



## The Conversion on the Way to Damascus | Caravaggio

1601 | oil on canvas | 90 1/2 x 69 in / 230 x 175 cm | Cerasi Chapel, Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome, Italy

Caravaggio (1571–1610) transformed the religious art of his time, using bold compositions and an uncompromising sense of realism to give his pictures a genuine feeling of immediacy. This is one of his best-known paintings, produced when he was at the height of his powers. The biblical story of Saul's conversion was a popular subject for artists. A Roman citizen (he is dressed as a Roman soldier in this picture), he was actively persecuting Christians when, on the road to Damascus, he was thrown from his horse and blinded by a heavenly light. Following his conversion he changed his name to Paul. Characteristically, the artist played down the supernatural element, reducing the blinding, celestial rays to a modest glimmer in the upper right-hand corner of the picture. The

process of the saint's conversion is internalized—the unkempt groom is unaware of the drama, and seems more concerned with calming the frightened horse. Caravaggio's critics accused him of undermining the sanctity of his religious themes by focusing on squalid details. Here, for example, they were unhappy with the veins on the groom's leg, and at the dominant role of the horse's behind in the composition. Nevertheless, Caravaggio's talent was recognized at the highest level. *The Conversion* was commissioned by Tiberio Cerasi, the Treasurer-General of Pope Clement VII, to hang in his chapel in the church of Santa Maria del Popolo. The picture was viewed from the side, which accounts for the exaggerated perspective and foreshortening. **IZ**



## Still Life with Game Fowl | Juan Sánchez Cotán

c.1602 | oil on canvas | 26 1/4 x 34 in / 67.8 x 88.7 cm | Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA

Juan Sánchez Cotán (c.1560–1627), born at Orgaz in the province of La Mancha, is perhaps most closely associated with a conception of still life inherited from classical antiquity. According to Pliny the Elder, the rival painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius tried to outdo one another through displays of technical virtuosity. To this end, Zeuxis painted a still life of grapes so convincing in their verisimilitude that some birds swooped down and tried to peck at the apparent fruit. Parrhasius then asked his rival to draw back a pair of curtains so that Zeuxis might see Parrhasius's own painting. When Zeuxis attempted this, he realized that Parrhasius had painted a pair of curtains so lifelike that they were able to deceive the eyes of an artist. While Cotán's still lifes perhaps fell somewhat short of such

an ambition, the artist, who often went to meticulous lengths to arrange a few objects in a sparing and highly selective manner, was concerned with getting his paintings as close to reality as possible. Only recently discovered, *Still Life with Game Fowl* places a number of objects within a shallow, boxlike space. Either suspended or resting upon an apparent ledge, each object carries its own integrity, while collectively working in harmony to instill an over-arching design or arrangement. In a display of artistic virtuosity, Cotán suspends the duck in front of the actual frame and toward the space occupied by the viewer. As well as instilling the palpable nature of the objects, Cotán's approach is more widely indicative of the artist's wholly singular approach to the genre of still life. **CS**



## Luncheon of the Boating Party | Pierre-Auguste Renoir

1880–81 | oil on canvas | 51 x 68 in / 129.5 x 172.5 cm | Phillips Collection, Washington, DC, USA

In the background of this painting is one of the many railway bridges that had recently been built by the French government and that were considered a symbol of modernity. These new lines allowed people such as those depicted here by Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919) to leave Paris and enjoy the countryside. Set on a balcony overlooking the River Seine in Chatou, France, a group of Renoir's friends stand in a complex composition, framed under a wide awning. The figures represent the diverse Parisian social structure, ranging from wealthy, well-dressed bourgeoisie to a young seamstress, Aline Charigot, in the foreground on the left, whom Renoir would marry in 1890. In *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, Renoir appears to create a typically Impressionistic scene,

capturing a moment when his friends join him by the river on a sunny afternoon. In reality, Renoir—one of the founding members of the Impressionist movement—executed the portraits of each figure either separately or in smaller groups in his studio. In doing so, he was beginning to move away from his contemporaries. Indeed, shortly after finishing this painting, Renoir began to use more traditional methods of painting. The way in which *Luncheon of the Boating Party* is painted remains Impressionistic however. Working in bright and warm colors, Renoir captures the effects of the light diffused by the awning. He suggests movement in his figures through loose brushwork, while using a thicker handling of paint for the still-life on the table. **WD**



## Sick Girl | Christian Krohg

1880–81 | oil on canvas | 47 x 41 1/2 in / 120 x 105.5 cm | Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo, Norway

Norwegian Christian Krohg (1852–1925) was a Realist painter and writer who portrayed the underbelly of society in both his painting and his writing, focusing on the problems of the poor or the unwell, as in *Sick Girl*. His social conscience led to some infamy, particularly after his 1886 novel *Albertine*, about a poor girl who becomes a prostitute, caused a scandal and was confiscated by the police. Yet his own fame was surpassed by that of his pupil Edvard Munch, who became Norway's greatest painter. From 1909 to 1925, Krohg was the director of Oslo's art academy. It was there he taught Munch, to whom he became a friend, mentor, and close supporter, especially when Munch's own work *The Sick Child* of 1885 was badly received by critics for its innovative psychological depiction of

Munch's feelings about the death of his sister Sophie. Krohg's *Sick Girl* shows a young girl swathed in a chaste white blouse and blanket. She is only a few years away from her swaddling clothes, but she is already almost a mummified corpse. The pure white material surrounding her heightens the deathly pallor of her face. The reddened rims of her eyes are accentuated by the red rose she holds like a rosary, its beautiful petals falling away like drops of blood on her blanket. She is well cared for, as she sits in a large chair whose shape reminds the viewer that this girl may never reach curvaceous womanhood. Yet despite the attention the girl is receiving, Krohg reminds the viewer that death and disease are society's great levelers, which pay no attention to wealth or class. **CK**



## Biblical Landscape | Reuven Rubin

c.1950 | oil on canvas | 23 1/2 x 32 in / 60 x 81 cm | Private collection

Reuven Rubin (1893–1974) was the most prominent artist in Eretz Israel's pioneering school of Modernism. He rejected the Western orientation of Jerusalem's Bezalel Academy, embracing the work of local artists who preferred "oriental" motifs and allegorical depictions of local life. Rubin was born in Romania and trained in Paris, where he was drawn to the faux-primitive work of Henri Rousseau (1844–1910). He frequently painted biblical scenes in Fauvist and Expressionist styles, setting them in contemporary Palestinian landscapes. He had his first one-man show, with the help of the photographer Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946), at the Anderson Gallery in New York in 1920. Rubin contributed to the first official art exhibitions in Israel, and his solo exhibit

of 1924 was the first documented one-man show in Jerusalem. He also served as Israel's first ambassador to Romania—from 1948 to 1950—and a show of his work launched the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Despite his European influences, Rubin's sensitivity to natural light, color, and architecture helped create definitive images for the developing Israeli culture—which strove to distinguish itself from Jewish culture in the Diaspora—and today he is still referred to as the patriarch of Israel's painters. *Biblical Landscape* exemplifies Rubin's romantic vision and love of the Israeli landscape. In this image, a couple embrace under the soft canopy of leaves. The painting's breezy textures and delicate lighting, borrowed from Fauvism, lend it a dreamy, fantastical quality. **AH**



## Chief | Franz Kline

1950 | oil on canvas | 58 x 73 in / 148 x 186 cm | Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, USA

In 1948, William de Kooning (1904–97) introduced Franz Kline (1910–62) to a Bell Opticon projector and encouraged him to look at enlarged images of some of his drawings. Kline first chose a small drawing of his favorite chair, and was astonished at the abstract form the chair's image made when projected onto a canvas and blown up so that the edges of the chair overlapped the picture frame. It was a decisive moment in the artist's life and completely changed the way he perceived his art. Having started his artistic career relatively late, and along conservative lines, he now worked in an almost entirely abstract manner. *Chief* was one of a series of large works in black and white that Kline made shortly after his move from figuration

toward abstraction. It is a work of intense, controlled brushstrokes; the application of paint is swift, bold, and as integral to the piece as the composition itself. There is an essentially masculine quality to this painting, as there is in the rest of his images of this ilk: the heavy black linear forms are almost threatening. In 1950, the year that *Chief* was painted, Kline staged his first one-man show at the Egan Gallery, New York—a popular venue for emerging Abstract Expressionist artists. The show was comprised entirely of paintings in his new style, and was an enormous success. After years of financial hardship, the artist finally began to achieve recognition, and a second show in 1951 confirmed Kline as a leading Abstract Expressionist painter. **TP**