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Art Appreciation & Criticism

“Supper at Emmaus”, Michelangelo Merisi Da Caravaggio, 1601

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Art Appreciation & Criticism

CHOICE OF ARTWORK



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, Supper at Emmaus. 1601. Oil on Canvas, 56''x77.2''. The National Gallery, London.

PART I : DESCRIPTION

Supper at Emmaus was painted by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio in 1601 by using oil on canvas at the size 56” x 77.2”. This painting is located at The National Gallery, London. The painting is telling the story when Jesus appeared for the first time after His resurrection to Cleopas and Simon Peter, but they didn’t recognize Him at the beginning. Since it’s getting dark, they asked Jesus to have a supper together, and after Jesus broke the bread, they finally realize that it was Jesus they were talking to. After that shocking moment, Jesus had already disappeared.

The character at the center of the foreground is a man called Jesus Christ. He has shoulder length curly dark brown hair. He has clean, beardless face complexion. It looks like he’s approximately 30-35 year old. He is wearing red tunic with white robe on his left shoulder. Both his eyes are closed, his right hand lifted with thumbs up, index finger pointed to his front, middle finger half closed, and the rest are closed, covering half of the palm. His left hand is about to rise with one index finger raised a little and other fingers are in the relaxed position. While His elbow area still placed on the table.

The character at the right side of the foreground is an old man called Simon Peter with short, dark brown grayish hair with gray beard surrounding his mouth and chin area. It looks like as if he’s around 60 year old. He is wearing the white coloured tunic covered in brown vest on the torso, decorated with a white clam shell on his left chest part. Only the waist up of him is visible. In the painting, both of his arms are stretched to his left and right side and both of his hands are open, at the same time, his right hand seems like it’s about to touch the man in front of him.

The character at the left side of the foreground is Cleopas. He has short curly Chestnut brown hair with matching coloured short beard surrounding his mouth and jaw area. It looks

like he's around 40 year old. He's wearing dark green tunic with a palm sized hole on the elbow that shows white coloured layer of fabric inside. There's orange coloured robe tied on his waist. He looks surprised with both eyes wide opened, body leaning towards the man in front of him, both hands are holding the end of the wooden arm chair while he was sitting.

The character at the left side of the middle ground is the inn keeper. He has very short dark brown hair with no beard yet there's a thin mustache. He looks like he's approximately 40 - 50 year old. He's wearing red tunic with brown vest on his torso with sleeves rolled, top unbuttoned and brown belt on his waist. There's ruffles at his collar. He's also wearing a white Kippah. Both his hands are holding the belt on his waist, and he's also tensely looking to the man at his front left side. His body leans towards that man, too.

At the centre of the foreground, there's a table covered in white tablecloth and another tablecloth underneath with traditional motif. On the table, there's a cooked whole chicken at the centre placed on a decorative curve lines plate and a broken loaf of bread behind. On the right side of the table, there's a whole loaf of bread at the front, behind it there are curvy lines motif jug, a clear transparent glass jug, and a glass of wine. On the left side of the table, there a basket filled with three rotten apples, a pear, grapes on top, some more grapes at the corner of the basket that looks like it's overflowing, and a broken pomegranate. Behind it there's a bowl (unseen content) and a loaf of bread.

PART II : ANALYSIS

“Supper at Emmaus” has several characters yet there’s only one character it focuses on. Caravaggio made it very clear who’s the focus point by using various of elements and principles of art.

First of all, Caravaggio created a balanced, harmony and less tense feeling to the viewer by creating the horizontally approximate symmetrical balanced composition on this painting.

The focal point here is clearly Jesus Christ. Viewer knows directly from the first time they look at the painting because there are some psychic lines directed to Him. It was also emphasized by the dominant value, colour, and shape in His form. One of the dominant element in Jesus form found on the red colour tunic He’s wearing. There is a repetition to create unity here shown by the type of clothing they are wearing, but even though Jesus, Cleopas, and Simon Peter wear the same type of clothing, Jesus’ tunic colour contrasts with the other characters’ that majority consists of dark colours, like dark green on Cleopas and dark brown on Simon Peter and the inn keeper. . It shows that He is actually different than the rest of the character. Among Jesus’ clothes itself, it combined with white toga in order to contrast with the red robe He was wearing to direct viewer’s attention to Him. Jesus Christ’s form also applied with maximum light with the stable implied shape, which what we can’t find on the other characters’ form.

Caravaggio also puts high economy value on the background and on the tablecloth along with parts that contain a lot of elaboration, such as the characters’ clothing, the hair, and the objects on the table so that viewers’ attention directed to the part they are supposed to look at and also to create some harmony.

The way Caravaggio made the viewer look at the objects on the table is also interesting. He combined some shapes and lines to create variety, so viewer is interested to look at those. He puts adequate amount of shapes and lines, and he also create huge difference between the size of the objects on the table and the characters so that it wouldn't win over the viewer's attention to Jesus, the focal point.

The painting has shallow space and atmospheric perspective to show that the event took place in a room, and there are not much space for the viewer to look at so that the viewer wouldn't pay much attention anywhere else except on the characters and the objects.

PART III : INTERPRETATION

Generally, this painting tells a classic biblical story of Christ after resurrection. The story is clearly written in the bible, the book of Luke 24 : 13-35. According to the bible, it started when two disciples were on their way to Emmaus. They were having a conversation while they walk, and they looked sad. Suddenly, a man, which was Jesus Christ approached and asked what are they talking about that makes them so sad. At the time, their eyes were restrained, so they didn't recognize Him. Meanwhile, they answered that they are talking about Jesus who was crucified, and how sad they are to wait for His resurrection, since it is already the third day- since Christ had predicted His own resurrection- since he was buried. And after being opened scripture by Christ, the night started to come, so they asked Christ to set abide with them. Even though He was about to travel much further, He agreed. So when they were having a supper, He broke bread and their eyes were opened, and they realized that it is Jesus Christ they were talking to! But before they can do anything, He vanished from their sight.

This painting captures the moment when two disciples were surprised that it was Jesus they were talking to right before Christ vanished.

It was an unusual moment to be captured since not much people might skip this part in their mind, or they just couldn't imagine how did He vanish, and what kind of media He was using to vanish? Did He use the smokes to cover it? Or did He go transparent at a snap? Well, we all have no idea exactly how did He vanish, since it wasn't written in the Bible, yet, Caravaggio had illustrated the shocking moment when the two disciples realized it was Jesus Christ.

But could we have experienced the same event as the disciples had while they were on their way to Emmaus? We might not have recognized Him due to the unusual style to picture Jesus, which is young and beardless.

So, why was He pictured young and beardless?

It turns out that it is one possible way Caravaggio thought how the disciples could not recognize Him at the beginning (Effigie, 1977, p. 379). And it worked. Not only for the disciples in the painting, but for us, the viewer, too. That is one way to picture someone incognito in a very brilliant way. It is brilliant since most people must be thinking He should be covered in something or they just couldn't figure out a way at all.

Moreover, there should be another clue to find out that it was indeed Christ who was resurrected. Which are holes in His palms. But Caravaggio just wouldn't let you find out that easy, so he covered His palms with natural hand gestures. As we see in the painting, His right hand is risen up with two fingers covering His palm, and the other hand was just facing the table.

It's just like a trick game with very little clues.

Another question, why was He wearing red robe? Why didn't Caravaggio just put on green or blue robe? Scientifically, he'd like to use the red colour to point viewer's attention directly to Him by creating dominance as we've talked about in the previous part. But there's another meaning of red robe on Christ. According to the research on Christian articles, a verse in the book of Revelation 19 : 13 which says. "He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God", tells the most possible answer. In that Bible verse's context, it pictures the Christ in heaven. Since He had resurrected, He will rise to the heaven. Another possibility is, since He has been nailed to the cross, He had purchased our

live with His blood. So the red colour on his robe might represent His blood He had used to pay for human's sins. He was also wearing white Toga draped on His left shoulder to represents the armies He has in heaven, "...clothed in fine linen, white and clean,..." (Revelation 19 : 14).

His right hand was lifted to the front, blessing over the meal (McElligot, 2005, p. 22). There's also another interpretation says that His eyes were closed tell us that He was about to leave the place. Apparently, in a way we could never imagine.

On His left side, there's Simon Peter. Is that really Simon Peter? There are theories based on the research made. Mostly, scholars would group that man with the man on the opposite side of the table as "two disciples", since they are not clearly described in the Bible. Especially if they only refer to the book of Mark. Yet, based on the book of Luke, which tells the event much clearer, it is highly possible that it is Simon Peter, because "Peter arose and ran to the tomb and stooping down , he saw the linen cloths lying by themselves; and he departed, marveling to himself at what happened" (Luke 24 : 12) and "...The Lord is risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!" (Luke 24 : 34). Also, according to McElligot (2005), one of the disciples has heavy hands of a fisherman. As we know, Simon Peter is actually a fisherman. So it is apparently Simon Peter.

Simon Peter extends both his hands like a crucified gesture to symbolize Jesus who were crucified, but at the same time pictures his marveled expression. On his left chest part attached a clam shell. In Christianity, clam shell represents the pilgrims. It reminds us to always remember Jesus as by the pilgrimage. But this clam shell may confuse the viewer instead of giving the vivid image of who is Cleopas' companion. Viewer may mistook it as James the greater, which is actually not, according to the Bible, as mentioned earlier.

On the opposite side of the table, there's Cleopas, one of the disciples. His eyes are wide open and his hands hold the armchair as if he was about to rise due to his shocking and disbelieved expression that it was really Jesus in front of Him. It pretty much represents our respond when we are in his shoes. And the reason why was he in shock is because He was really hoping for Jesus to be resurrected as we can see from his words, "But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel, today is the third day since these things happened." (Luke 24 : 21)

Right beside Christ, there stands the innkeeper with the innkeeper's uniform and with very contrast expression with the two disciples. The two disciples are surprised with the appearance of Christ, yet he, as an innkeeper, he has not much interesting expression as did not know anything about it, he was not aware of Christ's identity (Effigie, 1977, p.376). Yet when we look at his cap, the Kippah, it contains a message that we have to be aware of, "God is always above us".

When we look at the objects on the table, there's a lifeless chicken on the centre, which was just juxtapose (something that added to create contrast) to the lively fruits, breads, and glasses of wine. It may represent the lifeless life of the man-kind before Christ was being nailed to the cross because we were all strangled by our own sins.

And when we see the bread, most Christian know what it means. Bread symbolizes the body of Christ, as written in John 6 : 48, "I am the bread of life.", and there are three bread for each person. For Jesus' bread was broken by Him to remind them of the holy supper.

And there is a small tense feeling when we look at the basket of fruits. It was placed on the edge of the table as it was about to fall if there's a slight movement towards it.

Apparently, it represents the on-the-edge life of the man-kind, we can fall at any moment if we don't hold on to Christ, our savior.

The content inside was overflowing with fruits to represent the overflowing love from Christ, our savior. Yet there are rotten fruits, the apples. The apples represent the fall of man-kind when the first time Adam and Eve eat the fruit from a forbidden tree. It was not mentioned as an apple, yet apple is best to describe it due to the Latin name of apple, *Manum*, which has the homophone with the Latin word of evil, *Manum*. There's also a dark purple plum besides one of the apple that we mostly don't really notice. It represents death and the passion of Christ (Warma, 1990, p. 585). On the other side of the basket lies a pomegranate, since it contains lots of seeds, it represents the church and the congregation, and also God's blessing.

On the left side of the table, there are two jugs and a glass of wine. The wine and the grape on the fruit basket symbolize the blood of Christ.

And if we look closely to the motif used in the plate, jug, and the tablecloth, there's this kind of motif applied. Apparently, this is a Turkish motif which a lot used in Italy at the time when the artist painted it (Varriano, 1986, p.222-224). So it turns out that Caravaggio can't or didn't want to apply the real motif used in the Christ's era. It is better if he would pay attention to that smallest detail and apply it into his artwork to create more sense of the Christ's era.

Apparently, "Supper of Emmaus" is rich in Christian message that awaken us, as human, that the love of God is so great "that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3 : 16)

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