggesque artists active in Rome in the second decade of the seventeenth century. In an important study of painters in the circle of Caravaggio, published in 1943, Roberto Longhi gathered together a group of four stylistically similar paintings, attributing them to an independent personality whom he called the *Pensionante del Saraceni*.

As the four paintings had a 'vague French intonation', Longhi suggested that this 'boarder of Saraceni' was a French artist. Considering the geometric construction of figures and the atmospheric quality surrounding them, most scholars have agreed that the Pensionante was French, however subsequent attempts to identify him with Jean Le Clerc (1585 – 1633), Guy François (before 1580 – 1650), the Liégeois François Walschartz (1597/8 – 1678/9), and Georges de la Tour (1593 – 1652), as well as the Flemish artist Jacob van Oost the Elder (1603 – 1671), have failed.¹

Documented to have been active in Rome between 1598 and 1619, and to have given lodging to a number of artists, Carlo Saraceni was a known Francophile, and at least one French artist lived in his house. The contemporary biographer Giovanni Baglione wrote of Carlo Saraceni's obsession with France and the French, describing him in disparaging terms as always wanting to dress like a Frenchman, despite never having been to France nor speaking a single word of French.²

Just as Bartolomeo Manfredi had a French following in the form of Valentin, Tournier and Régnier, so too Saraceni had a group of independently successful French painters in his own circle. Their paintings, like Saraceni's, represented a different approach to 'Caravaggism': their typically peaceful narratives – so different from Caravaggio's 'violent' works – are imbued with a radiant light and rich sense of colour.

Since Longhi's identification of the Pensionante, a further twelve works have been associated with the artist. These paintings mostly represent half-length figures set in unadorned surroundings. Gestures alone imply movement, and a dusky light bathes and

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softens the forms imbuing a mysterious atmosphere to his paintings. Closely following the style of Caravaggio in form and in treatment of light, several works currently attributed to him were once considered to be by Merisi.

The present painting, which has never been published or discussed in the Caravaggesque literature, is arguably the most accomplished of all the known versions of the fascinating composition. The 'best' of the other versions has been generally considered to be that in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Strasbourg (fig. 1), whose composition follows this one exactly (though the Strasbourg canvas is slightly more cropped at the top, bottom and sides).³ The Strasbourg picture was at one time attributed to Mattia Preti and has been variously published as a work by a wide range of painters: Serodine (Mayer 1945); a follower of Caravaggio (Posner 1971); a French artist close to Pensionante del Saraceni (Cuzin-Rosenberg 1978); an anonymous Caravaggesque master (Nicolson 1979); a Neapolitan artist in the 1620s (Salerno 1984); and it is currently catalogued by the museum as 'Attributed to Pensionante del Saraceni'.⁴ Another variant, published by Maurizio Marini as a work by Tommaso Salini, was on the art market in Rome in 1955 and later in a private collection, Milan.⁵ That painting omits one of the crayfish lower left and, like the version in Strasbourg, presents a more compact composition. A third damaged copy, given by Benedict Nicolson to either an Italian or Netherlandish artist, is in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon.⁶ Two further versions are listed in the Strasbourg Museum catalogue: one, of similar dimensions to the present work (103 x 78 cm.), in the Salmi collection, Rome; and another, on panel, mentioned in the *Catalogue de la collection J. Audéoud* in Geneva in 1847.⁷ The existence of numerous variants attests to the fame and popularity of this particular composition among Caravaggio's contemporaries.

Although thematically linked to other genre paintings executed by Caravaggio in his youth, Marini did not believe this composition to derive directly from a Caravaggio prototype. Jean-Pierre Cuzin and Pierre Rosenberg, when discussing the version in Strasbourg, suggested, however, that there was a lost original by Caravaggio upon which the variants were based. A painting of similar subject is mentioned by Giacomo Manilli in his 1650 guide to Villa Borghese, as hanging in the Stanza di Dafne – '*Il quadretto d'un putto morso da un*

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granchio, è del Caravaggio – but no such picture ascribed to Caravaggio is listed in the 17th-century Borghese inventories, and the boy here is clearly being bitten by a crayfish, not a crab.⁸ The other genre paintings of this type that are evidently related to our picture in terms of subject include Caravaggio's *A boy bitten by a lizard* (National Gallery, London, fig. 2) and works painted in the artist's circle, such as *A boy bitten by a mouse*, formerly in a Roman private collection,⁹ or *A boy frightening a girl with a crab*, formerly in the collection of Joseph Kaplan, Chicago.¹⁰ The latter was ascribed by Nicolson to an artist close in style to 'Master K', otherwise known as the 'Master of the Open-Mouthed Boys', whom he believed originated from eastern France and may have had contact with Carlo Saraceni. The fact that Cuzin and Rosenberg considered the Strasbourg picture to be by an artist close to Pensionante del Saraceni does point to the probability that the present variant may also be by a Caravaggesque master of French origin, and most likely by Pensionante del Saraceni himself.

Surprising though it is that Pensionante del Saraceni's true identity has yet to be found, a corpus of paintings has been gradually brought together under his name and this painting does appear to adhere to many of this group's characteristics.¹¹ In particular, the tonal range and colour palette of this canvas, softer and cooler in tone than those in the Strasbourg variant (which is much more 'Caravaggesque' in the traditional sense), point to a convincing attribution to Pensionante.

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Figure 1. Attributed to Pensionante del Saraceni, *Boy being bitten by a fresh water crayfish*.
Musée des Beaux Arts, Strasbourg

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Figure 2. Michel Merisida da Caravaggio, *Boy being bitten by a lizard*, c. 1594-5.
National Gallery, London

Footnotes

¹ Jean Le Clerc is first recorded with Saraceni in 1617, when he was already 30 years old and therefore a mature, independent artist. See C. Pétry, 'Jean Le Clerc', in *L'Art en Lorraine au temps de Jacques Callot*, exh. cat., Nancy 1992, pp. 218-38. Guy François was in Rome by 1608 and left in 1613, two years before his earliest dated work. Though unfamiliar to us today, Walschartz was described as being in Rome 'où il se mit sous la leçon de Carlo Vénitien, peintre fameux, qu'il a voulu en quelque manière imiter, mêlée cependant d'un goût flamand qu'il a retenu toute sa vie'; Abry, *Les Hommes illustres de la nation liégeoise*, 1712, ed. Liège 1867, p. 208 (cited by A. Ottani Cavina, 'Les peintres de la réalité et le cercle caravesque de Rome', in *L'Art en Lorraine au temps de Jacques Callot*, exh. cat., Nancy 1992, p. 61.)

² G. Baglione, *Le Vite de' pittori, scultori et architetti*, Rome 1642, p. 147: 'Costui...voleva andar sempre vestito alla Francese, benche egli non fusse mai stato in Francia, nè sapesse dire una parola di quel liguaggio'.

³ Inv. 1285, 96 x 73 cm. See B. Nicolson, *Caravaggism in Europe*, Oxford 1979, vol. I, p. 89, reproduced vol. II, fig. 4.

⁴ It was attributed to Preti when in the De Pourtalès collection, prior to its bequest to the museum. For publications see A. L. Mayer, 'New Documents and Attributions from the Strasbourg Museum to the Venice Palazzo Ducale', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, vol. XXVII, series 6, 1945, pp. 91-92, reproduced fig. 11 (as Serodine); D. Posner, 'Caravaggio's Homo-Erotic Early Works', *The Art Quarterly*, 1971, pp. 317 & 324, footnote 65, reproduced fig. 10 (as Follower of Caravaggio); J.-P. Cuzin & P. Rosenberg, 'Saraceni et la France: a propos du don par les Amis du Louvre de la Naissance de la Vierge', *La Revue du Louvre*, vol. 3, 1978, p. 195, reproduced fig. 24 (as a French artist working close to Pensionante del Saraceni); Nicolson 1979, vol. I, p. 89, reproduced vol. II, fig. 4; L. Salerno, in A. Brejon de Lavergnée & N. Volle, *Musées de France: répertoire des peintures italiennes du XVIIe siècle*, Paris 1988, p. 75; A. Roy & P. Goldenberg, *Peintures italiennes du Musée des Beaux-Arts de Strasbourg: XVIe, XVIIe & XVIIIe siècles*, Strasbourg 1996, p. 107, cat. no. 66; <https://www.pop.culture.gouv.fr/notice/joconde/00190019078>.

⁵ 97 x 73.5 cm. See M. Marini, *Caravaggio*, Rome 1987, p. 342, cat. no. P-22, reproduced (as Tommaso Salini).

⁶ 111 x 76 cm., oil on panel transferred to canvas in 1980. Exhibited in Lyon, *Salon des Arts*, 1786, no. 10 (as Caravaggio). Published in Nicolson 1979, p. 89, and reproduced in *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, December 1975, p. 201, fig. 3. See also *Catalogue sommaire illustré des peintures du Musée des beaux-arts de Lyon. I, Ecoles étrangères, XIIIe-XIXe siècles: Allemagne, Espagne, Italie et divers*, Paris 1993, p. 196. The composition is more extensive than the Strasbourg version at the top, as in the present work.

⁷ Written communication to the museum from M. Natale in 1979.

⁸ 'The painting of a putto bitten by a crab, is by Carravaggio': J. Manilli, *Villa Borghese fuori di Porta Pinciana*, Rome 1650, p. 71.

⁹ V. Mameli collection, Rome, in 1954, and later sold, London, Christie's, 10 April 1987, lot 65 (as Bartolomeo Manfredi). See A. Moir, *Caravaggio and His Copyists*, New York 1976, reproduced fig. 6 (as Anonymous).

¹⁰ Moir 1976, reproduced fig. 5 (as Anonymous). Moir noted a likeness of these genre pictures to a painting of *A boy eating pulses* in the National Museum, Warsaw, which is signed in Italian by the Dutch painter Jan van der Meer (Moir 1976, p. 136, note 229 i-ii; 72 x 93.5 cm., inv. no. 770).

¹¹ Among works unanimously accepted as by Pensionante del Saraceni, see the *Chicken vendor* in the Museo del Prado, Madrid; the *Fruit vendor* in the Detroit Institute of Arts; and *Job mocked by his wife* (or *The Denial of St. Peter*) in the Pinacoteca Vaticana, Rome. See B. Nicolson, *Caravaggism in Europe*, ed. Turin 1990, vol. I, p. 155, reproduced vol. II, figs. 793-95.