

Caravaggio's the denial of st. peter



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In approximately 1610, Michelangelo Merisi, referred to today as Caravaggio by virtue of his hometown, painted his *The Denial of Saint Peter*, an oil-on-canvas depiction of St. Peter's renunciation of Jesus and disavowal that he was a disciple of Christ. Though it passed through the hands of several cardinals over the centuries,[1] the work itself was not commissioned by any religious authority, and was entirely conceived by Caravaggio. It currently is on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The most important aspect of the work stems from its era: Caravaggio painted in the early Baroque period, a time in art largely focused on emotion, drama, and realism in the portrayal of humanity, as opposed to the idealized, somewhat emotionless scenes of the Renaissance.[2] *The Denial of Saint Peter* is a prime example of this trend, for, as opposed to depicting idealized human forms in a heavily structured and adorned setting, it portrays just three figures, all of whom are imperfect, human, and express clearly visible emotion. While Caravaggio's subject matter is far from unique, his distinctive approach toward its illustration is revolutionary with respect to earlier Renaissance art; of course, it resembles other works from the Baroque period, which Caravaggio himself helps to usher in.

The drama and emotional anguish of Caravaggio's work is apparent even upon first glance. Upon examining the figures in the work, we see that Saint Peter is far from flawless and virtuous; instead, he is easily intimidated by a soldier as he frantically distances himself from Christ, pointing at himself incredulously as if to appear utterly surprised at the notion that he is somehow associated with Jesus. Peter lacks the saintly character attributed to Biblical figures in earlier works, for he has deeply furrowed brows and

looks pale and sickly in the harsh light shining on him-in fact, he more closely resembles a cowardly man eager to appear common and nondescript. The woman and the soldier have powerful emotional elements in their depictions as well-the soldier appears threatening, seemingly warning Peter of the consequences of allying with Christ, while the woman bears a stern expression that signals her certainty of Peter's solidarity with Jesus. Finally, the sheer size of the figures is noteworthy, for it places all emphasis on them and on no other point in the painting.

Caravaggio's stylistic effects, in addition to the figures' expressions, also lend the painting a dramatic air. The first and most obvious such technique is his use of lighting: specifically, the work has extreme contrasts between light and dark, which, due to their harsh appearance, convey an almost theatrical impression to the viewer. In fact, Peter's head is fully and strongly illuminated, while the soldier's visage, though just opposite his, is barely visible; the woman's face, furthermore, is alternately obscured and lit-with little or no attempt to mediate the two extremes. This consistent use of dramatic lighting, which in this case radiates only from the left of the painting, is termed "chiaroscuro"; in fact, Caravaggio used it so often that his version of the technique is labeled "tenebrism."^[3] The effect that these techniques have on a work is profound, for they create a powerful sense of tension in the piece because of their stark, almost jarring appearance. In The Denial of St. Peter, this effect is quite noticeable, for by illuminating Peter, but not the soldier, the sense that Peter is being interrogated and pressured becomes heightened; it is almost as if a spotlight is on him, coercing him into giving a reply.

Another important stylistic note is the varying level of detail Caravaggio applies to parts of the work. The background is not at all important, as is demonstrated by the broad, carefree, almost haphazard brushstrokes and lack of any remarkable detail behind any of the figures; by contrast, Peter, the soldier, and the woman are all painted with exceptional detail, exemplified by the soldier's helmet, which is ornately and intricately decorated, and Peter's face, which has distinct furrows and creases. This again serves to highlight the fact that the three figures and their emotional tension are the central features of the work and that all else is ancillary.

Caravaggio's work closely mirrors others of the Baroque period. Spanish artist Juan de Valdés Leal's *Pietà*, painted between 1657 and 1660 and currently on display at the Metropolitan,[4] features many of the same techniques Caravaggio uses to enhance the dramatic effects and emotional impact of the work. The use of chiaroscuro is immediately apparent, for the Virgin Mary and Christ are both well-lit, while the background is mostly darkened. As in Caravaggio's work, this element lends the work a powerfully dramatic aspect and compels the viewer to focus on the subject matter and its intense psychological themes.

Furthermore, Christ is an emaciated, bloodied figure, as the stigmata bleed profusely in the painting; Leal portrays him as a tortured, weakened man, unlike prior depictions of a handsome, nourished Christ. He has a gaunt, starved body, reflecting the anguish Leal wishes to convey, and the Virgin Mary looks on with a combination of anger and pain, a radical departure from the mostly serene Mary seen in earlier works. The overall tone of the work is

one of anguish, a theme reinforced by Leal's manipulation of light and the graphic, disturbing depiction of Christ.

Renaissance works, while portraying similar religious subject matter, are radically different from Caravaggio's painting and other Baroque art.

Raphael's Pietà of 1503, part of the Colonna Altarpiece and currently in the Gardner Museum,[5] while depicting the very same subject as Leal's work and certainly portraying grief and suffering, conveys an entirely different emotional character and lacks the psychological depth seen in either Caravaggio's or Leal's piece. Of first note in Raphael's Pietà is the size of the figures; they are proportionately smaller when compared with Caravaggio's, somewhat reducing their impact on the viewer. Additionally, the lighting in the painting is mostly uniform, and thus lacks the striking contrasts found in Caravaggio's work that impress the viewer with emotional immediacy.

The figures themselves also lack any poignancy. The Virgin Mary is largely expressionless, and while a man to the left seems to lament the death of Christ, the level of drama and anxiety seen on St. Peter's face is missing. Also of note is the fact that Christ appears as a nourished, healthy figure, and thus does not inspire the viewer with grief or sorrow. Thus it is apparent that this work portrays an idealized scene suited perfectly to Renaissance standards, and therefore has little in common with the flawed, emotional figures of Caravaggio's or Leal's work.

In short, Caravaggio's large, overtly sentimental figures, combined with his extreme uses of light and lack of attention to background detail, produce a work that impresses the viewer with its passion, tension, and dramatic tone.

As we can see, this is entirely consistent with Baroque art, for the similarities with Leal's work are immediately evident. Caravaggio's Renaissance predecessors depict idealized and romanticized figures that lack the emotional involvement suitable for their subject matter. By contrast, Caravaggio strives to represent and amplify human tensions and imperfections, achieving a compelling realism.

Sources

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2. [2] Stokstad, Marilyn. Art History. Revised Second Edition, Volume 2. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2005, p. 722.
3. Stokstad, Marilyn. Art History. Revised Second Edition, Volume 2. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2005, p. 735, 744.
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