

'Restitution of a lost beauty': Caravaggio Nativity replica brought to Palermo

Facsimile of 17th-century masterpiece to be brought to the oratory from which it was stolen in 1969, as fate of original work remains a mystery

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The theft of Caravaggio's Nativity with St Francis and St Lawrence from an oratory in Palermo in 1969 is still considered one of the worst art crimes in history.

The 17th-century masterpiece - a depiction of the newborn Christ on a bed of straw, painted in the chiaroscuro technique - was thought to have been painted by Caravaggio in Rome and later moved to Sicily, where it hung for centuries before being cut from its frame by two thieves in the night, never to be seen again.

Since then, various theories have emerged about the fate of the painting, including that its remnants were burned after it was gnawed on by pigs and rats after being stashed in a barn. Most experts agree on one assumption about the heist: that the mafia was involved.

But now a new twist has emerged in a tale that for decades has come to symbolise the Cosa Nostra's enduring hold over Sicily. A replica of the lost Caravaggio is being brought back to the spot where the original once hung. It is expected to be welcomed to its new home on Saturday by Italy's head of state, Sergio Mattarella, a former judge from Sicily and government minister whose brother was assassinated by the mafia in 1980.

The initiative was introduced by the TV broadcaster Sky, which also commissioned a Madrid- and Milan-based company, Factum Arte, to create a replica of the piece. The group is known for using hi-tech methods to create facsimiles of major works of art or other works of cultural heritage, including the creation of a replica of the tomb of Tutankhamun.

"We are not bringing back the original, but a facsimile. However it is one that will look very similar to the original," said Roberto Pisoni, the head of the Sky Arts production hub, which is based in Milan.

Sky said the replica was produced by a team of architects and computer engineers at Factum Arte who had precious little to go on: just a slide of the painting by photographer Enzo Brai, which did not even capture the entire painting, and some black and white photographs of the Caravaggio work from the 1950s that were recently discovered in the archives of the Restoration Institute in Rome.

Adam Lowe, the founder of Factum Arte, said in a statement that the information gleaned from the slide and photographs enabled the group to study the surface of the painting, including brush marks. The group also studied Caravaggio's three paintings in the Church of San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome to try to replicate the exact tone of colours the painter used. The Nativity is believed to have been painted at the same time as the other Rome works.

Pisoni at Sky said he hoped that bringing the replica to Palermo would serve as a "sort of restitution of a lost beauty". He added: "It will give people the possibility - even with a facsimile - to see how it would appear if the painting was still in the oratory, because it really is a wonderful place," he said.

It also would help further an understanding of how technology could help create reproductions so that works of art - which for whatever reason were damaged or could not be shown - could be imagined in their original setting, he said.

For years, an enlarged photograph has hung on the wall where the Caravaggio once was. The fate of the original masterwork, in the meantime, is still a lingering question in Palermo.

While many people think the painting was destroyed - either on purpose or by accident - Lynda Albertson, chief executive of the Rome-based Association for Research into Crimes against Art, a research and outreach organisation that promotes the study of art crime, said she is doubtful that is the case.

"I am quite confident that no one left a Caravaggio in a barn with pigs," she said. "You might do that if you are a crazy person, but this was a bit more organised than that."

Nor does she believe that the amount of time it has now officially been missing means that it is definitely lost for ever. "It is difficult to get these objects back, but often it does happen 30 or 40 years later," she noted.

The recent theft of 15 works from a museum in Verona, including masterpieces by Rubens and Tintoretto, proves there is still a market for stolen art, even though some experts contend that such works cannot really ever be sold again.

Another Caravaggio work that was stolen on the island of Malta was eventually recovered when a priest convinced a thief to return it, Albertson said. The thief was later found to be connected to organised crime. Asked whether stolen art was tucked away in the homes of rich patrons who pay for such works illegally, Albertson said that was the stuff of Hollywood.

"I think it is often used as collateral for other illicit activity, and kept in a safe place. Still, it is sometimes handled badly - as was the case in Malta - so safe is a relative term," she said.

Sky has produced a documentary called *Operazione Caravaggio - Mystery of the Lost Caravaggio* - which will be aired in January. The broadcaster said it will tell the story of the Nativity and the decision to reproduce the work and "give it back" to the city of Palermo.