

# Caravaggio

## Magdalene in Ecstasy



18. April - 18. May 2025  
KNMA, Saket

On the Cover  
**CARAVAGGIO (B. 1571)**  
**Magdalene in Ecstasy**

Oil on canvas  
40.75 in X 36 in. (103.5 × 91.4 cm.)  
Painted in 1606  
Collection : Private Collection

**BOOKLET COURTESY**

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**Special Thanks to**

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# Caravaggio

## Magdalene in Ecstasy



**‘Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy’** is one of Caravaggio's most compelling and influential works, rediscovered centuries after it remained hidden in a private collection. This extraordinary painting captures a moment of intense spiritual transformation that also marks a bold departure from the prevalent tradition in the depiction of Biblical subjects and themes.

In this evocative portrait, Mary Magdalene, placed against a faint shadowy hint of a landscape, has her enraptured body leaning backward in ecstasy. With loosened hair, parted lips, and eyes not fully closed and a tear rolling down, she is one could say in a state of surrender. Her clasped hands and white garment slipping from her shoulders convey her unspeakable emotions. Caravaggio brilliantly hints at the presence of music, drawing our eye to her ear, deeply tuned in by angels to transport her to Heaven as the legend goes, “to hear the delightful harmonies of celestial choirs.”

The lone portrayal of Mary Magdalene has been a rare subject, depicted by a few painters, either in penitence, or literally floating toward heaven surrounded by angels, often as a symbol of redemption. Caravaggio painted Magdalene closer to the ground, in an unknown setting/location, in a state of ecstasy, never painted before in this manner. Lost to history until its rediscovery in 2014 by Caravaggio specialist Mina Gregori, this painting was previously known only through copies made by his followers. After meticulous restoration work led by Cinzia Pasquali that lasted over six months, we can now engage and appreciate the power of Caravaggio's original vision, painted close to his death.

Believed to have been created during a tumultuous period when the artist was in hiding embroiled in an accidental murder in Rome, this work reflects Caravaggio's ability to transform personal anguish into timeless art that speaks to viewers across centuries and cultures.

Roobina Karode



#### **The eye and the tears**

Around the eye the pink area is painted in contrast to the paleness of the eyebrow and the remarkably intense slanted eye was created by two overlaying brushstrokes of black and white.

The inverted values of shade and light can be seen in the eye sockets that are usually in the shade but here are highlighted by the light from below.

One of Caravaggio's characteristics is the particular rendering of the tears: in fact he does not want them to stand out in an analytical way because he tends to merge things as they are in reality. His realism is always of a general and essential character.



#### **The mouth and nose**

Admirable is the colour contrast of the mouth between the upper lip, still pink and the lower, green, livid and swollen.

The pale nose is illuminated from below, but above where the skin is usually lightened, there is a strong irregular shaded effect which does not follow the shape but is rather unattached from it. It is not a shadowing of chiaroscuro effect in the traditional sense.

The expression of the face and mouth lends a merciless touch to the painting.





### **The red cloak and blouse**

The shade of red of the cloak is constantly used by Caravaggio. In the long folds, wide and free, not blended, typical of him, are created by only one vigorous brush stroke. The folds over the stomach are especially strong and lengthy on a grey background, accurate coverage of the preparation.

Typical of Caravaggio is the way of vigorously executing the brush stroke and turning it at the end.

The sleeves of the white blouse are painted with energetic brush strokes, executed with rare determination. The speed with which it was painted is due to the brush strokes which are true and proper wounds inflicted with anger, in an incredible executive economy because, limiting himself to these slashes of brush stroke, he creates a really strong evocativeness.



### **The cross and skull**

A wonderful balance between the figure and its attributes reigns in the painting. At the bottom right in a space a skull can be seen that has the same diagonal position as the Magdalene, and it seems to be disintegrating.

In the top left the cross and crown of thorns are of an extreme naturalism: the wood of the cross is like pure matter, the sharp thorns seem perceptible to the touch, and the nonchalant way they are painted reveals the hand of Caravaggio.

The cross and crown of thorns are not turned towards the Saint but towards us, because we need them to meditate; she has already done so! It means that this painting is a means, a means needed to meditate, it is raw material for devotion.

The attributes help in understanding the meaning of the image and lead to an emotional use of the picture and to understand the role of the Saint in the theatre of Salvation.



### **The red hair and shoulder**

The golden red hair is vivid, spread out across one shoulder and chest and can be seen in a heavy mass in semi-darkness on top of her head.

The passages of shadow and light are marvellous in the hair, just as in the bare shoulder, in a realistic position accentuated by the form of the light not corrected by any attempt to idealise the anatomy.

The decisive contrast created by the strong shade that accompanies the neck to the left, and in the characteristic ear which appears and reappears, cleverly illuminated so as to divide it into two parts.







### **The face**

The face is intense, the skin colour varies with delicate shades from light ochre to pink. The tonality of the skin of the neck, cheeks, forehead and eyebrows lend a candour and a new way of expressing the reality of the human figure. The play of light and shade on her face confers an inner mobility to the head and consequently to the expression which confirms that emotive tension issuing from the hands and seeping through the whole figure thus unifying it. This grants the possibility of understanding the naturalistic Caravaggesque style head where the inversion of luministic values are noteworthy, which do not observe current rules but even contravenes them.

Vision and execution do not start from the form but from shade and light, and this is typical of a naturalist playing with the luminous effect and not the form. Among all of Caravaggio's works Magdalene represents a key painting where chiaroscuro, even more present and much more defined here, is fruit of the observations of light that he was truly the first to have studied in this way thus paving the way to modern painting.

### **The hands**

The strong wrists and hands, in livid colours and wonderful variations of nuances and light, with part of the fingers in shade, are the striking and intense element of this painting.

In Caravaggio's paintings there is life and art; there is real feeling because the painter identifies himself with it and has the ability of representing and transmitting it in his painting, thus granting the observer the possibility of sharing his emotions. One can understand the emotional tension in the Magdalene by the gesture of the hands, with the entangled fingers in the forefront. The emotional value of the painting flows from the hands.

Caravaggio paints in a more naturalistic way than the subject itself, because naturalism, the true life of the painting, is not in the painting but in the mind of the observer.



X-Ray



Infrared picture in black and white

# Caravaggio (1571-1610)

**Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio** was one of the most revolutionary figures of European art. Named after a town in Italy, Caravaggio, as a painter was trained in Milan and was active in Italy through early 17th century. He was renowned for his sharp application of colours to create a dramatic play of chiaroscuro, also referred to as dramatic illumination using high contrasts of light and shadow, introduced a distinct visual language of Baroque art. Caravaggio's popular representation of religious parables was rebellious at the time with often 'lifelike' portrayal of biblical characters, usually accompanied by symptoms of age, anguish and poverty, rupturing the Baroque tendencies of grandeur and sacred reverence.

His practice of painting directly from posed models violated the idealizing premise of Italian Renaissance to build a new relationship between the painting and the viewer, breaking down conventions and the distance to create art as an extension of everyday experience.

This exhibition offers a rare opportunity to a diverse audience to experience first-hand the work of a master artist of his times, an artist who broke barriers between art and life, high and low culture and brought saints to life in the reflection of the commoner on the street.

Caravaggio continues to be an inspiration to artists across the globe and across time.

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## GULAMMOHA

### A Retro

6 February 2025 - 30 June 2025

Curated by



**GULAMMOHAMMED SHEIKH (B. 1937)**

**Kaarawaan**

Acrylic on canvas

80 X 257.25 in. (203.2 × 653.4 cm.)

Painted in 2019-2023

Collection : Kiran Nadar Museum of Art

Searching for the essence of humanity and world civilisations through pictorial narrative and via figures like Gandhi, Kabir, Saint Francis, Mirabai and Mary Magdalene, Gulammohammed Sheikh quotes the symbolic representations of multiple cultures in his art practice. To the viewer it unveils his profound art historical and cultural awareness as well as his fascination with Italian Renaissance, Rajput and Mughal miniatures, early Sumerian artefacts, the Dohas of Kabir, and the contemporary nuances of Gujarati poetry. Teaching art history and art was one of his initial and longest engagements, clubbed with his observations and analysis of iconic European and Asian (oriental) images from artworks, which surface as suppositions in his paintings. The unified surface appears as a collage of histories and visual references, all compressed into a complex cartography, with epochs and cultures intersecting and communicating simultaneously.



# ithin worlds

## MMED SHEIKH

### spective

Roobina Karode

KNMA, Saket, Delhi



### Kaarawaan

Kaarawaan, at first glance, is a monument to the broad sweep of history and culture, held around an ark that sways and pitches with the roiling waves of the sea it has been set upon. It is a place of many stories, of lore and legend, of generations of forebears and contemporaries alike. In the company of Sheikh's spiritual lodestones, the figures of Gandhi and Kabir, we are given a deliverance of the abundant characters, figurations, and worlds that the artist has quoted from in his prolific career.

Among the many portraits, are a host of Renaissance artists, from Caravaggio to Uccello, sharing space with, among others, MF Husain, René Magritte, and Pieter Bruegel, whose echoes are unmistakable in Sheikh's oeuvre.





# KNMA and Italy in India: A Living Dialogue Through Art and Cultural Exchange

KNMA's dynamic partnership with Italian Embassy Cultural Centre in New Delhi celebrates art as a means to transcend borders and foster meaningful cross-cultural dialogue. Rooted in a shared belief that art must be accessible to all, this collaboration has enabled a series of impactful exchanges. From Claire Fontaine's multilingual neon installation *Foreigners Everywhere*, which seamlessly blends South Asian and European sensibilities and made its India debut during the India Art Fair 2025, to programming diversity through a mutual lens of creativity and learning, the partnership continues to thrive. These initiatives have brought Indian art and narratives to international platforms while also introducing Indian audiences to Italian artistic thought, traditions, and voices. Italian thought leaders—like Prof. Chiara Rostagno Deputy Director of Pinacoteca di Brera—have engaged with KNMA through educational programs that explore intersections between Italian Renaissance masterpieces and modern Indian expression. Whether through lectures, exhibitions like *Objects Between the Lines*, or collaborative performances, KNMA and the Italian Embassy Cultural Centre in New Delhi continues to create a cultural bridge that reimagines how global art is experienced, shared, and celebrated.

## About KNMA

Established through the initiative of avid art collector Kiran Nadar, the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA) opened to the public in January 2010 as India's first private museum dedicated to Modern and Contemporary art from the subcontinent. With branches in New Delhi and Noida, KNMA is a non-commercial, not-for-profit institution supported by the Shiv Nadar Foundation. It seeks to foster a dynamic relationship between art and culture through its exhibitions, publications, educational initiatives, and public programs.

Committed to institutional collaborations and artist support networks, KNMA actively engages with diverse audiences through its wide-ranging programming.

The museum's ever-expanding collection of over 15,000 artworks from South Asia features some of the most seminal modernist and contemporary works. Now broadening its scope to include classical, folk, and tribal art, the collection spans historical trajectories from the 3rd century BCE to 21st-century Indian art, alongside the experimental practices of young contemporaries.

In the coming three to four years, KNMA is set to evolve into a landmark cultural destination with a new location, an expansive 100,000-square-meter (over 1 million square feet) architectural marvel, near the Indira Gandhi International Airport, New Delhi. It will feature multiple exhibition spaces, auditoriums, an archive centre, a library, restaurants, and a members room. Strengthening its role as a cultural epicenter, this expansion will further KNMA's mission to be a vibrant hub for visual and performing arts, fostering artistic innovation and cultural dialogue.

