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Psychiatry in art

Gambling disorder in the arts: Caravaggio's 'The Cardsharps'

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Caravaggio's 'The Cardsharps' (1594) is one of the most famous examples on the topic; the painting was commissioned by Cardinal Francesco Maria Del Monte, whose coat of arms appears on the back. The scene (Fig. 1) represents a fraud: a young man is playing cards with his friend, who is in league with the older man to cheat him. They are playing the Persian card game known as 'zarro', a forerunner of poker, which was banned during the Renaissance by Francesco Sforza, Duke of Milan, as being considered socially dangerous. In this work, as in many others, Caravaggio's magistral ability to represent human emotions is clearly in evidence. The young man seems almost unjustifiably serene, while the cardsharps' faces are marked by tension and anxiety. Caravaggio's work often carried moral undertones, and 'The Cardsharps' is no exception.



Fig. 1 Caravaggio, Michelangelo Merisi. 'The Cardsharps'. c1595. Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.

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The British Journal of Psychiatry (2024)
225, 415. doi: 10.1192/bjp.2024.42