

Caravaggio's Calling of Matthew

My favorite thing about Rome is the San Luigi dei Francesi. It is the church for French people in Rome. (It means "Saint Luis of the French.")



The church itself is not particularly beautiful. But inside the main nave (what we would call the sanctuary) on the left toward the front there is a side chapel that is one of my favorite places in the whole world. This little chapel holds three absolutely beautiful paintings by Caravaggio based on the life of Matthew, and they are so amazing that I am almost tempted to actually "believe" in Jesus.

And these are some of the only Caravaggios still in the place he painted them to be. "In situ." They were commissioned to be in this chapel. Seeing them here is a totally different experience from seeing them in a museum. (There is also the Conversion of Paul at Santa Maria del Popolo, also in Rome—and it is worth a visit.)

Here is the wikipedia page for the San Luigi. It includes pix of the Caravaggios:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Luigi_dei_Francesi

How to find it:

Stand facing the Pantheon. (And do visit the Pantheon, too. Often. It is free. It is my second favorite place in Rome.) Stand facing the Pantheon and turn to your right.

Walk to your right AWAY from the Pantheon.

At the northern edge of the piazza, take via Guistiniani (Justine Street) till it dead ends in two blocks at via della Dogana Vecchia (which means the "old customhouse"). And there it is facing Dogana Vecchia.

Now, there are two additional things to remember:

- 1) Bring Euro coins to turn on the electric lights in the chapel. (It is free, but you have to pay to turn on the lights.)
- 2) The "open" hours posted on the Wikipedia page (if there are any) and posted on the front door of the church really have no rational relation to when the doors are actually unlocked. You will have to be persistent and very patient to actually find a time when the damn church is open.

Dammit.

But your patience and persistence will be rewarded greatly. Especially the "Calling of Matthew" panel. When I look at this painting it strikes my most basic nerve. In case you have forgotten your Bible stories,

I will recap:

Matthew is a tax collector (but he is painted to look like a drunken gambler). Jesus comes into the tax office (which looks like a gambling house) to call Matthew to follow him. Even the other disciples accompanying Jesus can't believe this man could ever be redeemed. The other gamblers are scared. Matthew especially does not understand why he is being called. But there they are--with money still on the table (as if from a night of debauchery). One of the reasons this version is so powerful is that it does not tell the rest of the story--it leaves you hanging. (All the other renaissance painters show Matthew getting up and following Jesus; but this one depicts the real moment of tension.)

Also note that the light from the doorway falls across the painting the same way light from the chapel window might naturally fall across the room. And this light is symbolic. It has shown on Matthew—and he is being called—but the boy at the far end is still literally in the dark: he is unaware of the Christ's presence.

My strategy in Rome is to just hang around the Pantheon and drink coffee and watch people. Trevi Fountain is nearby. I hang around and walk past the San Luigi several times a day until I finally find it open.

Be patient, be persistent, and you will be rewarded.