



The Calling of Saint Matthew, 1598–1600  
Caravaggio (Michelangelo Merisi) (Italian, Lombard, 1571–1610)  
Oil on canvas; 322 x 340 cm  
Contarelli Chapel, Church of San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome

#### Chiaroscuro

This is an Italian term which literally means 'light-dark'. In paintings the description refers to clear tonal contrasts which are often used to suggest the volume and modelling of the subjects depicted.

Artists who are famed for the use of chiaroscuro include [Leonardo da Vinci](#) and [Caravaggio](#). Leonardo employed it to give a vivid impression of the three-dimensionality of his figures, while Caravaggio used such contrasts for the sake of drama. Both artists were also aware of the emotional impact of these effects.

National Gallery glossary

Trained in [Milan](#) and active in Rome (1592–1606), [Naples](#) (1606–7; 1609–10), Malta (1607–8), and Sicily (1608–9), Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610) was one of the most revolutionary figures of European art. His practice of painting directly from [posed models](#) violated the idealizing premise of Renaissance theory and promoted a new relationship between painting and viewer by breaking down the conventions that maintained painting as a plausible fiction rather than an extension of [everyday experience](#).

Caravaggio's two canvases, the [Calling of Saint Matthew](#) and the [Martyrdom of Saint Matthew](#) (San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome), were unveiled in 1600, and established his reputation. Caravaggio pushed the figures up against the picture plane and used light to enhance the dramatic impact and give the figures a quality of immediacy.

As a contemporary critic noted, "a characteristic of this school [of painting] is to use a focused light source from high up, without reflections, as though in a room with a [single] window and the walls painted black. In this fashion the lit and shadowed areas are very light and very dark and give enormous three-dimensionality to the painting, but in an unnatural fashion neither done or even conceived before by such artists as Raphael, [Titian](#), Correggio, or others." What was at issue was not a descriptive naturalism, but a provocative insistence on the physical reality of the scene portrayed.

