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DEBATES

THE MYSTERY OF CARAVAGGIO'S DAISIES

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BY ELISE ADIBI

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first saw Caravaggio's (Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, 1571-1610) *St Francis in Ecstasy*,

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Francis_of_Assisi_in_Ecstasy_\(Caravaggio\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Francis_of_Assisi_in_Ecstasy_(Caravaggio)))

1595 in the exhibition titled *Caravaggio 2025* at the Palazzo Barberini Rome. Made in Rome when he was just 24 years old, the painting was back on its native soil, on loan from the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford Connecticut. The Atheneum was the first American museum to own a Caravaggio purchased for \$17,000 in 1943.

Caravaggio's painting depicts St Francis of Assisi on Mt Verna while he is experiencing the miracle of the stigmata. St Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) was the first human ever reported to experience this miracle. The stigmata are the appearance on the human body of the same wounds suffered by Jesus on the cross. There are typically five stigmata wounds: nail holes on each hand, and each foot, and a spear wound on the side. In 1224, while on a spiritual retreat to celebrate Michaelmas, a religious holiday, St Francis was visited by a supernatural being, a six-winged Seraph, who shot rays of light and fire from the sky, inflicting the wounds of the stigmata and inducing the saint into an ecstatic state.

In Caravaggio's painting, we see St Francis in this trance state, reclining in the arms of an angel who looks entirely human, except for the feathered wings on his back. The two figures emerge from darkness bathed in an otherworldly glow. In the far distance, though cracks in the clouds, we can see either the sun or moon rising, it is unclear which. Behind St Francis there is a campfire with a shadowy figure dressed in a brown Franciscan robe assumed to be St Francis's beloved friend, Brother Leo. Behind Brother Leo are some shepherds, one with a crook, excitedly pointing up at the sky in the direction of the light. In the foreground nestled into the dark vegetation, are some tiny white daisies.

Two of the daisies in the foreground immediately caught my eye when I saw this painting for the first time in Rome. I noticed right away that there was something odd about them. Having already written several essays on the subject of daisies, I was acutely aware of the fact that daisies open their petals at dawn to greet the sun and close their petals at sunset. I wondered, why do these daisies in Caravaggio's painting have their petals open at night?

Caravaggio's painting has long been admired for its more inward interpretation of the miracle. Caravaggio does not depict the Seraph, like many others before him, nor does he depict the nail holes, as was customary. The only physical mark of the stigmata in his painting is the chest wound.

In a recent essay, *Daisies in Ecstasy* (published in [The Philosophical Salon](#) on October 27, 2025) I observe that the two daisies in the foreground of the painting are placed alongside the left hand and the left foot of the saint, spots where one would typically be looking for marks of the stigmata. The daisies opening their petals at night is a clue that something supernatural is happening here. Some flowers do open their petals at night. These flowers provide food for nighttime pollinators such as bats and

moths. With his close observation of nature, Caravaggio could easily have painted night-blooming flowers in the foreground of the painting. Tuberose, jasmine and lilies are all common night-blooming flowers in Italy, but Caravaggio chose daisies.

Daisies reliably tell time by opening their petals to face the sun; they are also symbols of humility. The word humble in English and *umile* in Italian come from the Latin *humilis*, which means low and on the ground. Daisies grow low to the ground. The daisies in Caravaggio's painting appear to be the species *Bellis perennis*, which would have been common in Europe in Caravaggio's time.

One reason Caravaggio may have chosen daisies to replace the nail holes is that, as the story goes, St Francis tried to hide his wounds for the remaining two years of his life. True faith does not need proof.

After contemplating Caravaggio's *St Francis in Ecstasy* and writing *Daisies in Ecstasy*, I was convinced that I had discovered hidden meaning in the painting. It was thrilling to uncover a secret waiting to be noticed for hundreds of years. I was so focused on the two white flowers in the foreground and my interpretation of them, that I failed to see that there was a third daisy!

My friend and Pittsburgh based artist, Michael Morrill, read my essay and studied the painting for himself. He pointed out the third daisy to me shortly after my essay was published. Then a day later, another friend and former teacher of mine, the philosopher Alexander Nehamas, based in Princeton, New Jersey, also pointed out the third daisy to me. The secret was out!

The third daisy is hidden by the robe of St Francis in the lower left of the painting near the saint's exposed foot. Its stem is in shadow, and its head aligns with a crease in the saint's robe. Unlike the other two daisies whose petals are painted a bright

white and stand out starkly against a dark leafy green ground, the third daisy is hard to see: its petals blend into the light brown fabric.

Also, unlike the other two daisies, the third daisy's petals are facing directly upwards in a high noon position. Using the petals as guides, we can determine the direction of the light sources in the painting. Several of the daisies open their petals to an unseen light source coming from the left of the painting, and the third daisy opens its petals to another unseen light source coming from directly above. The two different angles create a cross of light over the reclining saint.

The experience of my blind spot was so beguiling to me that I decided I had to go see Caravaggio's third daisy with my own eyes. I drove to Hartford to revisit the painting I had originally seen in Rome. I walked up to the canvas and there it was, right under my nose, the third daisy. Unlike in Rome, the gallery at the Wadsworth Atheneum was empty and I could linger in front of the painting undisturbed for as long as I liked. I looked closely at the painting, revisiting the two daisies which had initially popped out at me.

Reunited with the painting, it was as if the scales had been removed from my eyes, in utter disbelief, right in front of me, I saw two more daisies! Since seeing the painting in Rome, I had been studying the hi-res Wikipedia image of it online, and I had not seen these new daisies in the reproduction. Yet there they were, tucked away in the shadows of St Francis's robe, two more daisies, one with its petals open, like two of the other daisies, in the direction of the light coming from the left-hand side of the painting, and the other one with its petals closed.

The daisy with its petals closed, shrouded in darkness, is the hardest to see. Caravaggio painted a large upright leaf in front of it, preventing this daisy from receiving light. Caravaggio's closed daisy reveals his knowledge of plant biology. The scientific term for plants that close their petals in the absence of light is called *Nyctinasty*.

Now that I have seen all five of Caravaggio's daisies in real life, I can see them in the photo reproduction of the painting. Once I know they are there, I see them, but before I knew they were there, they weren't there. It was a eureka moment, Caravaggio had painted five daisies to correspond to five stigmata wounds.

How could I have missed three of the daisies? To be fair, they are easy to miss. As far as we know, the significance of Caravaggio's daisies has been missed for 430 years. Maybe the 16th century Italian audience would have recognized their significance, but in our times the daisies still remain lowly, and not worthy of recognition by cultural institutions. The significance of the daisies was not mentioned in the description of the painting offered by the curators of *Caravaggio 2025*, and in an email exchange with Oliver Tostmann, the curator of European Art at the Wadsworth Atheneum, he kindly confirmed that my observation was new to him, and he suggested putting my finding into the object file for the painting. I sent an email to the curatorial team of *Caravaggio 2025* sharing my findings with them, they did not respond.

The discovery of Caravaggio's daisies is a reminder that mystery is all around us waiting for us to see it. Seeing is a process. It takes time: in the case of Caravaggio's daisies, 430 years.

Note. Photocollage: *The Mystery of Caravaggio's Daisies*, Elise Adibi, 2025

THE AUTHOR



Elise Adibi is an artist and writer with a background in philosophy and architecture. She created a 6-month installation of plants and oil paintings in the greenhouse of Henry Clay Frick at The Frick Museum in Pittsburgh (Respiration Paintings, 2017) and wrote *Subtle Affinity* (2018) published in *Forty-Five: A Journal for Outdoor Research*. Some of her solo gallery shows include, *A Priori* (2010), *Da Capo* (2012) and *Substance* (2015) all in New York and *Metabolic Painting* in Cambridge MA (2013).

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