

FORTUNE-TELLERS AND TELLING SYMPATHIES:

INNOVATIONS OF CARVAGGIO'S

FORTUNE-TELLER

By

Kari A. Allegretto

Submitted to the

Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences

of American University

in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In

Art History

Chair:

Helen Lanza for Kim Butler  
Kim Butler Wingfield, Ph.D.

Andrea Pearson  
Andrea Pearson, Ph.D.

  
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Dean of the College of Art Sciences

Date

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American University

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Kari A. Allegretto

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I would like to dedicate this paper to my mom. She has always been there to support me, and always encouraged me regardless of how crazy the idea may seem at the time.  
Thanks Mom.

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ABSTRACT

Within art the Romani presence has been frequently seen but rarely observed. Historians and casual viewers alike have *seen* that the palm reader in many fortune-teller paintings of the Renaissance and Baroque periods is a Romani woman, yet rarely is the presence *observed*. The portrayal of the Romani, and its revelation of their perception during this time, is never deeply explored. The observation of these early painted Romanies reveals a stark difference between Caravaggio's 1594 *Fortune-Teller* and the works that followed in the wake of the painting's popularity. Caravaggio painted a sympathetic portrayal of the Romani, a choice that defied common expectations of the time both in the visual arts and in society.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The Romani representations in art have been plagued with the problem that the Romani people are seen, but rarely are they observed. Historians and casual viewers alike have *seen* that the palm reader in many fortune-teller paintings of the Renaissance and Baroque is a Romani woman. Yet rarely is this presence *observed*. The portrayal of the Romani, and what it reveals about their perception during this time, is never explored in depth. The close analysis of these early painted Romanies reveals a stark difference between Caravaggio's 1594 *Fortune-Teller* (Figure 1) and the works that followed in the wake of the painting's popularity.<sup>1</sup> Caravaggio's *Fortune-Teller* offers a sympathetic portrayal of a Romani woman that differed to the previous examples of the Romani, or "zingara" stereotype, in the visual arts, which had more closely reflected negative societal prejudice.

Caravaggio's *Fortune-Teller* is a deceptively simple painting. The woman and man upon the canvas lock eyes and share a private look, blocking the viewer from their thoughts as the woman holds the man's hand to read his palm. The characters, who are depicted in three-quarter view, are unidentified, although the man is perhaps based on the same model for the youth in Caravaggio's contemporary painting *Cardsharps* (Figure 2).<sup>2</sup> The artist places the characters in front of a blank, nondescript background, which precludes any sense of time or setting. Caravaggio's minimalist treatment of the background guarantees that the viewer's entire attention is directed to the two subjects and their interaction—nothing else.

In contrast to the painting's generic setting, the clothing on both figures is shown in exacting detail, especially the fabric of the woman's costume. As mentioned by Todd P. Olson,

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<sup>1</sup> Caravaggio, *Fortune-Teller*, 1594, Rome, Italy: Capitoline Museum.

<sup>2</sup> Caravaggio, *Cardsharps*, 1594, Fort Worth, Texas: Kimbell Art Museum.

Caravaggio relished in rendering coarsely textured and inexpensive fabrics in paint, and depicted them quite frequently.<sup>3</sup> His attention to detail allows insight into the revolutionary nature of this deceptively simple painting. The woman's cape, which wraps over one shoulder and beneath the opposite arm, is a *schiaivina*, a traditional piece of Romani clothing. It was a common signifier of the Romani in earlier works of art in which they served as background characters, and it is a central part of the wardrobe of Caravaggio's fortune-teller.<sup>4</sup> The *schiaivina*'s presence confirms the woman's identity as a Romani, and not simply a generic fortune-teller, which Caravaggio's audience would have recognized. This *Fortune-Teller* is the first time that a Romani was the main subject of Western painting.<sup>5</sup> Her presence as such has been insufficiently analyzed, and this has vastly limited the scholarship concerning Caravaggio's *Fortune-Teller* and the Romani presence in art as a whole.

In this paper, the phrase 'Romani' will be used in place of the rather dated term 'Gypsy,' with the exception of direct historical references.<sup>6</sup> The word 'Gypsy' is weighted with negative stereotypes, such as thievery and vagrancy.<sup>7</sup> The historian Ian Hancock has also explained that the phrase propagates the incorrect theory that the Romani people originate from Egypt, rather

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<sup>3</sup> Todd P. Olson, "The Street Has its Masters: Caravaggio and the Socially Marginal" in *Caravaggio : Realism, Rebellion, Reception*, ed. by Genevieve Warwick (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2006): 69.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Graham-Dixon, *Caravaggio: A Life Sacred and Profane* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010): 108

<sup>5</sup> Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983): 25.

<sup>6</sup> Such as titles and quotes, which may utilize phrases such as 'gypsy,' 'zingara,' or 'Egyptian.'

<sup>7</sup> Which has been reflected in the Early Modern term zingara. The negative stereotypes have been noted in numerous sources, such as Ian Hancock, *The Pariah Syndrome: An Account of Gypsy Slavery and Persecution* (Ann Arbor, MI: Karoma Publishers Inc., 1987): 145-162; Angus Fraser, *The Gypsies* (Cambridge, Blackwell: 1992): 85-86; and Helen Langdon, *Caravaggio: A Life* (Colorado: Westview Press, 2000): 86; amongst others.

than India.<sup>8</sup> The false Egyptian heritage was used by native Europeans as a means to justify the persecution of the Romani.<sup>9</sup> Europeans believed that the newly arrived Romanies were descendants of the Egyptians who had denied aid to the holy family as they fled from Jerusalem, and that their state of wandering was a form of holy retribution.<sup>10</sup> The story was used to justify the passage of laws and poor treatment that continually kept the Romani on the move and denied them many of the common rights awarded to the native Europeans.<sup>11</sup> There has been a recent push by human rights organizations, scholars, and government agencies to refrain from using the negative terminology of ‘Gypsy,’ and I will be following that example for this paper.<sup>12</sup>

The Romani began to appear in art upon their entry into Western Europe in the fifteenth century. They served as background characters, representing outsiders and foreigners. This peripheral presence was used to suggest exotic or oriental settings, and the Romani served more as decorative motif rather than as actual subjects or characters.<sup>13</sup> They were not prevalent figures in European art and were not used as main subjects until Caravaggio’s *Fortune-Teller*.

The painting comes from an early point in Caravaggio’s career, with historians dating it between 1594 and 1596, during a period when the artist lacked patronage after he left the studio of the Cavalier d’Arpino to work independently. It was not a commissioned work; rather, it appears that Caravaggio was in control of the aesthetic choices of the painting. The prevailing

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<sup>8</sup> Ian Hancock, *Danger! Educated Gypsy: Selected Essays*, ed. by Dileep Karanth (Hertfordshire: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2010): 45.

<sup>9</sup> Fraser: 87.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid: 87.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid: 87.

<sup>12</sup> These agencies including the United States’ Library of Congress in Washington, DC, where some of the research for this project was conducted.

<sup>13</sup> Erwin Pokorny, “The Gypsies and Their Impact on Fifteenth Century Western Europe Iconography” in *Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration, and Convergence; The Proceedings of the 32<sup>nd</sup> International Congress of the History of Art*, ed. by Jaynie Anderson (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2009): 597-600.

theory is that Caravaggio painted the work in order to attract the attention of Cardinal del Monte and win him as a patron. This seems likely, as after purchasing *Fortune-Teller* and *Cardsharps*, del Monte became a major patron to Caravaggio, and some of the artist's paintings for the Cardinal would become the most iconic of his career.

*Fortune-Teller* was painted at a pivotal moment in Caravaggio's career, but the groundbreaking painting is often overlooked in the discourse of the artist's legacy. Not only was the painting the first to feature a Romani as the main subject, but it also arguably depicted the foreign woman sympathetically and with an uncharacteristic sense of agency. The painting achieved such popularity that a second (Figure 3) was requested by Prospero Orsi's brother-in-law, Gerolamo Vittrice, who were both a part of del Monte's social circle and obviously admired the painting.<sup>14</sup>

One would expect the artists who followed Caravaggio in producing a fortune-teller painting, such as Bartolomeo Manfredi (Figure 4) and Simon Vouet (Figure 5), to also follow his sympathetic example in his depiction of the fortune-teller.<sup>15</sup> However, later depictions of the fortune-teller are noticeably different from the example set by Caravaggio. These differences indicate the later tradition which trades in common negative stereotypes are not solely physical, but also relate into aspects of character and sexuality, which will be discussed below.

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<sup>14</sup>Clovis Whitfield, *Caravaggio's Eye* (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2011): 15. Caravaggio, *Fortune-Teller*, 1595, Paris, France: Louvre. Unless otherwise noted, mention of the *Fortune-Teller* will reference the original painting now found in the Capitoline Museum.

<sup>15</sup> Bartolomeo Manfredi, *Fortune-Teller*, 1616-1617, Detroit, MI: Detroit Institute of the Arts. And Simon Vouet, *Fortune-Teller*, 1620, Ottawa, Canada: National Gallery of Canada.

## CHAPTER 2

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ROMANI AND THEIR ENTRANCE INTO WESTERN EUROPE

Before we can explore the representation of the Romani Caravaggio's work, we must first consider their standing and presence in Renaissance and Baroque society. With this in mind, this chapter presents a brief overview of the Romani entrance into Europe and their introduction into Western European culture. This background will allow a better understanding of the revolutionary nature of Caravaggio's portrayal of the female protagonist in *Fortune-Teller*.

The Romani entrance into Europe took the form of a steady migration. By the sixteenth century, reports indicate that they were present in every Western European country.<sup>16</sup> Angus Fraser's reconstruction of the migration of larger Romani groups and chronologically maps their movement across the continent. The earliest known documentation of the Romani in Italy comes from Milan between 1457 and 1480, almost a century before Caravaggio's painting, in the form of benign documents of safe conduct and receipts of sales.<sup>17</sup> These documents do not suggest any animosity initially between the Italians and the Romani; rather the documents of safe conduct suggest a degree of concord between the two groups. Legal documents that repressed the Romani and limited their movement started to surface in Milan by the 1490s, which pushed them farther south into Italy. Documentation of their presence in southern Italy begins appearing in the mid-sixteenth century.<sup>18</sup> Repression laws were the reason why the Romani of this era maintained easily mobile jobs such as horse selling, blacksmithing, and, of course, fortune-telling.<sup>19</sup> Such

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<sup>16</sup> Hancock, *Danger!*: 91.

<sup>17</sup> Fraser: 107.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid: 106-107.

<sup>19</sup> Hancock, *We Are the Romani People: Ames same e Rromane džene* (Hertfordshire: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2002): 59.

occupations could easily be packed up and allowed for movement with short notice. Fortune-telling was also a popular means of income because it included a certain level of protection. As Ian Hancock explains, one was less likely to poorly treat those who had the ability to view the future, as they were also feared to hold sway over one's fate and not just see it.<sup>20</sup>

A majority of the Romani presence in southern Italy is documented in the form of repressive legislation. For example, Governor Gerolamo di Rossi banned the Romani from the papal states in 1552 in response to the large influx of Romani population who had settled in the grottoes, vineyards, and countryside that surrounded the city.<sup>21</sup> By Caravaggio's time, edicts in the papal states limited the Romani in terms of livelihood and movement.<sup>22</sup> Despite the efforts of government officials such as di Rossi, the Romani became a part of Rome's society, often finding themselves placed amongst the lowest rungs of the city's social hierarchy.

The Romani came into Europe during a tumultuous time in its history. Many countries were at war and the church was scrambling to reassert itself in the aftermath of the "great Schism."<sup>23</sup> By the end of the sixteenth century, Rome was overwhelmed with a surge of new residents, including the Romani, religious pilgrims, the unemployed seeking jobs, and war-displaced refugees.<sup>24</sup> As one could imagine, this put a strain on the citizens of Rome. Suspicions of newcomers were rampant, with allegations ranging from petty theft to spying.<sup>25</sup> In such chaos, the Romani faced limited options; they could leave, attempt to assimilate with other

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<sup>20</sup> Hancock, *We Are*: 59.

<sup>21</sup> Fraser: 105-108.

<sup>22</sup> Olson: 74.

<sup>23</sup> Rajko Djuric, *Romanies and Europe: Romanies as Characters in European Literature* (Strasbourg: Characters in European Literature. 1996): 10.

<sup>24</sup> Graham-Dixon: 100.

<sup>25</sup> Djuric: 11.

minority groups, or maintain their cultural identities and live in ghettos with other populations like the Jews.<sup>26</sup> Romani took the option of remaining in Rome and identify as Romani, creating a place for themselves within society and becoming known to artists like Caravaggio through both reputation and direct observation.

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<sup>26</sup> Djuric: 11.



## CHAPTER 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the most glaring aspects of the scholarship concerning the Romani presence in Renaissance and Baroque art is its absence. Even recent studies which focus on Caravaggio and the *Fortune-Teller* never discuss the woman's ethnic identity. Despite being one of the earliest known Western paintings portraying a Romani as the primary subject, the scholarship overlooks it. The only person to address the subject of ethnicity was one of Caravaggio's contemporary biographers, Giovan Pietro Bellori; and even this, as discussed below, was to reference the artists preferred use of live models over statuary rather than to address the presence of a foreign other in the painting.

The historical study of the Romani in paintings such as Caravaggio's *Fortune-Teller* would mean addressing the Romani experience upon their entrance into Western Europe, as well as addressing the stereotypes that follow them even into this era, neither of which make for a pleasant subject. Even today in many countries, the Romani endure the typecast of a race with a predilection for crime, witchcraft, and superstition.<sup>27</sup> A small pocket of scholars has taken up the challenge of providing accurate Romani-centered histories, but their voices struggle against many flawed and inaccurate studies and for now they are a relative minority. I hope that this study joins the call for more historically accurate analysis.

So the real challenge lies in how one can use a painting like *Fortune-Teller* to better understand the perception of the Romani in Renaissance Rome. There are several categories of literature that can be used for this research, ranging from obvious sources such as contemporary biographies of Caravaggio to sources in the fields of law and anthropology, which have been used for this paper. The methodology used for this research would best be described as a

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<sup>27</sup> As demonstrated in Fraser: 69-67, 192, 197-199; Hancock, *We Are*: 59; amongst others.

combination of social analysis and iconographic study with influences of feminism and post-colonialism. Her ethnicity and sex are major factors in her identity and influence how her audience would have understood and interpreted her presence within Caravaggio's painting. Therefore all these methodologies must be kept in mind throughout the course of this study.

### Contemporary Biographies

Three biographies concerning Caravaggio were written shortly after the artist's death, one by the aforementioned Bellori, and the other two by Giulio Mancini and Giovanni Baglione. Of these three, Bellori's account is the most detailed and informative on the entirety of Caravaggio's career, especially on the early period when he painted *Fortune-Teller*. Bellori was responsible for the story that Caravaggio found a Romani woman on the street to serve as the model for the painting, addressing her as a woman "of the Egyptian race."<sup>28</sup> Very rarely do later historians who mention Bellori's tale note or explore the biographer's statement of the woman's nationality.<sup>29</sup> Bellori does not hesitate to attack aspects of Caravaggio's personal life, nor does he attempt to hide his antagonism towards the artist in the biography. Despite this, he comes across as neutral of the painter's technique, and on occasion even laudatory. His sparing approval stands out in comparison to the other two biographies, which blindly praise Caravaggio's achievements and career. Those compliments which come from Bellori seem more genuine, as it is tempered by his criticisms.<sup>30</sup>

Mancini's account of the artist's life, though shorter than Bellori's, is another biography utilized by current scholars. In contrast to Bellori's qualified praise, Mancini is consistent with

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<sup>28</sup> Giovan Pietro Bellori, "The Life of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio," in *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans. Alice Sedgwick Wohl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 179-180.

<sup>29</sup> As I will discuss in greater depth below.

<sup>30</sup> Bellori: 177-190.

praise, and coupling it with his adoration of the artist and his accomplishments make it difficult to see where the glorification ends and the chronicle begins. It should be noted that Mancini provides an alternative story to the creation of the *Fortune-Teller*. He suggests that the painting is not from Caravaggio's brief period of unemployment before working for Cardinal del Monte, but that the painting was started right before Caravaggio opted to leave his master's studio in favor of pursuing his own themes. The claim is neither very developed nor well supported, as it is only mentioned in passing, nor does not seem to have been adopted by many current scholars. It should also be noted that throughout his discourse on the painting, Mancini never addresses the fact that the woman in the painting is a Romani.<sup>31</sup>

The final contemporary biography, by Baglione, is the least-often referenced of the three in current literature on Caravaggio, and for good reason: his account is a rushed and brief narrative. The writer never delves deeply into any of Caravaggio's paintings, especially those from his early career. Compared to the biographies of Bellori and Mancini, Baglione's brief account is devoid of many details and is of little relevance to the research. While the other two writers were concerned with providing the works in the context of Caravaggio's life, Baglione's objective seems to have been to provide a listing of the works produced by the artist. He does not bother to describe the works in any detail, sacrificing a critical framework in favor of a summary of all of Caravaggio's works.<sup>32</sup>

### Current Biographies

Of the current biographies available on Caravaggio, two stand out for their focus on *Fortune-Teller* and the artist's early career. The first is Howard Hibbard's *Caravaggio*, published

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<sup>31</sup> Giulio Mancini, "Giulio Mancini 'On Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio' from 'Considerazioni Sulla Pittura,' circa 1617-1921," in *The Lives of Caravaggio* (London: Pallas Athene, 2005): 25-38.

<sup>32</sup> Giovanni Baglione, "Giovanni Baglione 'The Life of Michelangelo da Caravaggio, Painter' from 'Le Vite de Pittori, Scultori, et Architetti,' 1642," in *The Lives of Caravaggio* (London: Pallas Athene, 2005): 39-54.

in 1983. He provides information on the provenance of the *Fortune-Teller*, going as far as documenting damage to the painting's upper portion during its move to France.<sup>33</sup> However, as informative as his account on the painting and its background may be, his ready reliance upon- and lack of criticism towards- primary sources makes it difficult to trust some of his findings. He takes many anecdotes by Caravaggio's contemporaries at face value, accepting and presenting them as fact without consideration to incentives and biases behind the words. For this caution must be used when reading beyond the straight facts in Hibbard's oft-cited work.

An important update to the scholarship on Caravaggio is Helen Langdon's book published in 2000, *Caravaggio: A Life*. Much of the information presented is the same, but the addition of more historical material and the use of a critical lens on primary sources results in a better understanding of the artist as well as the dismissal of previous assertions presented by scholars such as Hibbard. When discussing Caravaggio's creation of works such as *Fortune-Teller*, for instance, Langdon provides evidence of contemporary events that would have affected the artist. She also looks at the agendas behind the written accounts of his contemporaries, including discrediting a historian who insinuated that Caravaggio's patron, del Monte, was homosexual.<sup>34</sup> By dispelling these rumors, Langdon is able to provide an analysis of the Cardinal's preferences in art which focuses on the less erotic works in his collection painted by Caravaggio, such as *Fortune-Teller* and *Cardsharps*.

More recently, Andrew Graham-Dixon explored Caravaggio's biography up to the point at which the artist painted *Fortune-Teller*, focusing on how these experiences affected Caravaggio's work. A unique aspect of Graham-Dixon's analysis is that he does not just link *Fortune-Teller* to *Cardsharps*, as is commonly done in the scholarship, but also to *Boy Bitten by*

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<sup>33</sup> Hibbard: 27.

<sup>34</sup> Langdon, *A Life*: 94-95.

a *Lizard*, arguing that all three paintings were produced to gain attention from del Monte and win the Cardinal as a patron.<sup>35</sup> His approach to Caravaggio is to explain the artist's decisions, and the cultural forces that would have influenced the artist, or, as this paper will analyze, how Caravaggio sometimes went against society's expectations.

### Romani-Related Art History

Few studies address the Romani as they appear in art. An important exception is Erwin Pokorny's "The Gypsies and Their Impact on Fifteenth Century Western Europe Iconography," presented at the 32<sup>nd</sup> International Congress of the History of Art in 2009.<sup>36</sup> As the title suggests, the article only focuses on the presence of the Romani in art the century before Caravaggio painted the *Fortune-Teller*. However, it excellently lays the foundation for research that is so critically needed to the field, as well as raises points that need further research.

An earlier essay by Helen Langdon in *The Genius of Rome, 1529-1623* follows the same approach. Langdon examines the lower socioeconomic strata that became the subjects to paintings such as Caravaggio's *Fortune-Teller* and *Cardsharps*.<sup>37</sup> She looks into how other artists depicted the "street culture," as well as the circumstances that made it such a popular subject. However, like many other scholars, she focuses on the formal characteristics of the paintings rather than on the Romani subjects.<sup>38</sup> Langdon provides many examples that contextualize Caravaggio's *Fortune-Teller*, for example a group of fortune-teller paintings that

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<sup>35</sup> Andrew Graham-Dixon, *Caravaggio: A Life Sacred and Profane* (New York: N.W. Norton & Company, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> Pokorny: 597-601.

<sup>37</sup> Helen Langdon, "Cardsharps, Gypsies, and Street Vendors," in *The Genius of Rome, 1529-1623*, ed. Beverly Louise Brown (London: Royal Academy of the Arts, 2001): 45-47.

<sup>38</sup> One unfortunate side effect of such treatment is that it subjugates the Romani figures similarly to the post-Caravaggio artists, denying the figures any sense of agency.

followed in the wake of Caravaggio's painting.<sup>39</sup> Though she does not discuss the ethnic identity of the fortune-tellers within the painting, she does track the development of the genre, which was beneficial to the research of this painting.

Todd P. Olson uses a complementary method when discussing the Romani presence in Renaissance culture. In his essay, "The Street Has Its Masters: Caravaggio and the Socially Marginal," from *Caravaggio: Realism, Rebellion, Reception*, he analyzes those from the lower socioeconomic strata who appear in Caravaggio's paintings, notably from *Cardsharps* and *Fortune-Teller*, focusing on the *zingara* stereotype in Renaissance culture, an archetype from the *Commedia dell'Arte*.<sup>40</sup> He links del Monte to plays featuring *zingara* characters.<sup>41</sup> Olson discusses the actual traits of the theatrical character only briefly, however, without addressing what, if any, of these characteristics were transferred from the stage to paintings such as the *Fortune-Teller*.<sup>42</sup> He also discusses the strain between classes, which is reflected in paintings like *Fortune-Teller*.<sup>43</sup> Despite his lack of attention to the paintings, his acknowledgment of the Romani theatrical presence is important to the study.

### Social History

Social histories and anthropological studies are useful to better situate the Romani in Renaissance and Baroque society, especially since there is little documentation on the Romani people during these periods per se, but there have been many studies society at this time, especially focusing on Rome. Some of these studies have focused on Rome's street life and

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<sup>39</sup> Langdon, "Cardsharps": 42-65.

<sup>40</sup> Olson: 72.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid: 72.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid: 69-81.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid: 74.

counter-cultures, the portion of society in which many Romani would have found themselves. These scholars provide a look at what everyday life was like for those on the lowest rungs of Rome's social ladder. No source delves too deeply into the subject of the Romani, however, in part because of a perceived lack of material.

Peter Burke dedicates a full chapter of his book to analyze the "counter culture" and criminal classes from the perspective of the social elite.<sup>44</sup> Burke's task is daunting, for the actual lives of these classes will most likely never be fully understood: he is forced to rely on certain biased accounts and depictions and sift through them for truth.<sup>45</sup> Burke's focus is useful, though, for differentiating reality from the perception of the upper classes, which would have included del Monte, who is believed to have purchased the *Fortune-Teller* from Caravaggio before becoming a patron to the artist.

### Romani History

One of the most important sources for this paper are the Romani documentary histories. These studies have become more accurate in recent years, but one must exercise caution when reading the older histories. Angus Fraser's *The Gypsies* is one of these new sources. He not only details the Romani people's arrival into Western Europe, but also sought to track their movement in the continent and their arrival in within borders as we recognize them today. He did so through analyzing official documents, such as receipts of sales with the Romanies and legislation allowing or barring their passage, and was able to craft a timeline of their migration through Western Europe.<sup>46</sup> Through this technique, Fraser is able to trace the Romani's movements

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<sup>44</sup> Peter Burke, *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Essays on Perception and Communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>45</sup> Especially notable in the cases of Giroloma and Pompeo's testimonies, which will be discussed later. Burke: 63.

<sup>46</sup> Fraser: 85-129.

through Italy and establish a period of time of when they would have entered the area of Rome. The documentation he uses also give an idea of their life, providing glimpses of their occupations as well as their treatment by native Europeans.

One of the authors who has added a great deal to the Romani scholarship is Ian Hancock. His 2002 publication sought to establish Romani history from the Romani perspective. While this history starts from the migration out of India up to the entrance into Western Europe, the narrative stops at the arrival only to pick up again in the years leading up to the Holocaust.<sup>47</sup> Despite the lack of information concerning the migration into Western Europe, Hancock does provide some of the origins of Romani stereotypes, including the creation of the Romani fortune-teller archetype, which will be discussed more below.<sup>48</sup>

Hancock's newer book, a collection of essays edited by Dileep Karanth, presents new aspects of Romani history and the movement into Western Europe. He provides more information on the entrance to Europe, yet abruptly ends the recount of the history in the year 1500. At this point Hancock assures his readers that the Romani were present within the boundaries of every modern European country, but he does not go in-depth into discussing the histories in any of the specific areas.<sup>49</sup> However, while Fraser was able to provide a detailed look of the migration country-by-country, Hancock was able to provide a wider perspective of the migration and its general reception by native Europeans.<sup>50</sup> Though I would like to note that

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<sup>47</sup> Hancock, *We Are*: 59-61.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid: 61.

<sup>49</sup> Ian Hancock, *Danger! Educated Gypsy: Selected Essays*, ed. Dileep Karanth (Hertfordshire: Hertfordshire University Press, 2010): 83-91.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid: 83-94.



in this collection, Hancock does confirm that the Romani have had almost no agency over their image.<sup>51</sup>

### In Summation

Although more sources have gone into developing this paper, those discussed in this chapter served as the key foundations to the research. When combined, these sources yield a glimpse into the perception of the Romani in the Renaissance, such as we might attribute to Caravaggio and his patrons. This paper will seek to examine the presence of the Romani in Renaissance art, focusing on Caravaggio's unique representation in hopes of furthering the scholarship in this currently limited field.

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<sup>51</sup> Hancock, *Danger!*: 147.

## CHAPTER 4

### PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Examining the appearance of the woman in Caravaggio's *Fortune-Teller* is the obvious starting point for this paper. It is one of the first features of the painting viewers note upon viewing the painting before exploring the interplay between the figures or its social implications.

The woman looks to her client with dark eyes, her gaze searching and inquisitive. Her hesitant smile suggests neither malice nor treachery. Caravaggio included a flush to her cheeks to darken her complexion. Her skin tone almost matches that of the young man whose hand she tenderly holds, and he matches the type of idealized Italian youth that Caravaggio regularly painted. The similar skin tones create an ambiguity between the ethnically European man and the female foreign "other."

As the viewer's gaze drifts downward, it takes in her crisp white shirt contrasted against the dark hues of the *schiaivina*. The cape's darkness highlights the interactions between these two figures' hands, which Caravaggio sought to emphasize. The man's hands are pale and long, and his left hand, positioned on the hilt of his sword shows that he has clean and long nails. The woman's hands are only slightly darker than those of her companion. Caravaggio shows the nails of both of her hands, and here her hands differ from those of the man. Her nails are short and lined with the slightest darkness that could be interpreted as dirt worked into her nail beds. This potential hint of dirt is the only suggestion that Caravaggio gives of the woman's lack of cleanliness. Otherwise he presents a young and pretty figure, and the slight detail of dirt in her nail beds is barely noticeable against her clean white shirt and neat, clean hair.

As we will see in this chapter, the Romani woman in *Fortune-Teller* is not a crude caricature like those in the fortune-teller paintings of other artists, either before or after Caravaggio. This Romani is more sympathetic in appearance alone. Hibbard notes that the

painting was the first occurrence of a Romani as the main subject of a Western painting.<sup>52</sup>

Graham-Dixon credits Caravaggio with the creation of the new genre of painting; something the historian calls the “low life drama.”<sup>53</sup> Since there was no precedent for the depiction of a Romani woman as a main subject in Western art, Caravaggio was free to create his own composition without external influences or the need to defy set expectations, taking agency upon himself. His innovation was even noted by Bellori, who explains just how Caravaggio found a female model for the *Fortune-Teller*: Caravaggio went out onto the streets of Rome until he found a Romani woman whom he instantly brought back to his studio and began to paint.<sup>54</sup> Bellori says that Caravaggio “portrayed her in the act of telling fortunes, as these women of the Egyptian race are wont to do.”<sup>55</sup> The biographer seems to suggest that the figure presented by Caravaggio is fairly close to life. We should also note that Bellori maintains the then current belief that the Romani were descendants of the Egyptian race, which would lead to expectations of darker skin which Caravaggio does not provide.

Bellori’s anecdote was meant to underscore Caravaggio’s preference for live models over statuary and studies. In his biography of the artist, Bellori claimed that Caravaggio “recognized no other master than the live model.”<sup>56</sup> Readers of the time would have taken the writer’s story as truthful, and would have believed that the model for this painting was indeed Romani, so this woman either looked like a Romani or, at the least, she had a more sympathetic and humanizing appearance compared to other representations.

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<sup>52</sup> Hibbard: 25.

<sup>53</sup> Graham-Dixon: 98.

<sup>54</sup> Bellori: 179-180.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid: 180. By “Egyptian race” Bellori means Romani.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid: 179.

## Costume

As previously mentioned, the *schiaivina* worn by the woman in the painting marked her as Romani to Renaissance and Baroque audiences.<sup>57</sup> It was also one of the few features to be adopted by later artists who portrayed the Romani women. But it does more than to serve as a vehicle for Caravaggio to depict the “modest material” that he was so fond of painting.<sup>58</sup> In terms of composition, the *schiaivina* creates a backdrop that accentuates the physical interaction between the two figures of the painting. As noted, pale flesh stands out in sharp contrast to the *schiaivina*’s dark fabric.<sup>59</sup> The decision serves as a formal vehicle for a study in chiaroscuro to an extent, while serving as a way to isolate the hands and promote their importance within the painting.

The cape’s darkened colors liberate Caravaggio’s work from the standard set by Cesare Ripa’s 1593 book on emblems and imagery. Ripa called for the costumes of Romanies to be brightly colored.<sup>60</sup> The first book on pictorial imagery was published in 1593 for orators and speakers to generate properly similes and comparisons in their writings and speeches. However, the book gathered great popularity with artists and theater designers. The first edition achieved so much success that a second edition came out in 1602. Each listing within the publication included an allegorical figure to embody a specific concept or allusion, including related colors and paraphernalia, often supported by classical literature.<sup>61</sup> The first edition was released approximately a year before the production of Caravaggio’s *Fortune-Teller*, yet it appears that

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<sup>57</sup> Graham-Dixon: 108.

<sup>58</sup> Olson: 69.

<sup>59</sup> More of this will be discussed in later chapters.

<sup>60</sup> Langdon, *A Life*: 88.

<sup>61</sup> Edward A. Maser, introduction to *Baroque and Rococo Pictorial Imagery*, by Cesare Ripa (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1971): vii-ix.

Caravaggio did not decide to reference the popular work, despite its influence on the theatre troops who served as some form of inspiration to the artist.<sup>62</sup>

The *Commedia dell'Arte* typically followed Ripa's advice, and many of their costumes of Romani characters were brightly colored, though not consistently since the female players rarely had specific character costumes.<sup>63</sup> The Romani character was not a rare appearance in the plays; it was a stock character, appearing in theatrical performances such as *The Deceived*, *The Theft*, *The Furious Lover*, and *The Gypsy Thief*.<sup>64</sup> The anti-hero Romani woman was a popular character for the *Commedia dell'Arte* as well as other theater groups in Rome, and Italy as a whole, where she would serve as both someone who aided the main (ethnically European) characters while maintaining her deceitful ways.<sup>65</sup> On May 6, 1589 the *Company of Signora Vittoria* performed before the Duke of Mantua's court a play called *La Zinagara* at the Duke's request.<sup>66</sup> The phrase 'zingara' became a name for the genre of play featuring Romani characters, (most frequently women) or the Romani character within a play, usually some sort of anti-hero or scapegoat character.<sup>67</sup> These were not flattering depictions, typically on par with the representation of Jews in anti-Semitic plays that were just as common, especially during

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<sup>62</sup> Cesare Ripa listed the figure Romani as an icon of poverty, contrasting with his call that they should wear brightly colored costumes. Langdon, *A Life*: 86.

<sup>63</sup> Pierre-Louis Duchartre, *The Italian Comedy: The Improvisation, Scenarios, Lives, Attributes, Portraits, and Masks of the Illustrious Characters of the Commedia Dell'arte*, trans. by Randolph T. Weaver (New York: Dover, 1966): 266.

<sup>64</sup> Langdon, *A Life*: 86-87. Are we seeing a theme developing for the plots and titles that concerned the Romani? Their presence appears to occur in plots dealing with the more unseemly facets of life.

<sup>65</sup> Langdon, *A Life*: 86-87.

<sup>66</sup> Duchartre: 91.

<sup>67</sup> Olson: 72-74.

Carnivale.<sup>68</sup> This unflattering image was the norm and what was expected, and it was popular enough to merit its own terminology, one which was also used as an ethnic phrase to identify the Romani at the time.

It is known that Cardinal del Monte was a fan of the theater.<sup>69</sup> He invited a group of entertainers, known as the *Gelosi*, to perform at the wedding celebration of Ferdinando de' Medici to Christine of Lorraine in 1589.<sup>70</sup> The *Gelosi* performed Artemio Gincarli's *The Gypsy*, written over forty years earlier in 1545.<sup>71</sup> Actress Vittoria Piismimi portrayed the title role of a Romani woman who was both a thief, kidnapper, and temptress.<sup>72</sup> It is believed that Caravaggio went to see the performance at the wedding party.<sup>73</sup> This connection with del Monte could have been in his mind as he began to craft the paintings that would attract del Monte to his work.

Yet even with this probable influence Caravaggio still does not follow the norms and expectations generated by the popular zingara plays. I suggest that Caravaggio was transforming the Romanies from the theatrical and negative characters into sympathetic and relatable people through his depiction of the woman on his canvas, giving her a sense of agency denied by many other artists.

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<sup>68</sup> Olson: 74.

<sup>69</sup> Olson: 72; Langdon, *A Life*: 84.

<sup>70</sup> Langdon, *A Life*: 87. Olson: 72 notes that the Cardinal went to a zingara play without noting the depth of del Monte's full involvement. This play was only five years before the first *Fortune-Teller*.

<sup>71</sup> Langdon, *A Life*: 87. The fact that the play had endured for over forty years by this point goes to show just how entrenched the Romani were in Italian life, both in society and in culture.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid: 87.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid: 87.

### Physical Features

Beyond the inclusion of the *schiaivina*, the physical features of Caravaggio's fortune-teller challenged the harsh stereotypes of its contemporary society. The most prevalent of these stereotypes were of dark skin, long and dark hair, ugliness, and the presence of earrings.<sup>74</sup>

Indeed, dark skin was a common feature of the painted Romani.<sup>75</sup> Ian Hancock made the link that darkness of skin was intertwined with darkness of the soul in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and was thus a common feature in both the descriptions and depictions of Romanies to suggest an inner, or innate, evil.<sup>76</sup> In the fortune-teller paintings that followed Caravaggio's, all of the women's skin is shown darker than Caravaggio's example. This is exceptionally notable in Simon Vouet's *Fortune-Teller*, where we are presented with a wide range of skin tones and yet the Romani woman is one of the darkest out of Vouet's four figures. Just as in Caravaggio's *Fortune-Teller*, the woman in Vouet's painting has a flush to her cheeks, but unlike Caravaggio's painting this only serves to redden the cheeks of an already darker skin tone. Vouet also casts additional shadows on the woman's face, both along her jawline and above her eyes, which creates a greater sense of darkness about the woman.

As for the hair of the woman in Caravaggio's painting, what we can see of it is a rather unremarkable light brown shade. A majority of it is tucked away under her turban, though what Caravaggio allows us to see appears neat and clean, being simply swept back and tucked behind her ear. It is heavily contrasted to her companion's hair, which is a mass of wild and much darker curls. In the Louvre *Fortune-Teller*, both heads of hair become less tamed. The man's curls are

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<sup>74</sup> Donald Kenrick, "The Origins of Anti-Gypsism: The Outsiders' View of the Romanies in Western Europe in the Fifteenth Century" in *The Role of the Romanies: Images and Counter-Images of 'Gypsies'/Romanies in European Cultures*, ed. by Nicholas Saul and Susan Tebbutt (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005): 80.

<sup>75</sup> Fraser: 126.

<sup>76</sup> Hancock, *We Are*: 60.

looser, though his hair is now lighter. The woman's hair is marginally darker, actually matching the shade of the man's hair. In this later version of the painting, she is given thicker hair, allowing the artist to depict more body and marginally less order. There are a few strands falling loose from her casual hairstyle, most notable above her ear and to the right of her part near the border of her turban. However, she is still shown in control of her overall neat hair.<sup>77</sup> And though the hair has become marginally less tidy, so has the hair of her European counterpart, making the change not overly notable.

The hair of Vouet's fortune-teller is darker than that of either of the Romani women painted by Caravaggio. More can be seen of her hair and its style as she does not sport a turban like her predecessors. This allows for a look at her braided hairstyle with many fly away wisps, especially towards the base of the back of her head. It is not just the braiding that appears unruly, even the hairs framing her face are fighting her attempts of making them presentable. A clump of hair pulls away from the rest of her hair and rests prominently across her forehead, declaring her minimal control over her appearance.

Messy hair was not just an attribute of Vouet's turban-less Romani. It is also a prominent feature of the fortune-teller in Bartolomeo Manfredi's *Fortune-Teller*. Like Caravaggio, Manfredi depicted his fortune-teller sporting a turban which conceals most of her hair. However, the young woman's hair has more similarities to the Romani woman in Vouet's painting. The hair that the audience is privy to seeing is completely loose and falling from the confines of her overly decorative turban. The hair's shading is dark, perhaps the darkest that has been discussed in this paper so far.

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<sup>77</sup> It should be remembered that unlike the first *Fortune-Teller*, this painting was actually a commissioned work ordered by one of del Monte's friends. He may have made certain requests or imparted onto Caravaggio preferences on how his painting should appear.



The loose and poorly styled hair of these last two examples suggests another stereotype of the Romani: their supposed uncleanness. Throughout numerous generations within Europe, the Romani were seen as vagrants who never bothered to undertake matters of cleanliness or sanitation.<sup>78</sup> Showing the women's hair in a state of disarray was a way for artists like Manfredi and Vouet to suggest a state of uncleanness or the supposed uncivilized personalities. Meanwhile, Caravaggio had painted the woman's hair as clean and under control. His fortune-teller is physically cleaner and more in control of her appearance than the women in the later paintings. She is shown as a demure woman with clean and neat hair, similar to the portraits of Italian women of this time.

As for the stereotype that the Romani were ugly, one need only look at these few paintings to understand that this was not how they were always shown in art. It seems that only literature portrayed them as such consistently, as most modes of visual art regularly showed them physically as pretty. However the woman in Caravaggio's work is shown as more modestly dressed compared to those by Manfredi and Vouet. She is depicted wearing a high necked shirt with the ornate collar securely fastened by a black bow in both versions of the painting. In the first *Fortune-Teller* her shirt collar comes to the base of her neck. In the later painting, the collar comes even higher on her neck. The neckline of the Romani women's shirts in later paintings, such as Manfredi and Vouet's, come much lower, prominently showing off the curves and shadowing of their cleavage. Caravaggio portrayed the Romani as a modest figure, not as the

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<sup>78</sup> Even recent legislation in Italy attacked the Romani with such accusations. In 2008 Italian Minister of the Interior Roberto Maroni and Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi attempted to pass census legislation and restrictive laws against the Romani by citing their supposed vagrancy and resulting inability to adopt modern ways of living as part of their justification of the laws. Though the legislation did not get ratified, it shows that the stereotypes from so many centuries ago are still entrenched in the public conscious, having been so thoroughly ingrained during periods like the Renaissance. Giovanni Picker, "Left-Wing Progress? Neo-Nationalism and the Case of Romani Migrants in Italy" in *The Gypsy 'Menace': Populism and the New Anti-Gypsy Politics*, ed. by Michael Stewart (London: Hurst & Company, 2012): 81-82.

sensually charged women of later works. It's a far more sympathetic depiction, respectful rather than overtly eroticizing.

And for the details of the earrings, only Manfredi showed a Romani wearing one. Once more Caravaggio did not give in to the sumptuous show of jewelry and foreign fabrics as Manfredi so obviously did. Caravaggio made a modest figure who is simply dressed and unimposing.

In terms of physical appearance, Caravaggio did not depict the Romani in what would have been an obviously stereotypical manner. There were already negative cultural expectations of colorfully clad, dark skinned women. He could have easily followed these expectations and made an image which correlated with what the expectations of his audience. Surely this route would have been more likely to assure him the patronage of del Monte, as he would have been visually quoting Romani characters from the *Commedia dell'Arte*, which the Cardinal so enjoyed.

Rather, Caravaggio chose to depict the Romani woman in a new way, which matches Hibbard's observation that the artist was more inclined to let his emotions dictate the appearance of his paintings rather than a pre-existing artistic tradition.<sup>79</sup> Caravaggio was known for his affinity for the lower classes and for wandering the streets of Rome, and of his fame comes from his ability to portray members of the lower socioeconomic strata and his great attention to appearances and details.<sup>80</sup> His contemporaries suggested that this preference for painting the lowest classes of Rome was reflective of his own troubled personality and his supposed

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<sup>79</sup> Hibbard: vii.

<sup>80</sup> Olson: 70.

unpredictable, and sometimes violent, nature.<sup>81</sup> Such familiarity may have motivated Caravaggio to portray the Romani sympathetically in *Fortune-Teller*.

Caravaggio made his sympathies known in the physical appearance of the woman in the *Fortune-Teller*, but he furthered emphasized this compassion in the woman's actions.

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<sup>81</sup> Olson: 70. When discussing Caravaggio's personality I would like to include a memorable quote summing up the artist by Bernard Benson: "One cannot deny that the painter was, as we say, no cupcake." Dan Hofstaster, "The Caravaggio Conundrum," *Art & Antiques* 33, no. 5 (May, 2010): 83.

## CHAPTER 5

### AMBIGUOUS ACTIONS

Caravaggio's Rome was a city overrun by crime. The issue was very much present in the public's mind. Those who were displaced by war or unemployed flooded the streets of Rome, adding to the masses of merchants and pilgrims regularly entering the city every day.<sup>82</sup> Included within this influx were the Romani people.

As the number of the city's unemployed grew so grew the crime rate, with the most common crime being pickpocketing.<sup>83</sup> Pickpocketing was so rampant that there was conjecture by Rome's citizens that it was part of a controlled organized crime syndicate.<sup>84</sup> Records from the prison of the Sistine Bridge document the interrogation of a thief identified as Pompeo in February 1595.<sup>85</sup> According to Pompeo's testimony, there were brotherhoods of thieves, resembling the law abiding guilds, and one entire group was dedicated to the activity of pickpocketing.<sup>86</sup> While Burke confirms that there is no way to be assured that the report was not sensationalized, the report does testify to Italy's fascination with the world of the rogue.<sup>87</sup> As crime rates continued to rise and pickpockets and their ilk became a common part of Roman life, the subject of thieves and cheats became a popular theme in Renaissance culture.<sup>88</sup> There were

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<sup>82</sup> Graham-Dixon: 100.

<sup>83</sup> Burke: 65.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid: 63.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid: 63.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid: 63.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid: 63-65.

<sup>88</sup> Langdon, "Cardsharps": 55.

dozens published of manuals that warned of these acts, including how the crimes were committed and the types of behavior to beware.<sup>89</sup>

The world of crime that was described in pamphlets and paint became known as the *mondo alla revescia*, or world turned upside down.<sup>90</sup> It was the world in which the pickpockets and cheats became the victors while young and naïve fops became the victims and were left penniless. Power and wealth shifted from the hands of the wealthy and entitled to society's lowest dregs.<sup>91</sup> Burke suggests that the phrase *mondo alla revesscia*/'world turned upside down' is where our modern phrase "underworld" originates.<sup>92</sup> Burke argues that the phrase "underworld" is suggesting the same thing as *mondo alla revescia*, as they are both just the world in reverse; for indeed in the criminal underworld it is the cutthroats who are king and the law abiding who are the most vulnerable.<sup>93</sup> Whatever one calls it, Graham-Dixon defines the motif most memorably, describing it as a world "where guttersnipes win and aristocracy lose."<sup>94</sup> The fear of being victimized by social inferiors was a common fear of the Renaissance upper classes.<sup>95</sup> The combination of tension and intrigue was something of which Caravaggio was definitely aware.

Caravaggio was actively engaged with of the growing popularity of the rogue motif. In *Cardsharps*, for example, a young man physically similar to the youth in *Fortune-Teller* is

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<sup>89</sup> Christopher Etheridge, "The Fortune Teller," in *Caravaggio & His Followers in Rome*, ed. by David Franklin and Sebastian Shülze (New Have: Yale University Press, 2001): 159.

<sup>90</sup> Burke: 65.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid: 65.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid: 65.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid: 65.

<sup>94</sup> Graham-Dixon: 105.

<sup>95</sup> Olson: 75.

focused on his cards and is unaware that his companions conspire against him in their game. The man by his side signals to his partner across the table. The younger conspirator has his back towards the viewers, giving them the opportunity to see him drawing cards from a hidden stash, which assures him a victory in this supposed game of chance. The ability to see the theft acts as a safeguard, allowing the audience to witness a theft but not risk becoming victims themselves. *Cardsharps* played well on the popularity of the rogue motif, and it was the first painting del Monte purchased from Caravaggio.<sup>96</sup>

It was del Monte's later purchase of *Fortune-Teller* along with the shared creation year of the paintings that influenced many to view the two as pendants. When the Cardinal chose to hang them in the same room at his residence, it solidified the belief that the two were a set. Yet Caravaggio did not paint them as a complementing pair and there is no solid proof for the theory.<sup>97</sup> Yet the trend to associate the two is present in modern scholarship. Both of Caravaggio's *Fortune-Teller* paintings have been lumped into the rogue motif because the association with *Cardsharps*. Scholars have persistently claimed that the scene portrayed upon the canvas is the Romani woman deftly stealing a ring from the unwitting young man's finger. This is a common assertion throughout the scholarship on the painting, and one commonly justified through its connotation with *Cardsharps*.

However, there is no certainty that the theft is actually occurring.<sup>98</sup> The detail is exceptionally small and easily overlooked upon the first viewing of the painting. Those who maintain that the theft is has occurred reference the woman's finger curling under as she caresses

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<sup>96</sup> Graham-Dixon: 99.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid: 99.

<sup>98</sup> Francine Prose is one of the few to challenge the theft's existence, which I believe is worth a special mention.

the man's hand, claiming that she is using this movement to steal the ring from her victim.<sup>99</sup> But the certainty is not provided as it is for *Cardsharps*. We are not "in the know" of this con as we were for the two cheats at the card table. *Cardsharps* shows that the artist could portray dynamic scenes of theft and cheating and that he was aware of steps needed to undertake these cons. He was aware of the necessary staging to execute these complex scenes. However, he did not apply any of this theatricality to the two figures of *Fortune-Teller*.

The theft of the ring would not be difficult to portray. Vouet depicts a ring quite prominently on the European woman's hand close to the center of the painting, and the Romani woman's finger gestures to it suggestively, promising that the theft is about to occur. The painting stages the moment where her finger is about to reach out and grab the ring and slide it off the other woman's hand; the whole affair is theatrical and unrealistically obvious. In comparison, Caravaggio's painting makes viewers question the possibility of theft. The artist stressed the ambiguity of the scene by framing the pale hands starkly against the dark *schivina*. Caravaggio wanted his viewers to focus on the interplay between the hands and what was not obvious. There is no ring noticeable, and so there is no open theft made known to the viewer.

But was this type of theft common in Renaissance society? Overall, the Romani were seen as a part of Rome's theft problem. Italians, as well as native Europeans as a whole, viewed the Romani as a race of undesirables. One of their earliest discussions of obvious issue in Western culture comes from Aventinus' *Bavarian Chronicler*.<sup>100</sup> In his account, the German chronicler retells the initial migration of the Romani into Europe through Germany, making his biases well known.

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<sup>99</sup> One such example can be found in Langdon, "Cardsharps": 45.

<sup>100</sup> Aventinus' given name was Johann Thurmaier. He wrote the *Bavarian Chronicle* in 1522. The following passage was taken from the section of 1439. Fraser: 85.

“At this time, that thievish races of men, the dregs and bilge-water of various peoples, who live on the borders of the Turkish empire and of Hungary (we call them Zigeni [Romani]), began to wander through our provinces under their king Zindelo, and by dint of theft, robbery, and fortune-telling they seek their sustenance with impunity.”<sup>101</sup>

The account claims that the main source of income for the Romani consists of underhanded deeds such as theft and fortune-telling. Aventinus associated fortune-telling with the crimes of theft and robbery, suggesting that these seemingly different actions are similar and should be equally reviled. He meant for fortune-telling to be recognized as a form of theft rather than the actual act of reading palms and divining one’s future.

Even the stories of the Romani that could be read as more sympathetic still portrayed them as natural born thieves. One such rendition of their origin story, as presented by Ian Hancock, claimed that the Romani race began at the crucifixion of Jesus. The story claims that a thief snuck up to the crucifixion and stole a fourth nail that was intended for Jesus. This act of theft spared Christianity’s savior further pain, and the thief and his descendants were blessed by God in reciprocation so that they could steal with impunity upon Earth with no fear of divine judgment in the afterlife.<sup>102</sup>

In this story the founder of the Romani race is supposed to be a hero; he spared Jesus further pain and tortures in what was a long and degrading death. Yet it also depicts the Romani as thieves by the fate of genetics and the will of God. Once more the belief that they are nothing more than a race with a predilection for law-breaking is hard to ignore. The stereotype of the

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<sup>101</sup> Fraser: 85-86.

<sup>102</sup> Hancock, *We Are*: 59.



Romani as a thievish people seemed to have been well ingrained into the social consciousness of Renaissance Europe.<sup>103</sup>

However, looking into Renaissance Rome's legal documentation there is little evidence to actually support these assertions. Just how much they contributed to Rome's rising crime rates is unknown.

Simon Vouet claimed to have witnessed such a theft of a ring, and illustrated it with the depiction two Romani women stealing from an unwitting European man under the guise of a palm reading session in an earlier *Fortune-Teller* from 1617 (Figure 6).<sup>104</sup> While the fortune-teller distracts the man, her accomplice is shown picking his pockets, while making a rude gesture to the audience to further deride him. Inscribed on the back of the painting is a phrase which translates from Latin as, "Egyptian commonly called gypsy telling the fortune of the foolish artisan, painted from the life by Simon Vouet 1617."<sup>105</sup> The inscription suggests that this was an actual theft witnessed by Vouet, presumably at some time after he arrived in Rome. Besides the phrase there is no evidence that such a theft happened in reality. It is also debated whether Vouet actually wrote the note himself or if it was later added by the painting's first owner, Cassiano dal Pozzo. Dal Pozzo was friends with del Monte, and it is probable that the collector saw the Cardinal's *Fortune-Teller* and purposely acquired one of a similar theme. Langdon suggests that

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<sup>103</sup> These beliefs were so strong and prevalent that they have carried over into modern society and politics. One of the key arguments made by Berlusconi and Maroni to spearhead their anti-Romani laws in 2008 was the Romanies' supposed lawlessness. The politicians argued that the Romani were dangerous people prone to becoming criminals who posed a threat to both urban and national security. If passed, this legislation would have required a new census of the Romani as well as a collection of all identities and fingerprints, even those of children. Note that this was not legislation attempted in the Renaissance; this law was seriously debated and almost passed in modern Italy. The belief that the Romani were thieves was one that was forced upon them shortly after their arrival into Western Europe and has remained to this day. Picker: 81-82.

<sup>104</sup> Simon Vouet, *Fortune-Teller*, 1617; Rome, Italy: Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica di Palazzo Barberini.

<sup>105</sup> In the original Latin: "AEGIPTIA-VULGO-ZINGARA-FATVI-CERDONIS-DIVINATRIX-A-SIMEO-VOEUT-AD-VIVUM-DEPICTA-MCDXVII." The inscription was not known until 1997, when it was discovered during the painting's restoration. Langdon, "Cardsharps": 57.

the inscription on the back of the painting was indeed written by dal Pozzo and not Vouet which puts the inscription's legitimacy in doubt.<sup>106</sup>

The only references to Romani and crime during the Renaissance come from personal correspondences and histories. Local law enforcement often left the Romani to self-regulate and keep order amongst themselves.<sup>107</sup> This means that the Romani were basically un-documented during the Renaissance and that modern scholars have no way to discern if the Romani were truly guilty of so many crimes.

But as seen in the case of Aventinus, histories and chronicles were subject to great levels of bias and inaccuracies. While the chroniclers perpetuated the negative perceptions of the Romani, however, these tales are balanced by letters of correspondence that make positive, or at least neutral, reference to the Romani. One such correspondence from France in 1427 discusses the culturally recognized link between palm-reading and pickpocketing. The writer claims that despite his numerous journeys through the street and witnessing palm readings, he never saw such a theft occurring.<sup>108</sup> It is possible that Caravaggio had the same experience when venturing out on the streets of Rome. However if this was not the case, the documentation from this letter shows that there was some awareness that the accusations of theft were unfounded, offering a possible explanation for the artist's sympathetic portrayal of the Romani woman in *Fortune-Teller*.

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<sup>106</sup> Langdon, "Cardsharps": 57. If Langdon's argument is valid, which I believe it is, it is likely da Pozzo wanted to emulate Bellori's story that Caravaggio painted del Monte's *Fortune-Teller* from life to truly rival the Cardinal's own painting.

<sup>107</sup> Fraser: 127.

<sup>108</sup> Pokorny: 600.

## CHAPTER 6

### NOT SEEING THE ROMANI AS THE 'OTHER'

Throughout the history of art there are examples of male artists subjugating and eroticizing foreign women. This is perhaps best seen in the Orientalist movement of the Avant-Gardes, which provided objectified images of exotic women for consumption by native European male viewers.<sup>109</sup> It is a plausible expectation that if Caravaggio did not demonize the Romani woman in *Fortune-Teller* then he would have eroticized her. Yet once more Caravaggio defies expectations. He neither eroticizes nor subjugates her; he does not “otherize” her. Rather it can be argued that he provides her with positive amorous connotations.

Too often themes of heterosexual romance are overlooked in Caravaggio’s work, the artist being more commonly associated with his homoerotic works. While there is no solid evidence to support or deny the assertions of Caravaggio’s sexuality, the academic mythos that has developed around the artist suggests that he was a homosexual and that his suppressed sexual preferences surfaced in his paintings. However, Dan Hofstadter claims that these theories did not readily surface in the scholarship until Bernard Benson suggested it in 1953.<sup>110</sup> Should we only focus on the homoerotic elements of Caravaggio’s artistic career, we lose the comparable study of scenes featuring heterosexual love in his work.

There is an obvious tension between the woman and man in the *Fortune-Teller*. The minor physical contact, as minimal as it is, is gentle and intimate. The tentative kindness of this interplay is not replicated in later fortune-teller works, which depict interactions that are both objectifying and derogatory. In these versions, the figure getting his or her palm read typically

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<sup>109</sup> Roger Benjamin, “Orientalism, Modernism and Indigenous Identity,” in *Art of the Avant-Gardes*, ed. Steve Edwards and Paul Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004): 85-87.

<sup>110</sup> Hofstadter: 83.

avoids looking directly at the Romani woman. The fortune-teller is also commonly to be depicted as a victim of theft.

These derogatory interactions do not feature in the relationship between the two figures in Caravaggio's painting. They are alone in an anonymous setting, creating a more intimate scene. They stand isolated from the world that intrudes in the other paintings, allowing for a glimpse at a private moment between two young adults with suggestive overtones.

### Power of the Portrait

As surmised by Paola Tingali, "What we see in a portrait is the public face of an identity, moulded by the ideals of the society to which it belongs."<sup>111</sup> No face painted in the Renaissance, if ever, is a pure and true to life representation of the individual it represents. Alterations to reality were made by the discretion of the artist and to match the expectations of society and patrons. Caravaggio's portrayal of the Romani woman did not meet societal expectations by choosing not to subjugate her. When she is seen as a portrait of a woman, Caravaggio's sympathies are revealed.<sup>112</sup>

The three-quarter positioning of her body allows us to see her in a greater depth than a profile would have allowed. This contrasts to the images like the one created by Manfredi years later. The woman in his painting is shown in a classic profile, making her face appear flat compared to those who surround her. Manfredi is more interested in her wardrobe and jewelry than her physical appearance. She is portrayed similarly to the female profile portraits that were prominent only a century before in Italy. As Patricia Simons demonstrated, the profile portrait was a typical way to portray women for some time during the Renaissance, this format rendering

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<sup>111</sup> Tingali, Paola, *Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation, Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997): 48.

<sup>112</sup> Note that the Romani is shown as a woman with no discernibly nefarious motives.

them as objects rather than actual individuals, allowing artists and their patrons to demonstrate signs of wealth and sometimes virtue. The profile rendered women into objects to be seen as a form of status.<sup>113</sup>

Much like these fifteenth century women, Manfredi's Romani is depicted in profile with large amounts of attention to her ensemble. While the profile of her face is flat and bland, the fabric of her clothing is shown in great detail. Her turban is thick and layered, with elaborate borders and embroidery. The ornate work suggests an exotic influence, making the woman appear foreign compared to the European men flanking her. While Manfredi gave such a materialistic focus to her appearance, the men are displayed more naturalistically, giving their bodies a greater . He made the woman appear less than real and less than human. He made her an unnatural "other," something different and negative compared to the Europeans who share the canvas space.

Similar treatment is given to the Romani women in Lionello Spada's *Gypsy Fortune-Teller* (Figure 7) from between 1614 and 1616.<sup>114</sup> The two women are both shown in a flat profile while the man's face is shown straight on and his body twists, giving him more dimensionality and a greater sense of movement. He appears more fluid than even the woman deftly stealing the money bag hanging close to his leg. This woman, despite crouching below her palm reading accomplice and weaving between two bodies, appears stiffer than the man whose only action is to turn his head to face his companion. Despite her movements the woman appears flat and her face is still rendered completely in profile. Her companion who is performing the

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<sup>113</sup> Patricia Simons, "Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture," in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992): 39-57. One such example is Domenico Veneziano's 1465 *Profile of a Young Lady*.

<sup>114</sup> Lionello Spada, *Gypsy Fortune-Teller*, 1614-1616; Modena, Italy: Galleria Estense.

palm reading is much like the woman from Manfredi's painting, shown in profile and bedecked in bright, rich fabrics and an elaborate headpiece.<sup>115</sup>

These dehumanizing traits do not occur in Caravaggio's *Fortune-Teller*. She is shown nearly straight on, same as the man. She wears more simplistic clothing that is not as overly Orientalized. As the clothing has fewer details and demands less attention, the viewer is free to observe the woman, take into account the entirety of her actions rather than see her as a flat presence.

Despite their actions, the Romani are rendered still, in part due to profile portrayals in many of the fortune-teller paintings. They are rendered as passive figures despite the active roles they are meant to take within the scene. They are shown as stiff in comparison to their more naturalistic and fluid European counterparts on canvas. The great sense of naturalism and movement gives the ethnic Europeans the appearance of the active role, forcing the Romani into the weaker, passive role. Meanwhile, in Caravaggio's painting the Romani takes on the active role, and her European companion is made the passive figure. She is the one who steps forward and grabs his hand while he stands still and watches her. She is given a far agency role by Caravaggio than the fortune-tellers of other artists.

### Victims of Theft

In the works of those who postdate Caravaggio, the Romani women are frequently shown becoming the victims of theft. Even as they steal from an unsuspecting mark, they themselves are stolen from in turn. In Vouet's 1618 *Fortune-Teller*, the Romani woman prepares to steal the other woman's ring unaware that she is already being robbed by the man with his hand in her

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<sup>115</sup> Spada takes the differences of the figures even further by portraying the Western European men on the illuminated side of the corner in the background, while a stark line of shadow separates divides them from the space occupied by the Romani women. This shadow also casts a darkness over their faces, suggesting a more sinister nature.

*schiaivina*. Langdon suggests that the much more comedic air of this scene is a direct influence from the *Commedia dell'Arte*, which sometimes made the Romanies into comedic anti-heroes.<sup>116</sup>

Vouet is not the only artist to victimize the Romani in his work. Manfredi's painting shows a similar theft occurring. Once more a Romani woman is robbed by a European man while she reads another's hand. In this version a companion of the woman watches, oblivious to the woman's victimization and unable to help, furthering the sense of the Romani woman's victimization and helplessness.

Valentin de Boulogne takes the victimization further in his *Fortune-Teller* (Figure 8).<sup>117</sup> In the painting, the fortune-teller is robbed by a hand snatching at the purse kept at her waist. She reads the palm of the man sitting next to her at the table, as a large cluster of other men watch. The painting does not confirm whether these onlookers are aware and complicit of the theft. However, it is apparent the Boulogne wanted his audience to recognize the action as theft since the shadowy thief gestures outward with a finger to his lips, begging silence from the viewer so he may pull off his illicit deed. Not only is the woman made the victim of a crime, but we are made conspirators by the perpetrator, as there is no way for us to intervene on her behalf. It gives a viewer total power over her victimization. It guarantees the audience's sense of superiority over the Romani figures, promising they themselves will not be subjugated. It is clear the Romani women are to be viewed as social inferiors, victims to be mocked.

By focusing on only two figures, the Romani woman and the Italian man, Caravaggio assures there is no ambiguity or threat of her becoming a victim of crime, as with the fortune-tellers of later paintings. Once more Caravaggio provides the woman with a level of sympathy and respect not given to the Romani palm readers of later paintings. She is not an object or an

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<sup>116</sup> Langdon, "Cardsharps": 58.

<sup>117</sup> Valentin de Boulogne, *Fortune-Teller*, c. 1620; Toledo, OH: Toledo Museum of Art.

extension of property, but an equal to the man with whom she interacts. The gentleness between these figures is not repeated in the later paintings. Caravaggio gives a scene of mutual trust and respect, both protecting and promoting the Romani woman in the process.

### Amorous Versus Erotic

The post-Caravaggio paintings depict interactions between the Romani and Europeans that are rude and furtive. Rarely do the European subjects look the Romani women in the eye, let alone at them, and the thefts only add further insult. Caravaggio's original painting depicts an interaction with a suggestion of domestic intimacy. There is an undercurrent of sexual tension in the painting. When describing the power of the female Florentine profile portraits, Patricia Simons how a humble and chaste woman would avoid eye contact in a public place, while "a loose woman, on the other hand, looked at men in the street. Temptation or a lover were discouraged if a virtuous woman did not return the gaze."<sup>118</sup> Power dynamics of the gaze dictate that a woman's averted gaze was linked with her chastity and humility. But the dynamic changed when the gaze was shared with a partner, as it compromised her chastity and replaced it with either love or lust.

While the figures of later fortune-teller paintings do not meet each other's gaze, Caravaggio's Romani both receives and reciprocates the male character's gaze.<sup>119</sup> In the *Fortune-Teller*, the man and woman lock gazes, their expressions soft and non-judgmental. Her gentle caress becomes suggestive of future possible physical interactions. Perhaps this woman

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<sup>118</sup> Simons, Patricia, "Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture" in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, ed. by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992): 50.

<sup>119</sup> Which is a unique challenge to an argument made by John Variano. To support his argument that only male figures were sensualized in Caravaggio's works, he claimed that the women who appear in Caravaggio's non-commissioned works avert their gaze from the audience, directly citing *Fortune-Teller*. Yet he disregards the couples own shared gaze, which I will prove is romantically suggestive. John Varriano, *Caravaggio: The Art of Realism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006): 62.



painted by Caravaggio is neither a victim nor foreign “other,” but I suggest she is viewed as a woman who was desirable.

However, Caravaggio is not replacing the crime of theft with the crime of prostitution. This is significant since prostitution at the time society was seen as “reprehensible morally, sociably, and economical,” despite statistics suggesting that the business flourished.<sup>120</sup> Despite no comprehensive censuses and inaccurate to non-existent legal records, it is believed that prostitution was a major factor in Rome’s economy.<sup>121</sup> Yet, Caravaggio shows a sexually charged painting without the payment. In the eyes of the Renaissance viewer this scenario would be morally better than one of paid sex. Sex that stemmed from love was deemed more acceptable than sex committed for money.<sup>122</sup> Between the hand and the gaze this is a portrait of romantic desire, not one of an overtly carnal lust or an illicit act. This is a mutual love, or at the least infatuation, that Caravaggio portrays, something of an amorous exchange.

All of these elements combine in Caravaggio’s work to reveal the image of a romanticized woman, not one who is simply, nor solely, an eroticized “other.” She is not just viewed by a male observer; she observes as well. She is actually the more forward of the two, taking the active role of grabbing the man’s hand and moving forward while her companion remains stationary and passive.

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<sup>120</sup> Ruggiero, Guido, “Prostitution: Looking for Love,” in *A Cultural History of Sexuality: Volume 3; In the Renaissance*, edited by Bette Talvacchia (Oxford: Berg, 2011): 157.

<sup>121</sup> Peter Partner, *Renaissance Rome 1500-1559: A Portrait of a Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976): 98-99.

<sup>122</sup> Ruggiero: 157.

## CHAPTER 7

### POWER OF THE PALM

Looking at the actual palm reading suggests that Caravaggio may have been familiar with some of the base aspects of palmistry sometimes referred to as chiromancy.<sup>123</sup> There were texts predating Caravaggio that sought to explain the practice of palmistry, revealing society's underlying fascination with this form of divination. One of the earliest manuscripts accessed for this project dates to 1484 and is attributed Michael Scot, the court astrologer to Emperor Frederick II. Scot reflects that since antiquity mankind had sought to discern the secrets of the soul through a person's physical features, including their hands.<sup>124</sup> By referencing the antiquity, Scot suggests that there were similar works which came before his own. The accompanying illustrations assign portions of the hands to the various planets and the moon, giving them the names of constellations named for Roman gods (Figure 9).<sup>125</sup> The presence of the manuscript proves that there was an interest in understanding palmistry. There was an interest in the field for many years, and the popularity of the fortune-teller painting further emphasizes this fascination.

The assignments explained and demonstrated by Scot remain the same throughout the history of palmistry, even into modern day manuals concerning the craft, as can be seen in Dora Noges' detailed illustrations in Henry Frith and E.D. Heron Allen's *Language of the Hand*

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<sup>123</sup> It should be noted that while the following section will discuss the beliefs and practices of palmistry, the actual meaning of the lines (if any) is only conjecture proposed by practitioners and historians over the years. This section is not meant to determine the authenticity, or lack thereof, of palmistry, but rather discuss its norms and guidelines. This is not an endorsement on my behalf on the existence of such means to read fate, but rather a discussion on beliefs to which Caravaggio may have been privy.

<sup>124</sup> Scot, Michael (attrib.), *Chiromantia: Ex divina philosophorum academia, secundum natura vires ad extra chyromanticio, diligentissime collectum* [also known as *The Art of Cheiromancy*] (Padua: Matthias Cerdonis de Windischgrätz, 1484): 4-5.

<sup>125</sup> Scot, Michael (attrib.), Illustration from *Chiromantia: Ex divina philosophorum academia, secundum natura vires ad extra chyromanticio, diligentissime collectum*, 1484.

(Figures 10-11).<sup>126</sup> Despite a separation of time and geography, Noges and Scot's maps of the man maintain the same designations and meanings. They give a standard which Caravaggio may have known and understood. Frith and Allen's history and guide to palmistry relates that the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw a blossoming interest in this form of fortune telling, with publications by Cocles in 1504 and De la Chambre in 1653 popping up in Italy and France, respectively.<sup>127</sup> The cultural interest was present and paraphilia on palmistry was available and accessible to those like Caravaggio if they had enough interest.

There are aspects of palmistry which Caravaggio matches to the illustrated guides. The palm must be relaxed and the muscles allowed to contract, rather than lain completely flat.<sup>128</sup> The man in the painting does this in both of the *Fortune-Tellers* and it would have been an easy trait for Caravaggio to observe from witnessing an actual palm reading on the streets or with a private demonstration. In comparison, the second Vouet painting shows the woman getting her palm read holding her hand stiff and flat, proving that the artist did not know as much on palmistry or had not observed the practice enough.

In Caravaggio's painting, the fortune-teller gestures primarily to the upper portion of the man's hand. The woman's hand lingers on this section of the hand, which is the part that dictates masculine traits. It features the "manly, aggressive, and hardy qualities" of the personality as well as the portions named for masculine gods or astral bodies.<sup>129</sup> The fingers are associated

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<sup>126</sup> Dora Noges, Fig. 8 and Fig. 9, illustrations for Henry Frith and E.D. Heron Allen's *The Language of the Hand: Being a Concise Exposition of the Principles and Practice of the Art of Reading the Hand; By Which the Past, the Present, and the Future May Be Explained and Foretold*.

<sup>127</sup> Henry Frith and E.D. Heron Allen, *The Language of the Hand: Being a Concise Exposition of the Principles and Practice of the Art of Reading the Hand; By Which the Past, the Present, and the Future May Be Explained and Foretold* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 189?): 14.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid: 77.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid: 81.

with Jupiter (index finger), Saturn (middle finger), Apollo (ring finger), and Mercury (pinky finger). The only feminine identities are in the lower half of the hand, in the thumb (Venus) and the space of the palm opposite (the moon).<sup>130</sup>

If one were to attempt a reading of the portion of the hand the Romani woman holds, allusions to sex and desire appear. She points to the region where the top most line of the palm would run, the Line of the Heart. As the name would suggest, this line is meant to dictate matters of love. Should it start at the index finger and stretch across the entire palm it is supposedly a sign of strong and quality love and enduring marriages. If the line ends by the middle finger (Saturn), it suggests a strong feeling of love and attachment that is sensual rather than domestic.<sup>131</sup> Caravaggio's fortune-teller gestures to this section of the hand. An understanding of chiromancy adds to the romantic overtones between the two figures. Caravaggio was suggesting a form of attraction between the two, not just in their physicality but in the very palm reading, which is the heart of his painting.

Of course, such readings must be taken with a measure of skepticism. In the words of Frith and Allen:

"There are as many considerations to be entertained and weighed as in a weather forecast. We may and do make broad guesses at the weather, and at times, are correct; but we must study the signs. So it is with Palmistry."<sup>132</sup>

The historians of palmistry are quick to explain that the method of fortune-telling is not an exact science and can be imprecise and difficult even for a skilled professional. If this is the case, then there is the likelihood for error on Caravaggio's part, though it would not affect his overall understanding of the palm.

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<sup>130</sup> Frith and Allen: 83; Scot: 4-5.

<sup>131</sup> Frith and Allen: 93.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid: 92.

Caravaggio deviates from certain standards of chiromancy. Both Frith and Scot recommend that the left hand that must be examined first during a reading. Yet Caravaggio does not follow this recommendation in his portrayal of the reading. The man's left hand is gloved and rests by his sword, and it is his right hand that he holds out ungloved. Should the left hand have already been read, it is more likely that Caravaggio would have shown both hands bare to suggest how far into the palm reading the scene was. Caravaggio likely chose the right hand due to the painting's composition. However, there is another reason to show the man starting his palm reading with his right hand. The left hand was considered something of the 'sinister' hand. By showing the palm reading done with the right hand, Caravaggio was trying to negate the sense of evil or un-Christian behavior within the painting. It suggests their attraction is love rather than lust, and that there is nothing underhanded with the proceedings we are witnessing.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

Observing rather than just seeing the Romani woman's presence in Caravaggio's *Fortune-Teller*, reveals significance of her presence. The picture becomes important not merely due to the fact that this is one of the earliest representations of the Romani in Western art as a subject, but because of the uniquely positive associations Caravaggio portrayed her in contrast to societal expectations and artistic conventions.

It has been argued here that Caravaggio's *Fortune-Teller* presents a sympathetic portrayal of a Romani woman. This woman is not the ugly, foreign thief that society expected at the time. Rather, she is a young and pretty figure, one whose purported theft is here revealed to be a historiographical falsehood. She becomes an equal in the eyes of her companion, neither a foreign other nor a manipulative woman. In constructing a mutually respectful rapport between the two protagonists, Caravaggio allows us to witness a relationship with neither making a victim out of the other. He has elevated the Romani woman from a stock character to a sympathetic figure with depth that is worthy of further consideration.

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