

Caravaggio: Individual Personality and the Drama of Personal Faith

“But Caravaggio (as he was called by everyone, with the name of his native town) was becoming more famous every day because the coloration he was introducing was not as sweet and delicate as before, but became boldly dark and black, which he used abundantly to give relief to the forms. He went so far in this style that he never showed any of his figures in open daylight, but instead found a way to place them in the darkness of a closed room, placing a lamp high so that the light would fall straight down, revealing the principal part of the body and leaving the rest in shadow so as to produce a powerful contrast of light and dark. The painters then in Rome were greatly taken by this novelty, and the young ones particularly gathered around him, praised him as the unique imitator of nature, and looked on his work as miracles. They outdid each other in imitating his works, undressing their models and raising their lights. Without devoting themselves to study and instruction, each one easily found in the piazza and in the street their masters and the models for imitating nature.”—Giovanni Pietro Bellori

The Hierarchies of Genres

Following traditional classical and medieval tradition, Renaissance and Post-Renaissance Italian Art in particular (and European art in general) ranked painting in importance by its subject matter. Part of the debate had to do with the technical difficulty of presenting the subject in a realistic fashion, the use of perspective, and what potential the subject had to move the viewer emotionally (*affetti*). There were also points of discussion, ascent, and dissent on the role of allegory and ethical subject matter in paintings.

1. The Human Figure—from biblical, mythological, or increasingly secular historical narratives
2. Portraits of Modern People
3. Animals
4. The Landscape
5. The Still Life

There was also a similar debate (about the superiority of painting to sculpture, or vice-versa (*paragone*). Another aspect of the debate involved questions of decorum, as well as the ideal versus the actual. Caravaggio’s lowlife genre painting, as well as his use of chiaroscuro, opened up new aspects of early modern style that would be studied and absorbed by both French and Spanish artists in Catholic countries and Protestant artists in England and the Netherlands. The later reinvented the use of light and dark to achieve both dramatic and spiritual effects.

Catholic Counter-Reformation Spirituality

“The First Prelude is a composition, seeing the place. Here it is to be noted that, in a visible contemplation or meditation—as, for instance, when one contemplates Christ our Lord, Who is visible—the composition will be to see with the sight of the imagination the corporeal place where the thing is found which I want to contemplate. I say the corporeal place, as for instance, a Temple or Mountain where Jesus Christ or Our Lady is found, according to what I want to contemplate. In an invisible contemplation or meditation—as here on the Sins—the composition will be to see with the sight of the imagination and consider that my soul is imprisoned in this corruptible body, and all the compound in this valley, as exiled among brute beasts: I say all the compound of soul and body. “—Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*

Three important devotional stresses in Catholic Reformation spirituality include: 1) a stress on humility and poverty; 2) a stress on personal devotion and emotion; and 3) the use of visualization, particularly following the practices taught by the founder of the Jesuits, Ignatius of Loyola, as well as popular devotional sites, such as the Holy Mountain, a series of chapels with life-like figurines that tell the story of Christ, as well as other important deeds of saints.

Exploratory Questions

- Can we truly know an individual's personality from their portraits? Why and/or why not?
- Do realism and allegory belong together in the same work of art?
- Do we have to know something about the painter's life circumstances to understand his or her paintings?
- Are some subjects for paintings more important than others?
- Does it matter if the models for biblical characters were themselves impious persons?
- Does it matter if the painter uses his own face and form for biblical or mythological characters?



H.O.C.S.

Humilitas occidit superbiam
 "Humility conquers pride."

Discussion Questions

(Chapters 1 and 2)

1. Compare and contrast the emotion and attitudes of the male figures in *Self-Portrait as Bacchus* (*Sick Bacchus*), *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, and *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*. (The first is a mythological scene, the second has mythological and biblical allusions encoded in it, while the third is a moral parable. Does this matter in your response to the pictures?)
2. What do the paintings *The Musicians* and *The Lute Player* suggest about music and personality?
3. Is *The Basket of Fruit* a religious painting? Why and/or why not?
4. What kind of ethical and psychological lessons do we learn from painting such as *the Card Sharps* and *The Fortune Teller*?
5. How does Caravaggio bring out Mary Magdalene's inner repentance in an outward painting?
6. What role do the angels play in *St. Francis in Ecstasy* and *Rest on the Flight to Egypt*?
7. How does violence confront us in *Medusa's Head* and *Judith and Holofernes*?
8. What do we learn about the costs of a seemingly justified act of violence?

(Chapters 4 and Epilogue)

1. How would you think through the relationship between Caravaggio's personal character and the piety of his late paintings?
2. How does the pictorial value of *The Seven Acts of Charity* reinforce its ethical lessons? How do they give them a spiritual context and purpose?
3. Do the events surrounding the *beheading of John the Baptist* (1607/08) alter the way we see and understand the painting? What do think of Caravaggio's signature?
4. Without knowing the subject story behind *The Burial of St. Lucy* (1608), how much does the picture itself suggest about its subject?
5. How does *The Raising of Lazarus* (1609) compare and contrast pictorially with *The Burial of St. Lucy*?
6. In *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (1609) and *The Annunciation* (1609), how are humility and submission portrayed visually?
7. How does one of Caravaggio's last paintings, *The Denial of St. Peter* sum up his emphasis on emotion and personality?