

CARAVAGGIO MAGISTER AND THE BEATLES

Irving Lavin

Institute for Advanced Study

Princeton, NJ



1) Caravaggio, *Calling of St. Matthew*, Contarelli Chapel. Trajectory of shadow-line indicated.

In the painting, following the line that separates light from darkness, anyone who knows how to "see," knows where it points. It is no accident that Christ converts, instantaneously, the typically red-bearded Jewish tax collector with a stylish broach in his hat, pointing with his index finger bent half-shadowed inward toward his inner self: his gesture does not ask, "who me?," it simply indicates that "I" am a new man. **In fact, he is the only figure who**

faces the viewer directly with both legs exposed to begin his response to the call. Christ here, appropriately, inevitably, uses the same gesture God the Father had used to create Adam in the Sistine ceiling, as does Peter his follower and successor. In the Contarelli chapel the line separates light from darkness (even the windows are dark), as did God in Genesis, and illuminates Matthew at his mouth, whence he will write, in his native Hebrew tongue, the first gospel, which relates the genealogy of Salvation from Abraham to Jesus. Christ's gesture is thus in both cases a gesture of creation, the creation of a New Man, whose language in this case serves to retrieve relapsed Jews who have wandered from the true faith, and thus fulfill at last, necessarily, the promise of the Old Law in the salvation of the New.



1969, Celestial Arts, Howard St., San Francisco

"Renaissance Minstrels," Artist: Fabio Traverso

In a famous Beatles poster made in 1969, Paul McCartney is portrayed as Caravaggio's Levi-become-Matthew in the center of the composition (a commercial Apple added). By no mistake, the poster's creation coincided in the same year with the recording of Paul's famous song *Maxwell's Silver Hammer*. McCartney, who was a Liverpool born, baptized Catholic, Jesuit-schooled, surely knew that, following long tradition, when a pope dies the Camerlengo, in the presence of the other cardinals, taps him on the head with a silver hammer, three times to prove that he is dead. In the poster, even the 20th-century artist, Fabio, knows who is being called. The choice of scene, no doubt, had to do with the concomitance of the song, and Paul's name with that of the current pope (Paul VI, 1963-1978).

*For information on the manifold religious lives of Paul McCartney and the Beatles see the website **Beliefnet**.

Published: *About Art Online*, October 2018 Issue:
<https://www.aboutartonline.com/2018/10/06/caravaggio-il-vero-matteo-e-i-beatles-irving-lavin-vs-sara-magister-english-text-with-italian-translation/>