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Rocznik MNW. NS | Journal of the NMW. NS
nr | no. 11(47), 2022

Imitar bene le cose naturali According to Caravaggio and the Caravaggisti

From the 17th century onwards, Caravaggio and his followers all over Europe were designated as realists.[1] But what does this ambiguous catch-all term really mean? What painting techniques and practices? The artist's 17th-century biographers, particularly those adverse to his style and adhering to the precepts of classic art theory, such as Gian Pietro Bellori, stressed that Caravaggio painted solely from nature: "si proposse la sola natura per ogetto del suo penello."[2]

The notion of Caravaggio as a radical realist is based on the opinions of several historical biographers, followers and authors of the classic theory of art, or actually the artist's rivals. But neither in the enunciations of Caravaggio's fans and collectors of his paintings, nor in his own opinion, preserved in the documentation of the libel suit brought against him in August 1603 by Giovanni Baglione, do we find a confirmation of Bellori's assertion. Also many contemporary researchers are critical of suggestions of Caravaggio's imitative approach to nature,[3] even if there is no lack of those who still search for evidence to back up the claim of his naturalism.[4]

The 17th-century references to Caravaggio's working methods seem an utterly exhausted source of knowledge on his oeuvre. The same paragraphs, quoted from the writings of just a few authors, have been used by both sides to prove their point. Hopefully, a contemporary analysis of the master's paintings will help to bring this pointless theoretical dispute to an end.[5]

[1] On Caravaggio's realism and his working methods see Grażyna Bastek, "Caravaggio i iluzja realizmu" in Ingenium et labor. *Studia ofiarowane prof. Antoniemu Ziembie z okazji 60. urodzin*, Piotr Borusowski et al., eds (Warsaw, 2020), pp. 181–88.

[2] "He proposed nature alone as the object of his brush." See also Gian Pietro Bellori, *Le vite de pittori, scultori e architetti moderni*, Evelina Borea, ed. (Turin, 1976), p. 214.

[3] See, e.g., Keith Christiansen, "Caravaggio e la pittura 'dal naturale,'" in Rossella Vodret, ed., *Dentro Caravaggio*, exh. cat., Palazzo Reale, Milan, 2018 (Milan, 2018), pp. 237–48; Pietro Roccasecca, "Light, Drawing and Composition in the Painting of Caravaggio," in *Caravaggio. Opere a Roma. Tecnica e stile. Saggi / Works in Rome. Technique and Style. Essays*, Rosella Vodret et al., eds (Milan, 2016), pp. 133–55; John Varriano, *Caravaggio. The Art of Realism* (Pennsylvania, 2006).

[4] See, e.g., David Hockney, *Secret Knowledge. Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters* (London, 2001); Roberta Lapucci, *Caravaggio e l'ottica. Perché bisogna saper vedere e osservare* (Florence, 2005).

[5] A comparison of certain details in Caravaggio's works with the photographs of their real-life equivalents offers interesting insights; see, e.g., Marcin Fabiański, "Rifrazioni nella pittura al tempo di Caravaggio," *Artibus et Historiae*, Ann. 28, no. 56 (2007), pp. 207–23. In the paper, Fabiański analyzes the phenomenon of the refraction

It was only in recent decades that the works of Caravaggio and the Caravaggisti became the subject of technological studies that have offered new conclusions about his materials and techniques.[6] Comparing the results of contemporary physicochemical research with historical writing on art has made it possible to challenge a range of views, uncritically repeated since the 17th century, concerning the technique of Caravaggio and his followers. These methods, and a close study of the optical and spatial characteristics of paintings, have revised our knowledge about how the Caravaggisti worked and how they created the illusion of reality.

The way Caravaggio primed his canvases has been closely studied, demonstrating that he was very flexible in adjusting the colour of the ground to the planned tonal effect of the composition. Thanks to advances in infrared imaging, underdrawings were revealed for the first time that he applied with a dark paint on coloured grounds,[7] complementing outlines of the composition scratched directly into the ground preparation with a sharp tool (*incisioni*).[8] Caravaggio did not always bring the ground right up to the edge of the figures or other elements of the painting, using a method known as *a risparmio*, where the ground and its colour serve to outline shapes and distinguish different parts of the body, such as fingers.

Studies conducted using a wide range of invasive and non-invasive research methods have provided new insights into the materials used by Caravaggio and his followers.[9] Cross sections show that the artists usually applied two or three layers of paint and greatly simplified chiaroscuro modelling. It was executed during a single session with the model (underpainting in black lines on a dark ground, *abozzo* lights). The most important stage in Caravaggio's and the Caravaggisti's creative process was that where the painters defined the most luminous parts (this concerns works with strong chiaroscuro contrasts). Glazing was limited to the minimum (usually to deeper shadows or half-tones). The final effect, therefore, was visible almost immediately, and compositional corrections and further work on chiaroscuro modelling were done without the model's presence. The artists used the presence of the model to closely observe and create the skin tone, then executed other details, such as draperies, and finally the background. They usually painted figure after figure, working with one model at a time, posed for the purposes of the scene.

Very helpful in understanding Caravaggio's methods today are various kinds of digital models, thanks to which the spatial and chiaroscuro relations can be closely studied. 3D digital visualizations make it possible to determine whether the painters applied levels

of light in water. While flower stalks submerged in water and visible through the spherical glass of vases should be distorted, Caravaggio does not render them so.

[6] See, e.g., Mina Gregori, "Come dipingeva Caravaggio," in Mina Gregori, ed., *Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. Come nascono i capolavori*, exh. cat., Palazzo Pitti, Florence; Palazzo Ruspoli, Rome, 1991–1992 (Milan, 1991); Larry Keith, "Three Paintings by Caravaggio," *National Gallery Technical Bulletin*, vol. 19 (1998), pp. 37–50; *Caravaggio's Painting Technique. Proceedings of the CHARISMA Workshop*, Marco Ciatti, Brunetto Giovanni Brunetti, eds ([s.l.], 2012); *Caravaggio. Opere a Roma*..., op. cit.; Rossella Vodret, ed., *Dentro Caravaggio*, exh. cat., Palazzo Reale, Milan, 2018 (Milan, 2018).

[7] Rafaella Fontana et al., "Optical Diagnostics on Caravaggio's Paintings with New IR Multispectral Scanner for Reflectography," in *Caravaggio's Painting Technique*..., op. cit., pp. 41–49.

[8] In the context of Caravaggio's paintings, the Italian word *incisione* (plural *incisioni*) denotes lines scratched with a sharp tool in the ground preparation, sometimes repeated or traced anew in the successive painterly layers.

[9] E.g., combining lead white with lots of calcium carbonate in the brightest parts of the painting, which made the paint thicker, allowing for applying larger and thicker impastos and leaving visible traces of the brush; using different kinds of oil in a single picture, walnut in the bright parts and linseed in the dark ones, see Mateusz Jasiński, "Technika i technologia obrazów caravaggionistów w oparciu o polskie zbiory muzealne" [unpublished PhD dissertation], Faculty of the Conservation and Restoration of Works of Art, Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, 2018.

of brightness consistent with the suggested sources of light, whether the shadows fall correctly, or whether the distances between the figures and objects, and their proportions, are based on observation or have been created for the purposes of the composition, expression, and overall meaning of the work. Several Caravaggist paintings from the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw have been subjected to such modelling and rendering.[10] The conclusions thus obtained confirm the intuitions of those researchers who do not consider Caravaggio's art in terms of realism construed as the simple imitation of nature. The art of Caravaggio and his followers is a sophisticated mixture of close observation and artificiality employed for the purposes of the composition and its meaning.

The Imitation of Nature According to Caravaggio

Many researchers have quoted Caravaggio's words *imitar bene le cose naturali* ('imitate natural things well') as a testimony of his artistic attitude. Testifying in the libel case brought against him by painter Giovanni Baglione, Caravaggio, who spread offensive remarks about the work of the fellow artist, explained, at the judge's request, who he thought was a valuable painter: it was someone who knew his art and knew "how to paint well and imitate the natural things well."[11] To illustrate his words, his mentioned the names of Annibale Carracci, Federico Zuccari, or Cavaliere d'Arpino, among others. Many researchers have taken this as evidence of the master's mimetism, even though the aforementioned artists can hardly be described as simple imitators of reality.

The painter's words may be complemented with another testimony, left by Vincenzo Giustiniani, one of Rome's major patrons of the arts. In a letter to Teodoro Amideni (Dirk Ameyden), written around 1620, Giustiniani divided painting into twelve categories. He stopped short, however, of placing Caravaggio in the eleventh category, those painting directly from nature: "The eleventh mode, painting with the natural object in front of oneself."[12] Instead, he classified him, alongside Annibale Carracci and Guido Reni, in the twelfth, most praiseworthy category, which combined the characteristics of the eleventh mode with those of painters from the tenth, i.e., those working entirely from imagination and without a model. According to Giustiniani, therefore, Caravaggio painted "di maniera, e con l'esempio davanti del naturale."[13] This seems to offer the best key to understanding the master's work – his paintings are creations, fanciful visions composed with elements modelled upon real ones. However, many researchers, following the suggestions of old historiography, such as Bellori, have continued to search for evidence of Caravaggio's radical realism, which would be

[10] 3D models were rendered as part of the project "Badania zagadnień światłocienia i przestrzeni w obrazach sztalugowych z wykorzystaniem modelowania 3D," itself forming part of a research task at the Faculty of the Conservation and Restoration of Works of Art, Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, "Zastosowanie innowacyjnych środków w dokumentacji, badaniach i konserwacji obiektów zabytkowych," no. 20/19, task manager: Dr Rafał Nijak. The purpose of the project was to conduct interdisciplinary research on historical objects using non-standard methods, hitherto little used in the field of conservation.

[11] "Quella parola valent'huomo appresso di me voul dire che sappi far bene dell'arte sua, così un pittore valent'huomo che sappi depingere bene et imitar bene le cose naturali," see Walter Friedländer, *Caravaggio Studies* (Princeton, 1955), p. 276.

[12] "Undecimo modo, è di dipingere con avere gli oggetti naturali d'avanti" – Vincenzo Giustiniani's description of painting modes, including Caravaggio's, has been quoted in numerous sources, see Keith Christiansen, "Caravaggio and 'l'esempio davanti del naturale,'" *The Art Bulletin*, no. 68 (1968), pp. 421–45.

[13] "Painting *di maniera* and with the example from nature before oneself."

manifested first and foremost in a faithful rendering of the models' appearance and a close observation of the distribution of light and shadow on their figures.

An eminent Italian researcher of Caravaggio's art, Roberto Longhi, asserted that in his relatively simple early works, Caravaggio used the services of one model at a time. For the later, more complex multi-figural compositions, according to Longhi, the tenebrist master arranged "living pictures."[14] Caravaggio's work with one model at a time is mentioned in historical sources.[15] The hypothesis of the *tableaux vivants*, however, was refuted in the 1980s by Keith Christiansen, who demonstrated that the composition of the *Musicians* from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, is a "collage" of figures posing separately. It would be impossible to create a "living picture" based on this composition – the lute player and the youth holding the manuscript are shown too close to each other, in a set-up that is physically impossible,[16] and the artist used one and the same model to paint them. The composition lacks depth, and the figures overlap unnaturally.

It has often been that Caravaggio's works were the subject of the popular amusement of staging "living pictures," where people re-enact scenes from famous paintings. Whether photographed or filmed, such *tableaux vivants* based on his masterpieces are frequently posted on social media or YouTube. Scenes from Caravaggio's paintings come alive also in Derek Jarman's famous 1986 film about the artist. Fashion designers too have taken inspiration from his work, one example being the spring–summer 2021 collection of Dior.[17]

Analyses have shown, however, that recreating the spatial relationships between the figures and objects, or the lighting of the whole scene and its different elements, would not be possible in real space, and Christiansen's observations apply to other works by Caravaggio and his followers as well.[18]

"Living Pictures"

Several testimonies have been preserved regarding Caravaggio's work with individual models. Caravaggio did not make drawing sketches for multi-figural compositions; instead, he rendered the poses directly on the canvas.[19] The method, innovative for its time, skipped the stage of producing numerous preliminary studies, from making drawings of the different figures to compounding multiple elements into a complex composition. Caravaggio made underdrawings on the ground using several methods at once, including *incisioni* and lines applied with a dark paint.

So how did he compose his multi-figural scenes? Several years after Caravaggio's death, Giulio Mancini discussed the limitations of working with multiple models in his *Considerazioni*

[14] Roberto Longhi, "Alcuni pezzi rari nell'antologia della critica caravaggesca," *Paragone*, Ann. 2, no. 21 (1951), pp. 52–54.

[15] See, e.g., Joachim von Sandrart, *Teutsche Academie der Edlen Bau-, Bild und Malerei-Künste* (Nuremberg, 1675–1680), vol. 2, p. 190.

[16] Christiansen, op. cit., p. 423.

[17] Collection designed by Maria Grazia Chiuri for Christian Dior for spring–summer 2021, photographed and filmed by Elina Kechicheva.

[18] Attempts to recreate the lighting of several Caravaggio paintings by cinematographers under the direction of Grażyna Bastek, see *Wysokie C – Caravaggio* [online], 3 June 2018, <https://www.ipla.tv/wideo/rozrywka/Wysokie-C/5002928/Wysokie-C-, CARAVAGGIO/89ca23dea7b3cf42ef4ce3b6e56b4fa3>, [retrieved: 2 February 2020].

[19] For examples of *incisioni* in Caravaggio's work and a bibliography of the subject, see Bastek, *Caravaggio...*, op. cit., pp. 183–84.

sulla pittura: "[...] they represent a single figure well, but in historical compositions and in the expression of affections, dependent on the imagination rather than on observation of the thing itself, because they constantly represent the nature they have in front of themselves, I don't think they have value; for it is impossible to put a multitude of people in a room to represent a narrative, lit by the light of a single window, nor to always have someone who laughs or cries, or walks or stands still, so that one can copy them, which is why their figures, though powerful, lack the movement, feeling, and grace that result from the mode of work that we shall discuss later."[20]

Mancini considers here a practical problem: how to fit many women and men into a single room to present a narrative and at the same time to credibly represent a person who is crying, laughing, or pretending to be walking. Caravaggio resorted to a simple trick: even with complex compositions, he usually worked with one model only. The sitters changed depending on the needs, sometimes one and the same model impersonating in turns the different protagonists of a scene. In this way, Caravaggio avoided the logistics issues mentioned by Mancini as well as saving on the daily pay. The effects were varied.[21] That method was also adopted by Caravaggio's followers.

Collage. *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*[22]

Francesco Boneri, or Buoneri, known as Cecco del Caravaggio (b. c. 1588–89, d. after 1620), worked in a similar manner. His *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* (**fig. 1**) is in the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw. Many art historians believe that as a boy Cecco posed for Caravaggio, most likely, for example, for *Amor Victorious* (Gemäldegalerie, Berlin), painted for Vincenzo Giustiniani.[23] Later perhaps for the figure of David in the painting from the Galleria Borghese (Gianni Papi believes that Cecco may have accompanied Caravaggio on the latter's flight from Rome to Naples in 1606).[24] He was probably not only the painter's model, but also his assistant. Consequently, Cecco's Caravaggism may be described as "first-hand," his technique reflecting that of the master himself.[25]

[20] "[...] fa bene una figura sola, ma nella composizione dell'historia et esplicar affetto, pendendo questo dall'immagination e non dall'osservanza della cosa, par ritrar il vero che tengon sempre avanti, non mi par che vi vagliono, essendo impossibil di mettere in una stanza una moltitudine d'huomini che rappresentin l'historia con quel lume d'una fenestra sola, et haver un che ride o pianga o faccia atto di camminare e stia fermo per lasciarsi copiare, e cosi poi le lor figure, anchorchè habbia forza, mancano di moto e 'd'affetti, di gratia, che sta in quell'atto d'operare come si dirà.'" (Giulio Mancini, *Considerazioni sulla pittura* [1614–21], Adriana Maruchi, ed. (Roma, 1956), vol. 1, pp. 108–9). [The quote retranslated from its Polish version by Marcin Wawrzyńczak].

[21] For examples of Caravaggio's work with one model at a time in multi-figural compositions, see Bastek, *Caravaggio...*, op. cit., pp. 182–83.

[22] Cecco del Caravaggio, *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*, canvas, 124 × 162.5 cm, The National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. M.Ob.654 MNW. See *Caravaggio. Złożenie do grobu. Arcydzieło Pinakoteki Watykańskiej. Różne oblicza caravaggionizmu. Wybrane obrazy z Pinakoteki Watykańskiej i zbiorów polskich*, Joanna Kilian, Antoni Ziemba, eds, exh. cat., The National Museum in Warsaw (Warsaw, 1996), no. 10, pp. 124–26 [Grażyna Bastek] (earlier bibliography).

[23] This identification is based on the words of the English traveller Richard Symonds, who stayed in Rome in c. 1649–51 and wrote that the Amor has "ye body and face of his [Caravaggio's] own boy or servant that [sic] laid with him"; for an analysis of this quote see Christiansen, *A Caravaggio rediscovered...*, op. cit., p. 52, note 88.

[24] Gianni Papi, *Cecco del Caravaggio* (Soncino, 2001), pp. 112–13.

[25] Cecco, like the other Caravaggisti, did not use *incisioni*; instead he made underdrawings on a brown preparation using black or very dark paint. This is visible to the naked eye in his unfinished painting *Un cantante e un beviatore*, canvas, 74.3 × 97.2 cm, Galleria Spada, Rome.

3D visualizations of the *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* from the National Museum in Warsaw[26] (**fig. 2**) confirm that the artist did not use several models to stage the scene in his studio. A group of men illuminated by light falling from the left and from above would throw different shadows than those painted by the artist. The right hand of the man pulling out the arrow should cast a shadow on the saint's abdomen, yet the martyr's whole torso reflects light from above, emphasizing his suffering and the cruelty of the Roman soldier. Moreover, the executioner's face should be hidden in the shadow – he is, after all, turning away from the light source and wears a wide-brimmed hat. A 3D reconstruction recreating the direction of the light shown in the painting and shadows consistent with it (**fig. 3**) demonstrates that in order to achieve the chiaroscuro modelling employed in the *Martyrdom*, the figures would have to be much farther away from each other. This means that in multi-figural compositions, Cecco, like Caravaggio, worked on each figure separately.

An X-ray photograph of the painting (**fig. 4**) and studies of the painterly layers have revealed that the painter originally planned a composition with the figure of Christ (probably the scene of the Scourging at the Pillar), but instead of finishing it, he remade the figure of Jesus at the column into a Saint Sebastian tied to a tree (in order to minimize the effort, he covered the Christ figure with brown paint) (**fig. 5**). Then he added the two figures of the executioners standing by the saint, while the head of the old man in the turban was probably rendered at the very end, tightly filling the composition on the left side (the X-ray shows that this figure originally looked straight at the viewer); the kneeling man in the foreground comes probably from the first, unfinished scene. The above-described procedure caused a disharmony, evident especially in the incoherent arrangement of the figures. Like Caravaggio, Cecco executed the dark background only after painting all the figures, which was a reversal of the sequence established in the previous centuries. Then he returned to rendering the highlights, creating the details, and correcting the contours, which allowed him to avoid the effect of outlining the figures with the background.

The *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* is, therefore, a double collage, a composite of two compositions – the planned one (see X-ray photograph, fig. 4) and the finished one – and a juxtaposition of individual models, painted separately.

Space. *Saint Joseph's Dream*[27]

In the years in 1606–10, Caravaggio worked in Naples, which left an immense impact on the painting community there. The "tenebrist epidemic"[28] would affect three successive generations of painters. One of those who succumbed to it was Bernardo Cavallino (1616–56). His style combines the lesson of Caravaggism, drawn from the master's Neapolitan works, with the experience of learning with Massimo Stanzioni, a follower of Caravaggio, and with the

[26] The visualizations are by Adam Maciejewski. The models correspond with the figures in the paintings, but are shown nude, which makes it easier and simpler to recreate both the spatial relationships and the lighting.

[27] Bernardo Cavallino, *Saint Joseph's Dream*, canvas, 102 × 75 cm, The National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. M.Ob.640 MNW. See *Caravaggio*. Złożenie do grobu..., op. cit., no. 9, pp. 120–23 [Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius] (there earlier biblioghraphy); Nicola Spinosa, "Od Ribery do Solimeny. Obrazy neapolitańskie w zbiorach Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie / From Ribera to Solimena. Neapolitan Paintings in the Collection of the National Museum in Warsaw," *Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie. Nowa Seria / Journal of the National Museum in Warsaw. New Series*, 7(43) (2018), pp. 270–71.

[28] Tadeusz Boruta, "Sen Świętego Józefa" [online], *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 17 March 2002, no. 11, *Szkoła patrzenia*, 32, <http://www.tygodnik.com.pl/numer/274911/boruta.html>, [retrieved: 5 November 2021].

elegance of Anton van Dyck. Cavallino took from Caravaggio the strong chiaroscuro contrasts, but not the brutal naturalism of the figures. He replaced the models' raw beauty with elegance and styling, so that people in his paintings have elongated proportions and assume refined poses, as in the painting from the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw (**fig. 6**).

Cavallino's monographer believes that the artist has illustrated here the third dream of Saint Joseph, where the angel told him to return with his family from Egypt to Nazareth[29] – Jesus has outgrown the cradle now, the dozing Joseph holds a pilgrim's staff, and a drapery is spread over Mary with the Child, suggesting a tent, a temporary abode. But determining which particular dream Joseph is dreaming here is not what matters the most. What seems to be the most important thing in depictions of this theme is emphasizing the saint's caring role, his submission to the will of God, and his trust in the protection of Providence, which guards the Holy Family. Cavallino has represented here a vision that comes to the saint in dream, which is probably why his figure is veiled in darkness. Consequently, we can forget about Joseph and observe what he is dreaming. The scene seems to be illuminated by a single shaft of light coming from the upper left. In reality, this luminous flux (of varied intensity, let us add) falls on Joseph and the Child, but Mary is illuminated from the front. The angel casts no shadow, probably because he is immaterial, but also because the shadow of his hands would partly obscure Jesus (**figs. 7, 8**). The shadow cast by Saint Joseph, in turn, has been shortened to stress the visionary nature of the scene and avoid obscuring the view of the background. Also the scale of the foreground figures has been distorted: they are too small compared with Mary and the Child. This disproportion may have a twofold explanation; firstly, that the foreground and background figures posed during different sessions, and secondly, that by reducing the shadow cast by Joseph, overscaling the mother and child and bringing them closer to the foreground, the artist seems to be stressing that the scene is a dream vision and at the same time a divine intervention. Caravaggio resorted to similar measures. In the *Conversion on the Way to Damascus* (1600–01, Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome), Saul experiences a divine illumination, but the servant does not see the intense light falling on the figure lying on the ground (Acts 9:7).

Colour. *Card Players*[30]

Caravaggio avoided using multiple intense colours in a single picture, which already his 17th-century biographers noticed,[31] praising him nonetheless for rendering the colours very faithfully (*vero colorito*).[32] This judgement seems adequate to the master's early, secular paintings, but certainly not to the later, religious ones, subdued in their colours and sometimes

[29] Ann Percy, entry on the painting in *Barnardo Cavallino of Naples 1616–1656*, Ann T. Lurie, Ann Percy, eds, exh. cat., Cleveland Museum of Art; Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth; Museo Pignatelli Cortes (Naples–Cleveland, 1984), cat. no. 37.

[30] Theodoor Rombouts, *Card Players*, canvas, 150.5 × 230 cm, The National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. M.Ob.575 MNW. See Hanna Benesz, Maria Kluk, *Early Netherlandish, Dutch, Flemish and Belgian Paintings 1494–1983 in the Collection of the National Museum in Warsaw and the Palace at Nieborów. Complete Illustrated Summary Catalogue* (Warsaw, 2016), vol. 1, pp. 510–11 (there earlier bibliography).

[31] "Non si trova però che egli usasse cinabri nèazzuri nelle sue figure; e se pure tal volta li avesse adoperati, li ammorzava, dicendo ch'e erano il veleno della tinte" – Bellori, op. cit., p. 212.

[32] Vincenzo Giustiniani in Giovanni Gaetano Bottari, *Raccolta di lettere sulla pittura, scultura, ed architettura* (Rome, 1768), vol. 6, p. 127.

nearly monochromatic (*Salome with the Head of John the Baptist*, c. 1607, National Gallery, London). Caravaggio's innovative use of colour, noted by his contemporaries, was emulated by other young painters.[33] Why, therefore, were his colours considered to be true to life and at the same time possessing a novel quality?

Caravaggio would place the most saturated colour, usually red, in the most intensely lighted areas of the painting. In old Italian distemper painting, and in the oil technique sometimes too (until the 16th century), the opposite was the case: pure colours were applied in the shadow parts and then lightened up with the addition of white. This convention is inconsistent with how the human eye perceives colours (and their saturation). Instead, Caravaggio placed pure colours in the most illuminated parts, which is closer to the physiology of human vision. The intense reds in his paintings fade away in the shadows, merging gently with the dark background, which produces the effects, noticed by his contemporary critics, of *unione* and *dolcezza*.[34] Caravaggio replaced the multitude of different saturated colours and the contrasts between them with an intensification of chiaroscuro effects. This is perfectly evident in the Cerasi Chapel at the Santa Maria del Popolo, where between Caravaggio's paintings (the *Crucifixion of Saint Peter* and the *Conversion of Saint Paul*, 1600–01), subdued in their colours, but strong in contrasts of light and shadow, one finds an altarpiece, Annibale Caracci's *Assumption of the Virgin* (1600–01), which is characterized by intense chromatics.

Theodoor Rombouts (1597–1637), who lived in Italy between 1616 and 1625, did not eschew a rich palette, nor did he avoid strong contrasts between illuminated and tenebrous parts of the painting (present in Caravaggio's early Roman works). He arrived in Rome only after the master's death, encountering not only his art, but also the work of his early Roman followers – Bartolomeo Manfredi and Rome-based Frenchmen Valentin de Boulogne and Nicolas Tournier. It was they who popularized elaborate genre scenes of merry companies: musicians, players, innkeepers, prostitutes, and procuresses. To this genre belong the *Card Players* from the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw (**fig. 9**), a composition that owes much to the solutions developed by the French Caravaggisti active in Rome.

The painting is characterized by rich chromatics; among the colours identified here are lead white, calcium carbonate, iron red and yellow, cinnabar, lead-tin yellow, ochre, organic red and yellow, ultramarine, azurite, malachite, smalt, vegetable black, and minute quantities of bone black.[35] The artist has used reds, purple, blue, green, yellows, and oranges, all in diverse hues, producing what is a particularly colourful composition. The effect is enhanced by the grey, relatively bright *imprimatura* (**fig. 10**).[36] Unlike Caravaggio, Rombouts has opted for traditional chiaroscuro modelling, lightening up the colours with white or darkening them with glazes of the same hue as the colours in light.

The scene is illuminated by natural light falling into the room through a high-placed window, not visible in the painting. Its slanted beam and the shadow of the door frame fall on the wall behind the characters. The whole group is lit uniformly, from above right, only

[33] Mancini, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 223.

[34] Vincenzo Giustiniani in Bottari, op. cit., vol. 6, p. 126.

[35] Jasiński, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 134–39.

[36] Mateusz Jasiński, Jerzy Nowosielski, "Badania podobrazi malarskich caravaggionistów na podstawie obrazów z polskich kolekcji muzealnych," *Acta Universitatis Nicolai Copernici – Zabytkoznawstwo i Konserwatorstwo*, no. 48 (2017), p. 237.

the young man standing between two women receives light more frontally, but this is not conspicuous because all the figures are illuminated with more or less the same intensity.

Far more inconsistent are the spatial relationships in the picture: the arrangement of the models around the table and the proportions between the group in the foreground and that in the background. A diagram of perspective lines (**fig. 11**) shows a high horizon line (running above the figures' heads) and a vanishing point that is to the left of the centre. The edges of the table are not parallel to the horizon line (as would be expected in a symmetrical and frontal composition as this), but slightly oblique. Moreover, the table top has been shown from above, probably in order to make the cards visible, whereas the figures are from a lower viewpoint.

In 3D visualizations, it is impossible to recreate the positioning of the leaning man in the centre left and the seated woman so that he could see the cards she holds (**fig. 12**). Also the man on the right would not be able to see the cards held by the other woman because the rim of her hat would be in his line of vision. There are considerable disproportions between the figures in the foreground and those in the background. The musician and the couple on the right are disproportionately larger than the central group behind the table.

It is possible that the painting is a collage of Rombouts's earlier compositions (the figures having been transferred from other paintings or from drawings using tracing paper[37] or cartoon). Venetian painters of the 15th and 16th centuries used a similar procedure, e.g., in religious paintings that were composites of individual images of saints.[38] The arrangement of the figures in another work by Rombouts on the same theme, in the collection of the Hermitage (**fig. 14**), is not much different than in the Warsaw *Card Players* (although the vanishing point is in this case beyond the edge of the painting, on the right); the foreground figures are again too large and seem to have been "pasted in," like the lute player and the male card player in the Warsaw painting. These inconsistencies are the result of the sequence in which the different parts of the composition were executed. As demonstrated by the infrared reflectogram (**fig. 15**), Rombouts first painted the lute player, the man in the plumed blue beret and the old woman on the right, and the table itself, and only then added the figures in the background. He stopped short of representing the shadows that the players should cast on the table (**figs.** 12, **13**), with the exception of those delicate and highly glazed shadows, thrown by the woman in the hat. It would seem that the painter (and probably also his potential clients) preferred a dynamic composition and appealing colours over scrupulous verisimilitude.

Light. *Supper at Emaus*[39]

Strong chiaroscuro is the key to Caravaggio's painting language. The master's first painting where colour fades and spot-lit figures blur in darkness is the *Ecstasy of Saint Francis* (Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford), painted for Cardinal Francesco Maria Del Monte. Here, light has artistic as well as symbolic significance. Having received the signs of the Stigmata, Francis lies on the ground, supported by a huge angel, much larger than himself. The landscape in which

[37] Whole paintings or individual figures were typically copied by tracing them on oiled, low-opacity paper.

[38] See Grażyna Bastek, *Warsztaty weneckie w drugiej połowie XV i w XVI wieku. Bellini, Giorgione, Tycjan, Tintoretto* (Warsaw, 2011), p. 159.

[39] Jan ter Borch (?), *Supper at Emaus*, canvas, 123 × 80 cm, The National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. M.Ob.2368 MNW. See Benesz, Kluk, op. cit., p. 79 (earlier literature).

the scene is set is dimmed in the darkness and few elements can be identified, except a tree looming in the distance.

The 16th-century masters were well aware that strong value contrasts enhance the *rilievo*. Leonardo devoted a lot of space in his treatise on painting to the observation of light, penumbrae, and shadows. But Caravaggio went much further than the Cinquecento masters, not only modelling forms with strong chiaroscuro, but actually losing them in deep shadow.

This was noticed by his contemporaries, both art theoreticians and artists: "Characteristic for this school is to illuminate paintings with a single light from above, without reflections, as if in a room with a single window and black-painted walls, and since the lights and shadows are either very bright or very dark, they impart *rilievo* to the painting, but in a way that is not natural, neither done, nor thought of in the past century or by historical painters, such as Raphael, Titian, Coreggio and others."[40] This famous passage from the *Considerazioni sulla pittura* led to a lot of confusion. While Mancini mentioned only that the interiors in the paintings of Caravaggio and his followers seem to be illuminated from above, from a high-placed window, and the walls seem to be painted black, his words would be frequently misinterpreted as a description of Caravaggio's studio. This was the mistaken view of 17th-century historiographers, such as Joachim von Sandrart, who wrote literally that Caravaggio placed his models in a dark interior and illuminated them from a high window.[41] Bellori, in turn, believed that the painter worked in a closed room with a single oil lamp casting light on the figures from above.[42] Many 20th-century researchers followed Mancini's cue, overlooking, like Von Sandrart did, his remark that the modelling in Caravaggio's paintings is utterly unnatural and only appears to be faithfully conveyed.

Today, finding in his paintings numerous inconsistencies in chiaroscuro modelling, many art historians realize that Caravaggio did not use a single light source to illuminate his figures.[43] However, they make the wrong assumption that he worked with multiple models at the same time, arranging them into *tableaux vivants*, and that he faithfully captured the light falling on the figures. With such an assumption, the illogical distribution of lights and shadows requires explanations that are sometimes far-fetched. Let us take for example the analysis of lighting in the *Crowning with Thorns* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna). In order to explain why the figure of the soldier on the left does not cast a deep shadow on Christ's body and the drapery, Maria Beatrice De Ruggieri suggests that light from a natural source was redirected between these two figures using a mirror. It would then fall from the left, from above and from the front.[44]

[40] "Proprio di questa scuola è di lumeggiar con lume unito che venghi d'alto senza riflessi, come sarebbe in una stanza da una finestra con le parete colorite di negro, che così havendo i chiari e l'ombre molto chiare e molto oscure, vengono a dar rilievo alla pittura, ma però con modo non naturale, nè fatto, nè pensato da alto secolo o pittori più antichi, come Raffaello, Titiano, Coreggio et altri" (Mancini, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 108). [The quote retranslated from its Polish version by Marcin Wawrzyńczak].

[41] Von Sandrart, op. cit, vol. 2, p. 189.

[42] Bellori, op. cit., pp. 204–5.

[43] Alfred Moir, "Did Caravaggio Draw?" *The Art Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 4 (1969,), pp. 354–72; Maria Beatrice De Ruggieri, "La tecnica pittorica di Caravaggio. Processi compositivi e strutture materiali," in *Caravaggio. Opere a Roma*, op. cit., pp. 88–131.

[44] De Ruggeri, op. cit., pp. 90–93.

In fact, these claire-obscure inconsistencies may be due to several simple reasons. A painter working with one model at a time for multi-figural scenes does not see the shadows that one figure would cast on another, nor the shadows that a group of figures would cast on the background. Caravaggio rendered all these relations post-fact, according to the principle of probability, increasing the intensity of light in places that he wanted to particularly emphasize. He executed the outlines of the different figures and then painted them during a number of sessions, probably in various conditions of natural lighting. This system of work required him to produce rather than imitate the complex chiaroscuro relationships.

While Caravaggio never painted a picture showing a direct light source, his followers, especially those from the North, frequently did so. In the works of Caravaggisti from Flanders, the Netherlands, or France, appear candles, cressets, and oil lamps, which produce additional chiaroscuro effects by casting reflections, affecting colour temperature, flattening out the highlights and enriching the half-shadows. Georges de la Tour, Gerard van Honthorst, Hendrick ter Brugghen and many others imitated Caravaggio's strong chiaroscuro, albeit with the use of artificial sources of light.

In *Supper at Emaus* (NMW) (**fig. 16**), a painting attributed to a little-known Utrecht Caravaggist, Jan ter Borch, there are two sources of light: the halo around Christ's head and the candle on the table. The supernatural glow of the nimbus has no effect whatsoever on the distribution of lights and shadows. All protagonists are illuminated by the candle flame, shielded from the viewer's vision by the hand of one of the disciples. The light (of consistent temperature and intensity) is evenly and logically distributed. The sole exception is the figure of the servant: the candle would not illuminate so brightly the place where he stands (**fig. 17**), and the man seated on the right would cast a shadow on him.

Among the works from the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw discussed here, *Supper at Emaus* is distinguished by the most consistent chiaroscuro. The halo around Christ's head is a work of fancy, but the effect of the candle burning in the middle of the table has been conveyed rather faithfully (**fig. 18**).

Does this mean that the artist painted from a distance a scene so arranged? This sounds as improbable as the suggestion that Caravaggio gathered a group of models in a studio with black walls and a single window high under the ceiling or a burning oil lamp. Such working conditions, starting, most importantly, with the fact that the palette would be insufficiently illuminated, would make it impossible for him to paint, especially a composition of such subtly varied light. Instead, he probably arranged the scene with convenient diffused lighting, and then – based on previous observation – faithfully represented the relations of light and shadow cast by a candle or rather a lamp (a flickering candle would not provide consistent illumination, nor produce such a strong glow). The final contrast and modelling was likely achieved by enhancing the shadows and half-shadows with glazing, which contributed to integrating the composition rather than achieving an effect of study from nature.

Caravaggism was a trend that at some artistic centres proved short-lived. Many artists (e.g., Cecco del Caravaggio) continued to follow the master's style, others adopted it only for a time being or partly, without completely eschewing their former preferences (this applies to the Caravaggisti from Northern Europe, for example). As a result, the style was aesthetically and technologically heterogeneous. All of its representatives seem to share one thing: a supposed "realism" developed using a range of optical and spatial illusions. But the realism of Caravaggio and the Caravaggisti is by no means based on a faithful imitation of reality. The compositions of the "Baroque realists" follow compositional and painterly conventions that

are different from the idealizing convention of the "Baroque classicists." Caravaggio and his followers used various optical and painterly measures that went far beyond simply imitating the appearance of the models, objects, and surroundings. Their paintings seem realistic, but – as analyses supported by digital imaging confirm – are in fact based on multiple manipulations concerning spatial relationships, the distances between the figures and the different elements of the composition, bodily proportions, lighting, as well as chiaroscuro modelling.

Translated by Marcin Wawrzyńczak