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Mini-Research Art History / Humanities

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Michelangelo Caravaggio: The Most Controversial Painter in Rome

Being a world-renowned painter does not make you above the law. The artist had to flee his own country and stay low. Due to his violent nature, Caravaggio tarnished his reputation as a talented artist. His run-ins with authorities for reasons such as fights, having a sword without a license and yelling insults resulted in his patrons taking down Caravaggio’s art in churches (Stone). Caravaggio lived two lives, one as a remarkable artist and one as a criminal. As an artist, Caravaggio was an important figure in the Baroque era. In fact, Caravaggism is a term used to describe the international artistic movement caused by Caravaggio’s style throughout Europe (Stone). He was an influential artist yet a controversial one. The rumors and controversies developed his career as an artist because it allowed for his name to be spread around.

It’s hard to think that a gifted painter such as Caravaggio can have such a violent personality. He was often involved in drama or a brawl on the streets. People agree that Caravaggio is a talented artist, but his work is often overshadowed by his actions. For instance, he attacked a waiter because he refused to tell Caravaggio if his artichokes were cooked in butter or oil (Wilkin). Caravaggio had a very short temper and was easily angered. On top of that, he was violent and escalated situations. Caravaggio’s involvement in drama led him to have controversial paintings and have a distorted sense of beauty. Caravaggio’s sense of beauty revolves in the world around him. In addition, he got in trouble with the authorities because of the violent, horrific, gruesome and ugly his art is. For example, there were graphic killings, messages that contradicted Christianity and breaking traditions (Wilkin). Furthermore, due to his troubled demeaner, Caravaggio was associated with loathsome people such as prostitutes and courtesans. Some prostitutes were his models for his work. Fillide Melandroni was from Siena, and she was his model for many works of art in the late 1590s (Graham-Dixon). In Rome, it was illegal for women to model for artists. Thus, hiring a prostitute was a loophole around the law (Graham-Dixon). It was evident that Caravaggio lived a life of crime and mischief. He did was indifferent to the social norms and the law at the time.

The Baroque art style was unique because of how dynamic the scenery was. There was drama and the scenery spanned from rape scenes to death scenes to religious scenes. The Counter Reformation was attempting to inject religion into its society through art. A unique skill that differentiated a Caravaggio painting than other artist is the way that Caravaggio uses light sources and the way he shades. Perhaps one of his most important innovations in his art, the technique that Caravaggio used was named chiaroscuro. A method that uses a high, single, unseen light source to create drama and depth. This creates a drama of dark and light, which is complimented with touching facial expressions and postures. The extreme contrast of dark and light helps to heighten and emphasize details of facial expressions or gestures (Graham-Dixon). This makes Caravaggio’s art piece more realistic and radiates a powerful, emotional psychological message (Stone). Besides, the art Caravaggio expresses are important themes of the Catholic Reformation, such as charity and poverty, redemption and death, faith and doubt, and in a method that is spiritual and poetic (Stone). Caravaggio made the poverty in his art pieces prominent by emphasizing their unclean, ragged clothes and their dirty feet. The dramatic staging and treatment of shade and light has inspired many other artists in oil painting. As Bellori would put it, “He went so far in this style that he never showed any of his figures in open daylight, but instead found a way to place them in the darkness of a closed room, placing a lamp high so that the light would fall straight down, revealing the principal part of the body and leaving the rest in shadow.” (Graham-Dixon). Bellori’s description of Caravaggio’s innovation of the chiaroscuro technique is accurate, as he darkened his shadows to generate extreme contrast of dark and light.

Caravaggio represented the Baroque era of art. However, a subsequent group of high-minded High Baroque painters, such as Poussin, who worshiped antiquity and claimed that Caravaggio had "came into the world to ruin painting," found theatrical realism to be too easy to imitate (Wilkin). Significant, significant art required not only an understanding of ideal beauty as defined by the Greeks and Romans, Raphael, and Michelangelo, but also a command of perspectival space, geometrically ordered composition, and, most importantly, a mastery of drawing, through which the painter could demonstrate his understanding of ideal beauty and geometric order (Wilkin). Being grounded in the real world, Caravaggio painted his works directly from reality without using well planned preliminary designs (Wilkin).

We all know that Caravaggio is considered one of the fathers of modern painting and famous for his use of tenebrism. In cities like Siena (Rutilio Manetti) and Bologna (Leonello Spada), where the artist himself had never traveled and where his works were not well-known, Caravaggism was practiced (Wilkin). The instance of Lorraine artist Georges de la Tour is arguably the most exceptional. La Tour's travel to Rome in 1640 is ill-documented. He most likely was familiar with Caravaggio's style in Lorraine thanks to Ter Brugghen and other Utrecht school artists. La Tour elevated common Caravaggesque devices, such a light flickering in a dark room, into beautiful musings on Catholic faith and human weakness in works like the Penitent Magdalen (Wilkin). This shows how far Caravaggism has spread into society throughout Europe. Few movements in the history of early modern art have achieved the remarkable diffusion that Caravaggism did. Caravaggism, on the other hand, had almost no "survivals" and only a few odd revivals in the eighteenth century, in a few works by Jacques-Louis David and Joseph Wright of Derby. This contrasts with the baroque classicism of the Bolognese school (Wilkin).

Annotated Bibliography

<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A62214305/BIC?u=nysl_ro_gateschi&sid=bookmark-BIC&xid=52356620>

Karen Wilkin is an independent critic and curator from the state of New York. Wilkin was educated at Barnard College and Columbia University. Wilkin talks about the different techniques and styles Caravaggio uses in his artwork. Wilkin goes into detail about the color shifts of fruit, texture differences in materials, the transparency and reflectiveness of glass. Wilkin also writes about Caravaggio’s life and related artists. Wilkin’s view will be a strong point in the paper I will be writing.

Graham-Dixon, Andrew. *Caravaggio*. Britannica Academic. 2010.

<https://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/Caravaggio/20229>

Andrew Graham-Dixon is a journalist and art critic. Graham-Dixon presented many landmark series on the BBC network for art. Graham-Dixon talks about the Caravaggio’s reputation and Christianity is expressed in Caravaggio’s works of art. There are details about how the Counter-Reformation other artists such as Borromeo has influenced Caravaggio greatly as an artist and how he developed his style. The information in this article is similar to the one in article by Karen Wilkin, but there are some more interesting facts that can be put in my paper.

Stone, David. *Michelangelo Merisi*. Gale In Context. 2004.

<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/K3404900170/BIC?u=nysl_ro_gateschi&sid=bookmark-BIC&xid=11588fa4>

David M. Stone is a Director of the Curatorial Track Ph.D. in Art History and a Professor of Art History. Stone earned his B.A. from the University of California and his M.A. and Ph.D. from Harvard University. Stone’s article gives a brief summary on the career history of Caravaggio. It goes in-depth on his apprenticeship in Milan. It explains the turning point in Caravaggio’s career after his first commission. It ends by explaining Caravaggism, a style of art grafted from popular elements of his pieces. My paper can be improved by using the information in this article. It would be my main source of information on my paper.

Works Cited

Graham-Dixon, Andrew. *Caravaggio*. Britannica Academic. 2010.

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Stone, David. *Michelangelo Merisi*. Gale In Context. 2004.

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Wilkin, Karen. *Two views of Caravaggio*. Gale In Context. February 2000.

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