

Caravaggio's Loyalty to "the Truth": The Accessibility of His Paintings

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ABSTRACT

Caravaggio is famous for his mastering of chiaroscuro and controversial subject matters. From both a technical and social perspective, Caravaggio's works were revolutionary. As he broke the decorums, he was redefining aestheticism and pushing the boundaries of the artistic society, sometimes also facing rejections. This paper will examine how Caravaggio committed to paint truthfully, thus, making his works accessible to the general public and changing the artistic landscape. By looking into both Caravaggio's artistic compositions and his interactions with the society at large, this paper examines his unique loyalty to truthfulness and the consequences to his artistic choices.

Introduction

Death of the Virgin by Caravaggio depicts a tragic biblical scene. Virgin Mary lays dead amidst mourning Saints as a ray of sunshine falls on her face. On first observation of the painting, the feeling of loss is palpable. The Virgin in red clothes, pale and dead, stretches one of her hands out. The surrounding Saints show either pain or concern, some crying and some silently grieving. The Saints' reactions epitomize the common human experience of grief and drew me, as a viewer, deeper into the scene. The scene takes place not in a lavishly furnished palace, but rather in a dark wooden house. This creates an even more moving experience, as the characters' emotions take focus instead of the decoration of their surroundings. The authentic and convincing portrayal of losing a loved one moved me, so finding that it was rejected by its commissioner was staggering.

Though not his most famous work, *Death of the Virgin* was well-praised by many professionals. Peter Paul Rubens, a Flemish Baroque master, even asserted it was one of Caravaggio's best paintings.¹ Simultaneously, *Death of the Virgin* is also one of Caravaggio's most controversial pieces. The art collector Giulio Mancini said after purchasing the painting that, "someone knowledgeable will reprove us, but as it is for the service of God and the embellishment of the city, I will pay no attention to complaints."² Mancini's comment hints at the disapproval of this painting by people of higher social status but reaffirms its aesthetic and communicative value. However, the exact reasons why such an impressive painting was rejected by its commissioner Laerzio Cherubini is still debated by modern art historians. Regardless of the reasons for its rejection, it strikes me that the impression it left on me is the same that sent ripples across the artistic society of his time. Caravaggio, with this piece and others, revolutionized the art landscape by distinguishing his pieces from the decorum of the renaissance through a commitment to truthfulness.

¹ Walter Friedlaender, "Documents on Caravaggio's Work," in *Caravaggio Studies* (n.p.: Schocken Books, 1969), 307.

² Michele Maccherini, "Caravaggio Nel Carteggio Familiare Di Giulio Mancini.," *Prospettiva* 86 (April 1997): 77, accessed February 4, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24432772>.

Caravaggio's truthfulness and its effects can be approached from two distinct perspectives: his composition of the artwork, and his engagement with his audience and the art society at large.

Truthfulness in Composition

Caravaggio's commitment to truthfulness is key to the artistic choices he made. Caravaggio achieved Realism through developing relationality and accurately sizing his characters. Filmmaker Martin Scorsese said of Caravaggio's works that audiences feel "immersed in it," and that his paintings are composed like "modern staging in film: it was so powerful and direct."³ Caravaggio intentionally created the immersiveness and made the scenes "in action" similar to the modern film-making process. His paintings are active and engaging, drawing their audiences into the story with figures that resemble them in size, stimulating their audiences' desire to imitate the characters and even participate, for example, following their gestures of worship or mourning. Such "modernity" in Caravaggio's paintings was revolutionary, as portraying the truth was prioritized before commissioners' requirements or standards of perfection.

Relationality and The Moment of Emotion

Relationality in Caravaggio's paintings focus on the moment of reaction and capturing scenes that are alive, creating a rich and "truthful" moment. American Artist Frank Stella describes Caravaggio's works in the Contarelli Chapel as "alive before they were put into the church."⁴ Indeed, most of Caravaggio's paintings capture the exact moment of action. Different from most of his contemporaries and predecessors, Caravaggio had the habit of "designing and then painting compositions directly onto the canvas without preparatory drawings."⁵ He moves his studio onto the canvas by painting directly from models, and according to art historian Hall, this unconventional method "helped him capture those fleeting facial expressions — sometimes quite violent — that make his actors seem so physically present."⁶ This method allowed emotional expression and relationality to take place in his paintings. The characters are never separated individuals, but rather performers of actions that create a holistic image together. Caravaggio breathed life into his characters, making them so that they almost seemed to break out of the picture plane, extending their movement outside of the canvas. Shifting away from idealizing and perfecting the characters, Caravaggio's direct portrayal allows fluent movements to take place on canvas, giving a feeling of realism to the artworks.

Death of the Virgin demonstrates this characteristic. Different from the traditional emphasis on the virgin's peaceful entry to heaven, Caravaggio focuses on the moment of grief. The composition gives the audiences the most immersive and direct experience of this emotion. Art historian Parks analyzed that we are led into the picture plane "by the diagonal of the Virgin's body and the cambering of the Magdalen's form outward."⁷ The Virgin's tilted position and the Magdalen's hunched back both create angles that make the picture more nuanced and integrated. Considering the design of the Cherubini Chapel, where the audiences are unable

³ Imogen Carter, "Caravaggio: How He Influenced My Art," *The Guardian*, July 24, 2010, accessed February 1, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/jul/25/caravaggio-scorsese-lachapelle-peter-doig>.

⁴ Frank Stella, "Caravaggio," in *Working Space* (n.p.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 13.

⁵ John T. Spike, "Artemisia Gentileschi. Florence, Casa Buonarroti.," *The Burlington Magazine* 133 (October 1991): 733, accessed February 1, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/884954>.

⁶ Marcia B. Hall, "Caravaggio: Secularizing the Sacred, Sanctifying the Secular," in *The Sacred Image in the Age of Art: Titian, Tintoretto, Barocci, El Greco, Caravaggio* (n.p.: Yale University Press, 2011), 17.

⁷ N. Randolph Parks, "On Caravaggio's 'Dormition of the Virgin' and Its Setting," *The Burlington Magazine* 127 (July 1985): 447, accessed February 2, 2023, https://www.jstor.org/stable/882127#metadata_info_tab_contents.

to directly approach the altarpiece, such diagonals create dimensions and draw us into the scene.⁸ Caravaggio's engaging composition made up for this specific architecture, creating a series of interactive movements that aim to engage the audiences. Moreover, the Saints in the background also express heartfelt emotions that resonate with common people. Whether shock, grief, or distress, all of the saints are openly expressing their emotions towards the Virgin's death. There is no pretense or glorification in this Biblical scene, but rather a moment of truthful reactions towards losing loved ones that many people have experienced - the story was simply "asserted and made palpable"⁹ by Caravaggio. All characters are reactors in this event, while Caravaggio captured the exact movements and expressions. From both the physical and emotional aspect, Caravaggio made the painting accessible and realistic.

Similar relationality is also demonstrated in *The Betrayal of Christ*. In this horizontal painting, all characters are depicted rushing towards the left. As Judas kisses Christ, he also "moves Christ from the shadows into the light."¹⁰ Christ, who is tilting left and exposed under the light, is still recovering from the sudden unbalance created by Judas's force. With this relationality that connects the characters and space, the image creates a continuous movement leftwards. Moreover, the scene seems to extend outside of the painting, with indication of more chaos by the man screaming to the left. As Stella described, in Caravaggio's paintings "the sensation of real presence and real action successfully expands the sensation of pictorial space."¹¹ *The Betrayal of Christ* was not composed to be contained by the spatial limit. Instead, Caravaggio invites us to imagine the full scene beyond the frame and feel the impact of the forces taking place both inside and outside the painting. Such precision in capturing these movements makes the scene alive and present even beyond its physical environment.

Movements and emotions are also present in Caravaggio's non-religious single-character paintings, such as *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*. In this piece, the young boy flinches and frowns as he is bitten by the lizard. His hands twist uncomfortably, indicating his pain and shock. Photographer David LaChapelle called this painting "a photograph before photography,"¹² praising Caravaggio's ability to grasp a specific movement through the painting. *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* is in fact like a photo, as Caravaggio captured that precise moment - the boy's immediate reaction to being bitten. This photo-like feature was unique to Caravaggio's paintings, and rarely seen in other portraits. By implementing his "rawness" into portraits, Caravaggio changed the definition of portraiture from one of motionless elegant characters to one of vivid and expressive stories.

The habit to paint directly without refinement took away the idealization in the process of painting and allowed Caravaggio to paint "alive." The precision in movements and characters' interactions show a commitment to truthfulness that stimulates the audiences' emotions. Caravaggio's paintings are powerful because audiences resonate with them, and it symbolizes Caravaggio's breakthrough in artistic expression that inspired further exploration of Realism after him.

Sizing

Not only did he capture raw movements on canvas, Caravaggio also made sure that the content of his paintings were optimized for engagement and connection through specific sizing of his subjects, ultimately achieving realism. Caravaggio manipulated his sizing to make his works appear life-size, as paintings are more engaging when the figures resemble their audiences.

Caravaggio painted not to fill the space given by his commissioners, but rather to capture the most realistic image on his canvas. In doing so, Caravaggio painted characters that appear life-size (See Appendix

⁸ Parks, "On Caravaggio's," 446.

⁹ Hall, "Caravaggio: Secularizing," 22.

¹⁰ Leo Bersani, "Chapter 6: 'Benefits of Betrayal,'" in *Caravaggio's Secrets* (n.p.: MIT Press, 1998), 54.

¹¹ Stella, "Caravaggio," 11.

¹² Carter, "Caravaggio: How He Influenced."

A) even when it placed him in conflict with the commissioning circumstances. The similarity between themselves and the illustrated characters makes connecting with the paintings easier for the audiences as it “incites a wish to participate in the scene represented.”¹³ To see figures that are human-size, as if they were actually in front of their audiences, is more powerful than seeing a smaller or larger depiction even if they are proportionally accurate. Caravaggio’s life-size scenes succeed in arousing an emotional connection. Moreover, he adjusts the sizes according to the setting of his paintings: oftentimes exactly life-size for galleries, and slightly larger for chapels, to accommodate the different viewing angles and distances.

Narcissus, *St. John the Baptist* and *The Incredulity of St. Thomas* are paintings commissioned for private galleries instead of chapels. Therefore, the setting allows audiences to view the artworks in a relatively close distance at eye level. In all three paintings, Caravaggio made the figure’s head exactly life-size. *Narcissus*, *St. John the Baptist*, and *St. Thomas* are respectively 20 cm, 22 cm, and 23.5 cm (See Appendix B) in head length, all of which are within the normal range of the human head.¹⁴ *Narcissus* and *St. John* are both slightly smaller, but considering their young age, Caravaggio’s representation is still accurate. With such dimensions, audiences standing in front of the canvas will perceive the characters as if they were physically in front of them.

For artworks displayed in the more spacious chapels, however, Caravaggio adjusted the sizes of his characters to accommodate a different viewing angle and distance. Caravaggio “manipulates the fictive environment, its furnishings, and its natural effects to generate an empathetic response in the viewer.”¹⁵ Indeed, in the case of chapels, there usually was some distance between the altars and the audiences. Additionally, artworks were hung up higher instead of displayed at eye level. In *the Entombment of Christ* for Santa Maria in Vallicella, for example, Nicodemus, who carried Christ, was painted with exceptionally large feet of 34 cm, and head length of 27 cm (see Appendix C) *Inspiration of Saint Matthew* in the Contarelli Chapel also displays the Saint with a 26 cm head length (see Appendix D) Such slight enlargement compensated for the distance between the picture plane and the viewers, so that the characters still seem realistic despite the spacious environment and odd viewing angle.

Life-size was important to Caravaggio because he valued the truthfulness of his paintings. In many of his works, such as *Raising of Lazarus*, *Death of the Virgin*, and *Madonna and Child with St. Anne*, Caravaggio even left spaces open to keep his subjects life-size. Instead of enlarging his characters, he chose to prioritize authenticity instead of filling the space assigned to him.

Through creating relationality and life-size images, Caravaggio was able to paint truthfully and make his paintings accessible to his audiences. He valued the connection between his audiences and the image and strived for Realism instead of Idealization. Caravaggio’s paintings are constructed to be dramatic and photogenic, therefore more accessible to their audiences.

Audience Engagement

Caravaggio’s commitment to truthfulness in his composition was not done in isolation. The subject matter directly looked to engage with audiences in a way his contemporaries did not, and further revolutionized the art landscape with intense public reaction. Hall believed that “one of the reasons Caravaggio’s pictures appealed was that they included the popolo [translation: people], without patronizing them, as no other paintings had.”¹⁶ During a time when idealized beauty was pursued, the general public was rarely included in aestheticism and

¹³ Bersani, "Chapter 6: 'Benefits,'" 3.

¹⁴ V. Ahlstrom and K. Longo, "Chapter 14 Anthropometry and biomechanics," in *Human Factors Design Standard (HF-STD-001)* (n.p.: Federal Aviation Administration William J. Hughes Technical Center., 2003), 18.

¹⁵ Parks, "On Caravaggio's," 12.

¹⁶ Hall, "Caravaggio: Secularizing," 9.

considered worthy of appreciation. However, common people and the poor often appeared in Caravaggio's paintings: sometimes as part of religious scenes, and sometimes alone in portraits. These images did not align with the decorum of his time but did resonate with public audiences, often leading to mixed reviews.

“De-Idealization”

The physical truthfulness in Caravaggio's composition is accompanied by representative truthfulness in the selection of his subject matter. Different from the typical idealized Renaissance images, Caravaggio often portrayed ordinary people even in sacred religious paintings. His “de-idealized” characters received criticism and even occasionally led to rejection from by commissioners, as with the first version of *Inspiration of Saint Matthew*.¹⁷ Yet the realism and naturalism adopted by him was revolutionary, as he focused on reflecting the world around him, instead of conforming to certain ideals.

One painting that represents this is *Madonna di Loreto*. The Madonna, holding the baby Jesus, stands barefoot in front of a door. Contrary to most of the Renaissance portrayals of her as a rich and well-dressed young lady, such as in Jan van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* and Raphael's *Madonna della Seggiola*, Caravaggio's Madonna could be any ordinary woman, with only the halo hinting at her identity. Moreover, the pilgrims in front of her are two “low-class peasants.” Their dirty bare feet stretch straight out, as if breaking out from the picture plane. This shows the viewer that they have walked a long distance, and their ragged clothes also reveal their social status. The painting was criticized for its depiction of “vulgar peasants.”¹⁸ However, such “indecent” images were compelling to the general audiences because they could resonate with the weary pilgrims and the approachable Madonna. As Bersani says, “the spectator's imitation of the painting's action testifies to the painter's mimetic talent.”¹⁹ *Madonna di Loreto* is definitely one of those paintings. The carefully measured life-size (See Appendix E) pilgrims (whose foot is 29 cm, large but still life-size) kneel piously in front of the Madonna, an open request by Caravaggio for the audiences in the chapel to do the same.

Another representative piece, *St. Matthew and the Angel*, was rejected due to Caravaggio's determination to paint realistically. St. Matthew, illiterate and casually seated, crosses his legs and stretches out one of his bare feet. The humbleness of the Apostles and the sacredness of the Gospels were directly expressed, but it could not “serve as an intercessory hotline to God,”²⁰ for that it was more natural than venerative. This painting's rawness is especially apparent compared to Carlo Dolci's *Saint Matthew Writing His Gospel*, a painting of the same subject matter produced a few decades later. In Dolci's version, Saint Matthew is amiable and elegant, dressed in fine red and blue clothes that represent his holiness. The cherubic angel besides the saint holds the cartridge while he transcribes. In comparison, Caravaggio's humble portrayal of Saint Matthew obviously lacked decorum, leading to its rejection. However, it was a realistic and intimate scene, one that general audiences could relate to easily.

Therefore, Caravaggio's paintings were not only truthful in dimensions and movements, but also in the images of his characters. In a time when ordinary people were excluded from aestheticism, Caravaggio truly broke the Renaissance expectation for idealized and exquisite figures.

¹⁷ Troy Thomas, “Expressive Aspects of Caravaggio's First Inspiration of Saint Matthew,” *The Art Bulletin* 67 (December 1985): 636, accessed February 1, 2023, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3050848#metadata_info_tab_contents.

¹⁸ Hall, “Caravaggio: Secularizing,” 13.

¹⁹ Bersani, “Chapter 6: 'Benefits,’” 52.

²⁰ Hall, “Caravaggio: Secularizing,” 11.

Public Reactions

Although Caravaggio had a relatively successful art career during his time, his legacy was revolutionary and one that changed art history. Sometimes Caravaggio was accorded by the art society, while other times he pushed boundaries and broke them. He was a successful artist tolerated by most of his patrons despite his rebellious behaviors and unconventional paintings and had many followers throughout the centuries commonly known as Caravaggisti.²¹ However, some of his paintings aroused great controversy and faced rejections. Without generalizing people's reactions toward Caravaggio, I will explore one specific facet of his impact - "de-idealization", as discussed previously. Ultimately, these unconventional and realistic representations challenged the decorum and altered the boundaries of artistic norms, sometimes even redefining conceptual terms.

To better understand the revolutionary impacts of these controversial paintings, one of his rejected works will be further analyzed. *Death of the Virgin*, as previously explored, was originally painted for Santa Maria della Scala. Carlo Saraceni is one of Caravaggio's contemporaries, he took over the commission after Caravaggio was rejected. Saraceni's first attempt was also rejected, but his second version was ultimately accepted and remains in situ until now. Although the exact reasons for the rejection are unknown, with many arguing that it was because Caravaggio used a prostitute as the model for the Virgin,²² I believe comparing the painting to the accepted Saraceni version offers insight into the problem at hand. Additionally, comparing the two paintings offers a glimpse into the artistic dialogue of the time, especially as it relates to Caravaggio's work.

The most obvious difference between the Saraceni and the Caravaggio paintings was the portrayal of "death." While Saraceni's Virgin is "alive and gazing heavenward,"²³ Caravaggio's Virgin lay dead. Arguably, Saraceni's version was more holy and emphasized the religious experience of the scene, but it is far less emotional and relatable when compared to Caravaggio's. Moreover, the Saints in Saraceni are not mourning, but merely surrounding the Virgin, lacking any active participation. The angels, added during Saraceni's second attempt, are playing music and offering the Virgin flowers as they welcome her into heaven. The differences between the two paintings indicate that the commissioners wanted something conventional and idealized - "a more optimistic view of the Virgin's death."²⁴ It was not that Saraceni was more technically advanced or more emotionally appealing than Caravaggio, but rather that he followed the decorum and painted something appropriate in the eyes of the commissioner. *The Virgin*, along with other Caravaggio paintings, symbolizes his breakthrough in religious paintings because he shifted the focus from simply generating veneration to telling nuanced stories and leading the audiences to appreciate the scenes, pushing the art landscape towards modernity.

Caravaggio also painted many "genre paintings" – paintings smaller in scale that depict peasant life²⁵ – such as *Fortune Teller*, *Cardsharps*, *Musicians* and *Lute Player*. Not only did Caravaggio include ordinary people in his commissioned paintings, he also viewed them as individuals worthy of artistic appreciation. In these paintings, Caravaggio captured the real life scenarios of ordinary people including tricksters who "had ever been considered a worthy aesthetic subject."²⁶ Such an assumption was established during the Renaissance, when genre painting was often viewed as "an inferior pursuit suitable for less talented artists."²⁷ Therefore,

²¹ Richard E. Spear, "1.," in *Caravaggio and His Followers* (n.p.: Harper & Row, 1975), 17.

²² Friedlaender, "Documents on Caravaggio's," 195.

²³ Parks, "On Caravaggio's," 443.

²⁴ Parks, "On Caravaggio's," 446.

²⁵ "Genre Painting," Tate, accessed February 2, 2023, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/g/genre-painting>.

²⁶ Jenny Farrell, "The Revolutionary Realism of Caravaggio," *Culture Matters*, September 14, 2021, accessed February 2, 2023, <https://www.culturematters.org.uk/index.php/arts/visual-art/>.

²⁷ Roderick Conway Morris, "From Caravaggio to Ceruti, How Genre Painting Grew in Italy : Low Life and Vagabond Days," review, *New York Times*, January 9, 1999, accessed February 6, 2023,

Caravaggio's many paintings of Roman street life marked "a key turning point in genre painting"²⁸ and the purpose of art, one may argue, is changed through this process as it is no longer restricted to the idealized aristocratic images. Caravaggio's inclusion of the general public in art was revolutionary and attracted many followers to do the same.

Rising from his commitment to truthfulness, Caravaggio's "de-idealization" of religious images and his exploration of genre paintings forever changed people's perception of art as well as the purpose of art. He was not afraid to challenge the decorum of his time, and consequently faced rejection. But more importantly, his unconventional depiction and subjects contributed to the artistic revolution with continuous legacy.

Conclusion

Relationality and the raw "staging" of the scenes made Caravaggio's paintings theatrical, unconventional, and engaging. His breakthrough in "de-idealized" representation also ignited revolution and aroused controversy. The alignments and conflicts between Caravaggio and his contemporary decorum are the reasons for the appreciation and criticisms he received. Rather than generally concluding Caravaggio's artistic career, I would frame it as one that resonated with the public and remained loyal to his own values, but also one that successfully pushed the boundaries of his contemporaries. Overall, the Death of the Virgin, therefore, quite precisely sums up the story of Caravaggio's loyalty to truthfulness and its consequences - rejection by tradition but embraced in legacy.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor for the valuable insight provided to me on this topic.

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²⁸ Morris, "From Caravaggio," review.

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