

Caravaggio: the beauty and blasphemy of genius essay sample

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Caravaggio was born September 29, 1571 to Lucia Aratori and Fermo Merisi, a stonemason, just nine months after their wedding in Caravaggio and he was named Michelangelo after the Archangel Michael. While his father made a good living as a stonemason, they never became wealthy or achieved high status, despite what Caravaggio presented and many speculate “ his elevated sense of his own status would lie at the root of many of his future troubles” (Graham-Dixon 9). He lived in Milan until the age of five when his family moved to Caravaggio, then, at the age of six, Michelangelo lost his father and several other members of his extended family to the black plague. He would spend the rest of his childhood with his mother and three siblings being raised and educated there in Caravaggio. At the age of thirteen he signed a contract to be the apprentice to the painter Simone Peterzano’s, leaving his mother’s home to pursue his dream of being a painter.

The most obvious thing that Michelangelo learned during the apprenticeship with Peterzano was what was expected of artists at that time, the rules that had been established by the Council of Trent, that: all the human figures, and above all the saints, should be executed with the greatest honesty and gravity, and there should not appear torsos, nor other limbs or parts of the body, and every action, gesture, clothes, attitude and drapery of the saints should be most honest, modest and full of divine gravity & majesty (Graham-Dixon 55). While Michelangelo exhibited no techniques that mimicked those of Peterzano, he did learn skills that all Renaissance artists learned: how to draw; how to create his colors; and how to paint a fresco. His first paintings were mediocre and crude, evidence that his lessons at the hands of

Peterzano were less than instructive. This is possibly why Michelangelo evolved into Caravaggio, “ a painter of extraordinary innate talent, a unique virtuoso when it came to conjuring the illusion of three-dimensional reality within the two-dimensions of painting” (Graham-Dixon 55).

Caravaggio bucked the standards of the times by refusing to draw on his paintings and, instead, choosing to stage “ fragments of scenes, that he knitted together, collage-like, on his canvas, using shadows to mask the joins” (Graham-Dixon 185). Caravaggio took everything that was commonly considered beautiful in Renaissance art and he twisted it into something new and exciting. “ He celebrated everything from the smooth bodies of adolescent boys to the knotted muscles of brawny workmen, from the rounded cheeks of pretty young women to the wrinkles of shrewd old crones, equally engaged, it seems, by come-hither smiles and features distorted by pain” (Wilkin 2). While it seems so unbelievable that he could have ever been considered anything but genius, his paintings were often considered offensive and rejected by the clientele that commissioned them, something that hurt and angered Caravaggio.

Prior to his death in 1610, Caravaggio became “ quick to take offence and easily provoked... and, in the course of a fight with an old rival, mortally wounded him. He fled Rome directly and lived the remaining four years of his life in anxious flight. All the while he painted” (Walsh 10). One of the most notable efforts by Caravaggio was his determination to place himself into his art, something seen repeatedly through his pieces, as he painted his face onto characters throughout his body of work: Goliath in each of his David

and Goliath pieces and the executioner of Saint John the Baptist, for example. It was clearly important to Caravaggio to insert himself into his art, to express his emotions by the interjecting his image into horrific scenes of brutality painted with the grace and beauty only Caravaggio could present.

Through the pieces that he created, Caravaggio expresses his beliefs in not only religion and mythology, but his unwavering dedication to his methods and styles helped to create art such as *The Taking of Christ*, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, *The Crucifixion of Saint Peter*, *Omnia Vincit Amor*, *Saint John the Baptist*, *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*, *David with the Head of Goliath* and *The Denial of Saint Peter*, that have survived centuries and are still being loved by art-lovers around the world.

<http://www.wga.hu/art/c/caravagg/03/191captu.jpg>

The Taking of Christ (c. 1598) depicts Jesus Christ as he was captured by soldiers after the betrayal of Judas Iscariot. According to the biblical story, Judas was bribed to kiss his master in order to identify him: “The one I shall kiss is the man; seize him and lead him away safely” (Mark 14: 44) and in this piece Caravaggio poignantly captures that moment, including the knowing expression on Jesus’ face, indicating he knew that Judas was not being forthright but accepting “his fate with humility, his hands clasped in a gesture of faith, while the soldiers move in to capture him” (National Gallery of Art). Once again, Caravaggio took the opportunity to paint himself onto the canvas, standing far right and holding up the light. Caravaggio’s intense

use of lighting is evident, as Jesus' face is bathed in light and Judas' is cast in dark shadow and the terror of the moment evident in the panic on Jesus' disciples face as he flees, screaming for help of some kind from what he realizes is happening. Caravaggio does exactly as he set out to do, he evokes emotion from a long-known story, and does so beautifully.

<http://www.wga.hu/art/c/caravagg/03/17judit.jpg>

The original tale that is depicted in the piece Judith and Holofernes (c. 1598) is of a beautiful Jewish widow who must overcome power much stronger than hers by beginning a relationship with the dominant Assyrian general who is persecuting her people and then takes his life using his own sword while he is sleeping peacefully in his own bed. This painting marked the beginning of the violence that the majority of his future works presented. He embraced the dark background, the bloodshed, and the emotion that was evoked by this underdog usurping the tyrant (Prose 62).

In this piece, Holofernes is depicted mid-decapitation as screaming and struggling, while his killer portrays "restrained revulsion... [making] her look like someone slicing a messy roast while worrying that some of the gravy might stain her frock" (Bent 70). While painting the piece, he realized that a partially decapitated head wouldn't look like his model did, with his head fully attached, and x-rays prove that he actually repainted that portion of the piece, hoping to capture a greater sense of realism (Graham-Dixon 185). This is almost a snapshot into a story that many people know, but it is gruesome and real and thoughtful, a true masterpiece.

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<http://www.wga.hu/art/c/caravagg/06/34thomas.jpg>

Also known as Doubting Thomas, The Incredulity of Saint Thomas (c. 1601) was commissioned by a loyal fan, Vincenzo Giustiniani to display in his palazzo. This picture is a literal interpretation of a man with no faith who had to be convinced that Jesus was, in fact, resurrected from death and that he had the wounds to prove his death was legitimate and “ in the act of touching Christ, Thomas is born again in unquestioning faith” (Graham-Dixon 240). The canvas is particularly moving, reflecting Jesus’ acceptance of the indignity of being forced to prove himself to one whom was supposed to be a follower, as “ Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because though has seen me, though hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed” (John 20: 29).

The light that Caravaggio shines from the left of the picture is important because it draws focus to the wound that is apparent in Jesus’ side and seems to be also drawing the attention of Thomas, who has just been humbled by the grace of God. It is speculated that Giustiniani, who had commissioned many previous painting, was intentionally requesting paintings of faith in the hopes that his vast collection would allow Caravaggio to “ win papal favour, obtain great public commissions and become one of those painters who transform the depiction of Christian belief” (Graham-Dixon 239).

<http://www.wga.hu/art/c/caravagg/05/28ceras.jpg>

This riveting piece, *The Crucifixion of Saint Peter* (c. 1601), portrays the defiance of Saint Peter as he refuses to lie still and accept his fate while the executioners nail him to the cross. It was actually placed in a chapel and the eyes of Saint Peter were cast towards the altar of the church, speculated to be a demonstration of the belief in the church being the path towards righteousness. It is clear that his persecutors are struggling, straining and working hard to crucify a man that is quietly pushing himself towards the savior that he so desperately seeks. Caravaggio made a point of using the most basic colors imaginable, despite that the commissioner of this piece requested expensive and vibrant colors, perhaps to convey the message that “the lives of Christ and his followers were neither rich nor splendid. Their deaths were brutal” (Caravaggio 219). If there is one thing that Caravaggio effectively mastered, it was to make his scenarios realistic and believable.

http://www.wga.hu/art/c/caravagg/06/36amor_v.jpg

“Love does indeed conquer all in this impudently pornographic painting of a teasing boy cupid” (Top Five Works) in the commissioned piece, *Omnia Vincit Amor* (c. 1602). Once again, Guistiniani requested a unique piece from Caravaggio, but this one was significantly different from any of his previous requests, with very little to do with the Bible or Jesus, and instead was “the most nakedly libidinous of the painter’s secular mythological works... a mischievously joyful celebration of Eros – a laughing proclamation of the power of sexual love” (Graham-Dixon 240). While it is a much more playful picture, with the cherubic smile and playful posture, it still delivers a powerful message of the power of love to conquer all. Looking at the setting,

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Cupid is surrounded in a space “cluttered with the stuff of intellectual, artistic, military, and political endeavor” (Graham-Dixon 241), symbolizing that no matter how much someone seeks and finds, love will always win in the end.

This was believed to be a very personal piece, with the items in the background representing Guistiniani’s previous life and many people speculate on whether or not the love that conquered all could have possibly been Caravaggio’s own, but there has never been evidence to prove or disprove that speculation. It is known and well-documented, however, that Guistiniani prized this particular painting above all others in his collection, going so far as to keep it covered until the end of a tour so that the beauty of this piece did not diminish the beauty of the others (Graham-Dixon 242).

http://www.wga.hu/art/c/caravagg/03/272y_ram.jpg

Saint John the Baptist (c. 1602) is one in which Caravaggio clearly copied his idol Michelangelo who painted a boy in almost the identical pose on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and named it Ignudo. The major difference between the two is that Michelangelo was painting according to the ideals of the time, with a “chiseled, marmoreally perfect” (Graham-Dixon 227), while Caravaggio embraced the realism by having his “adolescent saint... slight and skinny... his ribcage [showing] through the light-dappled flesh of his side and... dirt under his toenails” (Graham-Dixon 227). Saint John is clearly happy, happy to have this animal that was sent to him by God, but Caravaggio even went a step further by making the animal a horned ram, an

animal that represents sacrifice. “ In his mind’s eye, he is looking into the future, seeing Christ’s blessed death and the salvation of mankind” (Graham-Dixon 228). This is, in reality, one of Caravaggio’s truly hopeful pieces, one that doesn’t have the dark side or macabre of the majority of his masterpieces.

<http://www.wga.hu/art/c/caravagg/10/62behead.jpg>

The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist (c. 1608) depicts the martyrdom of Saint John the Baptist as the dirty little crime it was, not before a crowd the way a celebrated death would be, but instead in a dirty corner, alone, with only prisoners through a jail window as witnesses. One of the most significant points of the piece is that the trickle of blood actually contains the initials of its artist, something that Caravaggio never did before or since. The significance of the signature is obscure only if we fail to recognize the executioner. The half-naked artist seems to be following the commands of the clothed figure who stands beside him and points emphatically at the platter that will hold the Baptist’s head, but does this mitigate his guilt? Caravaggio is not only depicting the crime, he performs it, and this identification leaves no room for appeal (Bent 78).

<http://www.wga.hu/art/c/caravagg/08/52david.jpg>

Larry Levis wrote a poem, “ Caravaggio: Swirl & Vortex”, about this particular piece, David with the Head of Goliath (c. 1609), which perfectly summarizes, in just the first few lines, exactly the emotions that are stirred when analyzing this creation: ... Caravaggio, painter of boy whores, street

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punk, exile and murderer, Left behind his own face in the decapitated, swollen, leaden-eyed head of Goliath, And left the eyelids slightly open, and left on the face of David a look of pity Mingling with disgust a peach face; a death mask. If you look closely you can see It is the same face, & the boy, murdering the man, is murdering his own boyhood... (1-5) Looking into David's face, the pity is evident, for himself and for the victim that he was forced to decapitate, in the sweet youthfulness of his features. He doesn't look proud, but instead, resigned, to his fate as a murderer.

<http://www.wga.hu/art/c/caravagg/11/72denial.jpg>

In 1609, Caravaggio was in an altercation, permanently disfiguring his face and nearly taking his life at the age of 38. This piece, *The Denial of Saint Peter* (c. 1610), was one of only two that he completed in the year after his attack and before his death in 1610. His skill level seems to have diminished, his strokes were broader than ever before and his style coarser. It is assumed that he sustained damage to both his hands and eyes, but the emotion invested is still as evident as before. "The conception is subtle, the composition strikingly original and the mood bitterly sad" (Graham-Dixon 421) as two men and a woman are clearly in a confrontation. Mimicking the prophecy that his disciple Peter would deny him three times and this is Caravaggio's interpretation of those three denials of the savior that Peter made and his expressions and affectations almost seem to reflect his self-recrimination for denying the one whom he was supposed to serve (Graham-Dixon 422).

Between the subject matter and Caravaggio's failing health, this is often considered to be one of his darkest pieces, evoking emotion in the realization that this was the end of Caravaggio and his reign as the greatest painter of the Renaissance. "Caravaggio was perhaps the first artist in history to disregard the notion, invented in the fifteenth century, that the object of a work of art was to beautiful" (Kitson 9). It is for this reason that Caravaggio's art is both dazzling and inspirational, he took away the shiny veneer that had forever coated the characters of religious past and showed them in a light that was unflattering but real. It was the way they deserved to be seen and Caravaggio's brilliance is unrivaled.

He is a genius at combining the virtuousness of mankind with the undeniable malevolence that also exists. "His pictures present spotlight moments of extreme and often agonized human experience" (Graham-Dixon 3). "Caravaggio's contemporaries comprehended all too well the momentous novelty of his art, it burst on the scene like a thunder clap at the very end of the sixteenth century," (Gmssi 27) and his work is still mesmerizing, even in the twenty-first century. Caravaggio, one of the most profound and celebrated baroque painters, changed the face of art by challenging what was acceptable and utilizing techniques that shunned the standards of the time.

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