

## How a long-lost Caravaggio masterpiece was recreated, nearly 50 years after it was stolen

Painstaking project to recreate Caravaggio's "Nativity" painting led by British art expert



An art laboratory led by Adam Lowe, a British artist, has managed to reproduce the masterpiece in all its original glory after a painstaking project lasting five months Photo: Alessandro Gaja

By Nick Squires, Rome

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Nearly 50 years after it was stolen by the mafia from a church in Sicily, a masterpiece by Caravaggio has been miraculously brought back to life by cutting-edge technology pioneered by a British expert.

In one of the most infamous art thefts of the 20th century, Caravaggio's "Nativity with St Francis and St Lawrence" was snatched from the Oratory of San Lorenzo in the heart of Palermo in 1969 by two unidentified raiders who cut it out of its frame with knives.

According to one account the painting, which today would be worth at least £13 million, ended

up being hidden in a farm in the Sicilian countryside, where it was eventually nibbled to nothing by rats and mice.

Another story, told to Italian police by a mafia “pentito” or turncoat, recounts that the painting, which is 2.7 metres high and nearly two metres wide, was used as a floor mat by Toto Riina, the murderous head of the island’s Cosa Nostra mafia.

Yet another theory holds that it was destroyed in an earthquake in Irpinia in the southern region of Campania in 1980, shortly before it was to be sold on the black market.

Whatever became of it, one thing is sure – it was never recovered, and is listed by the FBI as one of the world’s top 10 art crimes.

Now an art laboratory led by Adam Lowe, a British artist, has managed to reproduce the masterpiece in all its original glory after a painstaking project lasting five months.

“This is unique in terms of the level of engagement that has gone into the project,” Mr Lowe, the director of the Madrid-based Factum Arte digital restoration laboratory, told The Telegraph.

His team faced a huge challenge – initially they had to work off a single colour photograph that was taken of the painting a year before it was stolen.

By luck, they then managed to find in an art conservation institute in Rome a collection of black-and-white glass-plate negatives of the masterpiece, dating from its last restoration in 1951.

The experts used sophisticated, 52 mega-pixel cameras and purpose-built digital printers to make copies of the images, steadily building them up into a composite image that was as faithful to Caravaggio’s original canvas as technically possible.

They painted in details in a style that was true to Caravaggio’s famous “chiaroscuro” technique of depicting light and shade.

They were even able to replicate the original brushstrokes left by the Renaissance painter.



Photo: Alessandro Gaja

“We worked by hand to decipher and interpret areas where the photographic information was not sufficient,” said Mr Lowe, who did the painting along with a colleague.

“It was a constant process, moving between the digital realm and the physical realm.

“We created multiple layers to build up the densities of tone and colour. We took photographs about the size of a postcard and then stitched them together digitally,” said Mr Lowe, who founded Factum Arte, a multidisciplinary workshop aimed at art conservation, in 2000.



Photo: Alessandro Gaja

He has since worked with art institutions and museums around the world, including the National Gallery and Sir John Soane's Museum in London, the Prado in Madrid, the Louvre and the Vatican Museums.

His team was able to make sure they were using exactly the right colours and shades by studying other Caravaggio works, including three which hang in the Church of San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome – The Calling, The Martyrdom and The Inspiration of St Matthew.

“We used our knowledge of the paintings in Rome to paint in the missing elements, in the character and style of Caravaggio,” said Mr Lowe, 56, originally from Oxford.

“We would make a very high-resolution digital photo, then check that it was faithful at a detailed level, and repeat the process over and over again. It was gradual, incremental. We added in multiple layers of information.”

The project brought together photographers, digital restorers, art historians and computer scientists.

The reproduction was stretched, varnished and mounted on traditional canvas.

A few days ago, it was placed in the exact spot where the original hung, above the altar in the Oratory of San Lorenzo.

It will be unveiled on Saturday at a ceremony that will be attended by Sergio Mattarella, Italy's president.

“When we installed the painting last week, the people connected with the Oratory said how wonderful it was because they felt that a wound had been healed,” Mr Lowe said.



“I would hope that whoever took the original would now be prompted to return it, prompted by the degree of care and affection lavished on this project.”

A documentary about the project, “The Mystery of the Lost Caravaggio”, has been made by Sky Arts and will be shown in the UK in January.

It is thought that Caravaggio painted “Nativity” in 1609, just a year before his death in Porto Ercole, Tuscany.



Caravaggio's the Nativity

He arrived in Sicily in October 1608 after escaping from Malta, where he had been jailed for the

killing of a young artist in a brawl.

The hell-raising artist, whose real name was Michelangelo Merisi, went on to produce many of his best-known masterpieces in Sicily.

Factum Arte has been involved in similar projects before, but they involved making copies of paintings that still existed.

The company made a copy of *The Wedding Feast at Cana*, a massive oil painting by the late-Renaissance artist Paolo Veronese, after being commissioned by Venice.

The original painting was plundered from Venice in 1797 by Napoleonic troops and is now owned by the Louvre Museum in Paris.

The facsimile can be seen in a monastery on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore in the Venetian lagoon, where the original once hung.

The Madrid-based firm was also responsible for producing an exact three-dimensional copy of the tomb of King Tutankhamen in the Valley of the Kings at Luxor, Egypt.

Nicholas Reeves, a British archaeologist, studied the high-resolution facsimile and came up with the theory that behind the walls of the tomb lies a hidden chamber that could be the final resting place of Queen Nefertiti, the stepmother of the boy-king.

Results from radar imaging have been sent to a team in Japan for analysis, with the results expected in the next few weeks.