Paint Me Like One of Your Emaciated Saints:
A Creative Piece on an Interaction with Caravaggio

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The night passed slower when it rained in the streets of Rome. I had grown familiar with the main and side roads guiding my hand along the buildings searching for a doorstep with a large enough covering to stay under for the rest of the night. As I turned the corner, I slammed into a figure wearing all black. The man looked at me with a menacing eyes that reflected in the moonlight, and I heard a building door close shortly after our collision. I was not surprised to see another man hurrying down this street, since there was one woman on this road that seemed to bring a lot of men into her house at this hour.

I immediately apologized for stumbling into him and bowing my head down to show my respect. The man said nothing so began to step around him. As I began to walk, he grabbed my shoulder and asked my name. I told him. He then asked where I was going. “To find a place to rest,” I stated. “Come with me boy,” he said.

I stepped into his apartment, and I was surprised to see how bare it was. Suddenly, it dawned on me. It was a studio, not a living room. The only reason I knew this was because I had grown up in an art studio my whole life until my dad had passed away. I never liked to dwell on the past, especially when the memories brought more pain than joy nowadays. Upon entering his studio, I was greeted by a chill breeze and I looked up towards the source only to see a torn apart ceiling. To the left of the entrance, there was a giant black wall that appeared to be slightly peeling and his tools were scattered around the small apartment. I scanned the ground, and the first things I saw piled near the doorway were insufficient payment notices for the property. A light layer of dust had begun to collect on the papers, suggesting that this man had insufficient funds to pay his rent.¹ I continued to examine the floor and saw some out of place items that I assumed he used as props.

My eyes were drawn to two mirrors leaned up against a wall of the studio.² I had used mirrors before to make self-portraits of myself in my father’s studio, and I assumed that he had used them in a similar way. My father told me that some artists believed the mirror displayed a


² Ibid., 9.
place, person, or thing as it really was. I pointed to the reflective surfaces and asked why he had them. The man said, “I use them to control and monitor the precision and accuracy of things that I paint. When you reflect a subject off a mirror, the image takes on the same two-dimensional characteristic as a canvas. Even though, the sizes of the mirror and canvas may differ, the subject is now easier to transpose onto canvas.” I had never thought about using a mirror to draw a live model. Not only was this ideal due to its convenience, but it made it easier to gain a better understanding of how to make a three-dimensional scene work on a two-dimensional canvas.

He beckoned me to step away from the entrance of his apartment. I shook my head and stood there in defiance, still analyzing the situation. “Why am I here?” I asked. The man let his guard down a little and explained that he did his paintings with live models that were locals to the area. “I will pay you if you let me paint you,” he said. I paused there, acting in deep contemplation. However, it was clear I did not have anything better to do and it definitely beat sleeping outside. I nodded my head in response to his proposal. The man walked towards me, extending his hand. “Call me Caravaggio,” he grinned.

I slept on Caravaggio's sofa that night, and he woke me up early the next morning. I expected a tour of the other rooms, but he wanted to get started right away. Caravaggio seemed like a “do now, ask questions later” kind of guy. It was my first time being a live model and I had never seen someone model before in my father’s studio. This concept was foreign to me, but Caravaggio instructed me to undress to my comfort level. Once I had done that, he told me to assume a pose that I would be able to hold for a long period of time. I decided to play it safe and asked if I could sit. He brought over a chair with a slightly reclined back. Caravaggio positioned my arm behind me with one foot tucked near my chest. He lit more lamps overhead adding to the rays of sunlight already streaming in. The bright overhead lights casting shadows dimples of my skin and highlighted the few muscles I had.

I was confused when Caravaggio set up a canvas immediately. I figured he would sketch out my pose first. It startled me to see him begin painting directly on the canvas. I assumed this was possible, since oil paints were rather forgiving. After a few hours, he offered me meals or

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3 Ibid., 9.
refreshments that would make me more comfortable. I would politely accepted and he would fetch something, shortly resuming his work after.

We went through this routine five to seven times a week, and he paid me if I posed longer than our agreed upon times. Although he kept to himself, after spending a lot of time with him, I was able to piece together some of his story. Michelangelo Merisi, or Caravaggio, as he had asked me to call him, seldom revealed what his life was like. I tried engaging in small talk while he painted, but I received few responses. Caravaggio told me that he was born just east of Milan, but made no mention of his family. Anytime I tried to bring them up, he dismissed the question, saying he had not seen them since he was a boy. I assumed, like many of those in Milan, Caravaggio had lost his family to the plague at a young age. This made more sense why he had taken me, an orphan, into his home; he saw himself in me. I would not have been surprised if the loss of his family had caused him to suffer from some trauma and made it difficult to form intimate connections with people.

Even though he let me stay with him, I felt like I rarely saw him outside of the studio. It was evident that he preferred his alone time, which might explain why he talked to himself a lot. I once overheard him mumbling the name Francesco del Monte, who turned out to be a cardinal. I continued to pry, and finally Caravaggio gave in saying that Monte had taken a liking to his work and had begun collecting pieces to display in his own personal collection. This publicity had given him more commissions, including the one I was currently being depicted in for a man named Vincenzo Giustiniani. I was excited for him. Caravaggio had taken me under his wing and I was glad to hear he was landing more commissions. However, that also meant more stress.

Time passed and he kept the painting covered, forbidding me to look at it. Caravaggio had a violent side, but we lived in violent times. Instead of badgering him, I began conjuring up what the painting might look like. I imagined myself in a relaxed and elegant fashion. My skin

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4 Ibid., 8.


would be clear and in the likeness of porcelain. I would resemble a hero with my defined arm muscles and bulging calves. The jawline on my face would be accentuated as well as my dark flowing locks. Essentially, I would appear as the best and most improved version of myself.

The day of the big reveal came, and I was shocked. It clearly looked like me, but I did not like the way I was depicted. Features such as my sloped nose and untuned stature were not corrected as I had expected them to be. Caravaggio did not simply replicate my image, but he carefully choose the characteristics and elements that my figure emitted. He included my toenails, the skin folds under my neck, and my chubby cheeks. The hyperrealism and provocativeness of the picture was unsettling. Caravaggio chose details that he wanted others to notice in order to help strengthen the realisticness of his scene. Additionally, the positioning of my body was exaggerated. He made me look as though I might slip out of the painting and did not leave much distance between my image and the viewer. Caravaggio called it Saint John The Baptist and made it in 1602. This version of me, as well as the rest of the scene, used theatrical effects including giant gestures and expressive emotions, which made me dislike it.

Years have passed, since my first interaction with the flighty Caravaggio. I have had the opportunity to sit by his side and learn how to analyze his as well as other artists’ themes, techniques, and styles. Overtime, I have realized that Caravaggio does not heavily focus on pre production. However, when he does, he uses two main techniques. Typically, Caravaggio will make incisions on his canvas to take note of the model’s varying compositions, so he or she is able to move and take breaks. These markings became the groundwork of his pieces and allow for comfort of both him and model. Additionally, this technique helps the layout of not only the figure but other still-life objects within the painting. Another practical method I picked up on was camera obscura. This is where images from a lightbox are projected and traced onto a canvas. This projection serves as a general outline for the model in Caravaggio’s work.

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8 Langdon, 213.

9 Varriano, 13.

10 Varriano, 11.
In terms of characteristics, I can now say that a key element of any Caravaggio painting is the usage of light. He implements this idea of light by contrasting lightness and darkness within his painting. Like other artists I have seen, he uses chiaroscuro to create depth in his works. This is a consistent element in his pieces where he would use light and dark to create three-dimensional figures, playing with the highlights and shadows that were cast on the subject. In The Calling of Saint Matthew, Caravaggio depicts this idea of light and dark aspects. A powerful beam of light above Jesus and angled at Matthew signals a call of discipleship. In this instance, Caravaggio uses the light to send a message to the viewer and draw the onlookers’ attention to the main character of the piece, Matthew. Additionally, the source of the light is unknown. By never including a source of light, a sense of drama and theatricality is conveyed in his expression. This unknown source of light typically indicates the mystery of God, but the message varies depending his particular work.

When painting oil paintings, like The Calling of Saint Matthew, Caravaggio strayed away from what would qualify as naturalism and delves into the realm of realism. Although the words are misconceived to mean the same thing, there is a difference in a piece of art exemplifying naturalistic qualities as opposed to realistic qualities. In the painting of Matthew, a window is seen in the background without any natural light shining through. The purpose is to tell the viewer that the light beckoning to Saint Matthew is supernatural and in fact unnatural. In this way, Caravaggio emphasized the ordinary characteristics of the people he paints, including wrinkles and thinning hair, but also the supernatural qualities found within the Church.

Another uncommon way that Caravaggio used light contrasts in this painting is through the lack of light. Canvas and oil pigments are costly. Not only do these materials come at a price, but any kind of art supply is not inexpensive. In other pieces, artists cover their entire canvas with color and minor details, not wasting an inch of space. However, Caravaggio boldly chooses to leave “empty spaces” in his artwork. In the painting, Boy with a Basket of Fruit, the boy stares out of the canvas holding this fruit basket. Caravaggio decides to leave a black void at the bottom of the painting, and the areas to the left and right of the boy are devoid of any subject matter.

Caravaggio does this intentionally to accentuate the color and light emulating from the boy and basket. Additionally, the placement of the painting is important because those viewing the painting meant to fill the black regions. These dark areas are not solely used for the setting of the painting, but they are used to maintain one’s focus on the details and main messages that the piece is intended to convey.

One problem I noticed was his ability to foreshorten. The creating of two-dimensional images to appear as three-dimensional, was a great skill and struggle for Caravaggio. Even though he is able to successfully foreshorten still life, he started to worry about the time he had left to foreshorten people in order to continue his success in the art world. In his painting, *Conversion of Saint Paul*, Caravaggio practices this idea of foreshortening. At this point in time, he is a master at drawing still life items into the viewers' space. These items include the sword and the helmet, where you can feel as though you can touch the sharp blade of the sword or put on the metal helmet. Additionally, Caravaggio masters this in clothes too, painting the glow and texture of the fabric by using the butt end of the brush and allowing red pigment to permeate under tones of purple and blue.\(^\text{12}\) The layers of the paints and the different ways he handles the brush provide greater depth for the viewer. However, he still cannot perfect the foreshortening of the human body. This continues to cause him much frustration, since this is what church commissioners want; they want holy figures to be portrayed in an informative and believable way. Also within this painting, Paul’s right leg appears to be a stub, which was not Caravaggio’s intention. Instead of the right leg appearing bent down, the lack of his experience in foreshortening makes it appear like a stump. Once again, Caravaggio attempts to use realism to make the characters of his story more less idealized.

It is also important to mention that Caravaggi used models typically belonging to the lower class; I am a prime example of this. He was known to pay average men and women of varying ages of the street to model for his paintings. When he painted his figures, they were modestly dressed and their wrinkles gave them a realistic appearance.\(^\text{13}\) The figures were

\(^{12}\) Langdon, 165.

\(^{13}\) Wilkins, 360
represented as he saw them and did not care to conceal their flaws, making them appear more human. Caravaggio continued this throughout his career, therefore painting stories of famous saints with the faces of common thieves, gypsies, or even prostitutes. This depiction supported the Counter-Reformation’s idea that the Catholic Church was open to everyone, regardless of status.\(^1\) Prior to this, only the elite were seen in artwork, which did not preach the church’s current message. Caravaggio depicted Jesus’s followers how they actually were described in the Bible, sinners. This could range from Mary Magdalene, the prostitute, or Matthew, the tax collector. Critiques condemned this uncensored and raw artwork, since they did not want to see the beggars on the street hung up and worshipped in churches.

I have reaped so many benefits from this opportunity as Caravaggio’s apprentice. I have gotten to know him as an artist, an innovator, and an instigator. He has many layers and may not be the epitome of an ideal Christian painter, primarily due to his violent tendencies. However, like his pieces, Caravaggio models a sinner. He represents the average man and draws on the realism of his own life in Rome, to depict saints and other holy figures as the people he sees day-to-day. There is a sense of honesty in his paintings when he creates his characters. Although the positioning and lighting may be dramatized, the bony, wrinkled, or dirty figures are real people. Caravaggio is not concerned in the sole purpose of enlightening a person with knowledge and philosophies.\(^1\) A painter’s job is to preach through their paintings and arrange figures in a way that everyday people will understand. Caravaggio tells us his truth through the extensive realism in his paintings, showing us the actuality of the saints and holy figures that the Catholic Church venerates.


Bibliography


