

With Stolen Caravaggio Still Missing, a Digital Substitute

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ROME — The fate of a 17th-century Caravaggio nativity painting that was whisked away from an unprotected oratory in Palermo, Sicily, one night in October 1969 has been one of the art world's most enduring enigmas.

According to a popular theory, the 1609 painting, “Nativity With St. Francis and St. Lawrence,” ended up in the hands of the Mafia.

On Saturday the public will get a chance to once again see the nativity in situ — at least a close facsimile of it — when Italian officials are to unveil a high-tech, layered digital print at the oratory.

The copy was made by [Factum Arte](#), a Madrid-based company known for its large-scale art replicas, including [a 2007 reproduction of a Veronese](#) removed from a Venice church by Napoleon's forces in 1797.

The Caravaggio nativity proved especially challenging, as the artists, computer experts and restorers involved in the reproduction had very little primary material available, working chiefly from a transparent slide photograph that was taken in 1968 and some large black-and-white glass plate negatives, according to the company.

Comparisons with other Caravaggios produced a digital and technological palette as a starting point. The resulting facsimile mimics the original in scale, color and surface texture.

The reproduction was commissioned by a Milan production office of the Sky television network, which will broadcast a documentary about the making of the digital copy next year.