

T1006

NC 0020122 7



110056852NC

NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN

FINE ART PAINTING

**"CARAVAGGIO -
THE FIRST MODERN ARTIST"**

by

PAUL JOYCE

Submitted to the Faculty of History of
Art and Design and Complementary
Studies in Candidacy for the Degree of
B.A. in Fine Arts, 1992.

-----0000000-----

C O N T E N T S

CHAPTER i	"Beyond Mannerism" Pg. 9-17
CHAPTER ii	"Expressions of Character" Pg 18-33
CHAPTER iii	"Formal Values" Pg 34-48
CHAPTER iv	"Cezanne to Modern Art" Pg 49-65
CONCLUSION Pg 66-70

-o0o-

LIST OF PLATES

FRONTPIECE;	"Caravaggio" by Ottavio Leoni
Fig. 1;	"Flagellation of christ" by Federico Zuccaro
Fig. 2;	"Burial of the Conde de Orgaz" by El Greco
Fig. 3;	"Cardsharps" by Caravaggio
Fig. 4;	"Concert Champetre" by Giorgione
Fig. 5;	"Ecstasy of St. Francis" by Caravaggio
Fig. 6;	"Bacchus" by Caravaggio
Fig. 7;	"Bacchus" (detail) by Caravaggio
Fig. 8;	"St. John the Baptist" (Toledo) by Caravaggio
Fig. 9;	"St. John the Baptist" (Rome) by Caravaggio
Fig.10;	"Medusa" by Caravaggio
Fig.11;	"Incredulity of St. Thomas" by Caravaggio
Fig.12;	"Beheading of St. John the Baptist" by Caravaggio
Fig.13;	"St. Jerome Writing" by Caravaggio
Fig.14;	"Salome with the Head of John the Baptist" by Caravaggio
Fig.15;	"St. John the Baptist" (Borghese Gallery) by Caravaggio
Fig.16;	"The Calling of St. Matthew" by Caravaggio
Fig.17;	"Jev de Paume" by David
Fig.18;	"Entombment" by Caravaggio
Fig.19;	"Conversion of St. Paul" by Caravaggio
Fig.20;	"Large Horse" by Durer
Fig.21;	"Supper at Emmaus" by Caravaggio
Fig.22;	"Supper at Emmaus" (diagram)
Fig.23;	"Last Supper" by Leonardo
Fig.24;	"Crucifixion of St. Peter" by Caravaggio
Fig.25;	"Demoiselles d'Avignon" by Picasso
Fig.26;	"La Toilette Funeraine" by Cezanne
Fig.27;	"Death of the Virgin" by Caravaggio
Fig.28;	"Basket of Fruit" by Caravaggio
Fig.29;	"Landscape" by Cezanne
Fig.30;	"Ma Jolie" by Picasso
Fig.31;	"Excavation" by Willem de Kooning
Fig.32;	"Adam" by Barnett Newman
Fig.33;	"Marilyn" (detail) by Andy Warhol
Fig.34;	"Lightning Field" by Walter de Maria



FRONTPIECE; "Caravaggio" by Ottavio Leoni

INTRODUCTION

'Without doubt Caravaggio advanced the art of painting, for he lived at a time when realism was not much in vogue and figures were made according to convention and "maniera", satisfying more a taste for beauty than truth.'

So wrote Giovanni Pietro Bellori in 1672. Caravaggio revolutionised painting of his time, which had allowed itself to degenerate into self-parody in its supposed search for an idealised beauty. This thesis is an examination of his most innovative achievements and of how far-reaching they were for their time. Many of Caravaggio's paintings are still an influence to artists of the twentieth century, and a section explores his effect on modern art. The final chapter describes a situation in today's art world which is comparable to that of late Mannerism and suggests that a radicalisation, comparable to the one given by Caravaggio, is necessary in order for art to progress into a new millenium.

Around the time of Caravaggio's youth, Mannerism was a dominant style. However, it had lost its early direction and was moving sideways and backwards, but seldom forward. Caravaggio, while from time to time borrowing certain Mannerist conventions, remained apart from this movement right from his beginnings. From his early genre-type paintings onwards, he painted only what he saw - or what he believed. His singlemindedness and personal direction marked him distinctly apart from the idealised formulae and golden rules of the art before him, and opened up a whole

new realm where feeling and instinct were better authorities than reason and logic. He reduced painting to its essentials, recording a 'truer' type of art than had been seen before.

Throughout his career Caravaggio painted what he felt, so that we are left with a (sometimes disturbing) account of the man. His overt use of sexuality is evident in most of his early works, which are basically homoerotic pin-ups. This early eroticism is gradually replaced with a more serene sensuality toward the middle and end of his career. Nowhere is this transition more evident than in the career-spanning series of paintings of St. John the Baptist, with whose character Caravaggio identified strongly. This is not as odd as may first appear - the good of the Baptist is profiled against the bad of a man 'who tended to see human events in black and white'.² In this series, elements of Caravaggio's sadomasochism, sensuality, and juxtapositioning of usual characteristics occur. His feeling and emotion are evident throughout his career, usually to the detriment of artistic tradition.

The formal values of Caravaggio's work; his composition, shape, space and colour; provide the field where his genius really shone - and are of most value to modern art. Caravaggio developed a pictorial space that was uniquely his own. He created spatial associations between his pictures and his viewers that were so tangible as to convince the viewer the action was occurring before his eyes. His compositions were delicate balances between organic and geometric shapes, his colour schemes contradicted the natural colour range, in order to enhance our sense of

understanding. Diagrammatic analysis of his paintings show how his formal use of composition heightens the emotional pitch felt by the viewer.

Caravaggio's artistic innovations have influenced many generations of artists, including modern artists of the twentieth century. So far-reaching was his understanding of space that Cezanne, the 'Father of Modern Art', was influenced to the extent that he copied some of Caravaggio's work. After Cezanne, the Cubist debt to Caravaggio became clear. That Caravaggio's realism should be so influential to a basically abstract movement emphasises the truthfulness and timelessness of his work. In fact, as the abstract movement grew, so too did Caravaggio's influence.

Parallels can be drawn between our stagnant abstract movement of today, and that faced by Caravaggio, within the style of Mannerism. The art world has come full circle, as painting today is failing to expand upon the achievements made by the abstract artists up to the 1950s, in a similar way that the Mannerists did not live up to the accomplishments of their Renaissance forebearers. In order for abstract painting to progress into the twenty-first century, we must re-examine Caravaggio's achievements. Analysis of his work, and his approach to painting, will help clarify our modern direction for abstract art. This thesis offers such an analysis.

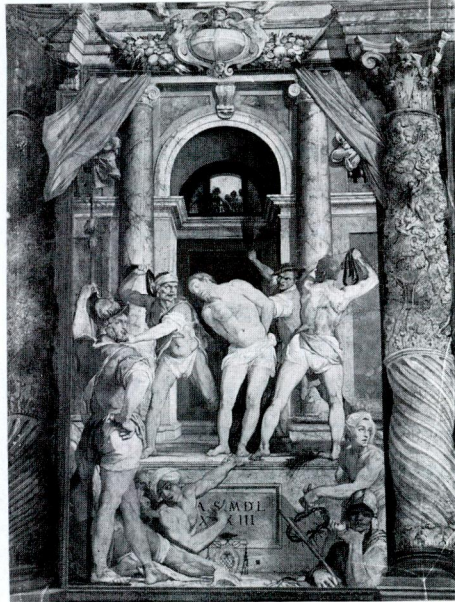


Fig. 1; "Flagellation of christ" by Federico Zuccaro

CHAPTER i

BEYOND MANNERISM

By the time of Caravaggio's birth in 1571, painting had abandoned the exuberance and inventiveness that so marked the High Renaissance. The most gifted artists of the cinquecento, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Giorgione, Titian, Raphael, were deceased, and their innovative aesthetic developments were being manipulated by the increasingly confused school of Mannerism.

In the second part of his 'Lives of the Most Excellent Architects, Painters, and Sculptors'¹; first published in 1550, Giorgio Vasari mentions that Mannerism, beginning roughly with Masaccio and Brunelleschi, appears to him to have moved towards capacity ("disegno") and style ("maniera"). Artists of this era believed that art should learn from art; that the successors to Leonardo, Michelangelo, et al, would further idealise the human body, and its surroundings. Shearman opines that 'Mannerism is a style of excess ... it could only flourish in an atmosphere of self-assurance. And one reason for this assurance was the conviction that artists were in the main stream of advancing perfection that was apparent, in retrospect, in the Renaissance'². A painting such as Federico Zuccaro's Flagellation of Christ (fig.1) of 1573 displays a certain Michelangelesque influence, but is nevertheless concocted in an artificial manner, with the figures sitting unconvincingly in their unlikelike background. A later Italian scholar, Giovan Pietro Bellori, remarked that 'artists, abandoning the study of nature, poisoned art with "maniera", that is to say a fantastic ideal based on knack rather than imitation' (of nature)³.

One Mannerist artist who did place a high priority on the study of nature was El Greco. Although his work displays many wholly Mannerist attributes - his elongated, serpentine figures, for example - his work anticipates the full Baroque splendour of Rubens (and, to a lesser extent, Caravaggio), in the spiritual significance he placed in his figure compositions. A work such as the Burial of the Conde de Orgaz (fig.2) emphasises the importance he placed upon the power of human expression, and its inherent spirituality. The emotional power of El Greco's paintings heightens the sense of the stylised, artificial look of other late Mannerist work.

It was within this late Mannerist era that the young Caravaggio began to paint. From the beginning he took nature as his model, directly contradicting the art of his time. He painted only what he saw, or knew, or believed, to produce a style that at once overturned the stagnant Mannerist beliefs, and opened the way for the Baroque movement.

On 6th April 1584, aged about twelve and a half, Caravaggio was apprenticed to the Milanese painter Simone Peterzano. Peterzano was born in Venice, and since he signed one painting 'student of Titian' we can assume he studied with the aged Titian there. Venetian art was so clearly dominant in north Italy during the Cinquecento that most artists, including those from Lombardy, Caravaggio's region, were touched by its light and colour, its fluid and dynamic rendering of forms in space, and its lyrical themes. By the end of the century, however, there must have been a strong sense even in Venice that the golden age was over; talented younger artists like Palma Giovane failed to



Fig. 2; "Burial of the Conde de Orgaz" by El Greco

approach the brilliance of their masters. The single exception was El Greco (1541-1614), who had moved from Crete to Venice to Rome and finally to Spain in 1577. Perhaps Peterzano was in Titian's studio together with El Greco in the 1560s.

Caravaggio would have learned from Peterzano the fundamentals of painting, the grinding of colours, the preparation of walls for fresco, and the basic principles of drawing and applying paint to wall and canvas. However, Hibbard suggests that he may not have completed his four-year apprenticeship⁴, bearing in mind his later resistance to authority, his impatience and belligerence. More importantly, there are fundamental aspects of Renaissance painting, mastered by Peterzano, that Caravaggio did not learn or refused to practice. He never painted fresco. Not one of his drawings exist, so he was presumably not much of a draughtsman (he never sketched onto canvas). And his ability to paint figures in a believably receding space was deficient (this, as explained in chapter iv, was to the benefit of future generations of artists).

Caravaggio's early colourism was attributed to his discovery in Venice of the paintings of Giorgione; credited by Giovan Pietro Bellori, a reliable Roman scholar of Caravaggio's time. Giorgione relied to a large extent on his senses, and approached a painting fresh, without any preparatory drawings or compositions. Caravaggio was drawn to these aspects of Giorgione and his art, his freedom and adherence to Nature and her laws, as opposed to the more humanist rationality that was popular at the time. There are striking similarities between the two painters. Both produced emotional art which relied more on feeling and instinct than science and logic, in doing so releasing



Fig. 3; "Cardsharps" by Caravaggio



Fig. 4;

"Concert Champetre" by Giorgione



TO: [illegible]
FROM: [illegible]
SUBJECT: [illegible]
[illegible]
[illegible]

painting from idealisation and caricature (in Giorgione's case, Classicism; in Caravaggio's, Mannerism) to create a new art for the senses and imagination.

Bellori states that the 'sweet and clear' colouring of Caravaggio's first Roman works (e.g. the Cardsharps or Fortuneteller) can be traced to his study of Giorgione. Giorgione had achieved the purest and simplest representation of natural forms in a few colours - something Caravaggio emulated in the early Cardsharps (fig.3). The genre appeal of this painting was, however, of Caravaggio's own mind, but the whimsical nature of the painting is comparable to many of Giorgione's works, such as the Concert Champetre (fig.4) of 1510.

Nevertheless, the young Caravaggio's single biggest influence was unequivocally what he saw around him. From an early age he started his lifelong preoccupation with the depiction of people and events as they really were. Bellori wrote that 'he recognised no other master than the model and did not select the best forms of nature but emulated art ... without art'.

When once asked why he did not follow the example of contemporary painters and paint from antique models, Caravaggio pointed to people in the street, signifying his reliance on no other models than those about him.

From these early works, Caravaggio acquired a stubborn belief in his own judgement. This opinionated detachment from conventional, more collective working methods was to enable him to reshape traditional biblical scenes into highly personal scenes which rose above the mere portrayal of scriptural passages. An early religious work such as



Fig. 5; "Ecstasy of St. Francis" by Caravaggio

the Ecstasy of St. Francis (fig.5) is a precursor for many later, more famous works in its typically Caravaggesque physicality and simplicity.

The Ecstasy is powerfully physical, despite some vegetal detail and intimations of landscape. Two large human forms dominate the foreground, with a relatively empty space at the left in which the distant figures are unusually small and dark. There are typical confusions or distortions; Francis's right arm seems to emerge from that of the angel, and we seek a long time before finding the angel's left hand. He, for all his boyishness, is bigger than the saint, whose lower body trails off ambiguously. Its crudities and awkward passages indicate that this must be one of the earlier paintings. Nevertheless, Caravaggio's outstanding importance as an innovator in religious imagery is already evident and the picture was quickly copied and imitated.⁵

This painting shows a personal response to mystical events that we value in Caravaggio's later and finer religious paintings. It seems newly felt and imagined, as if he had experienced the subject before he painted it. The picture gives the impression that he began with no preconceptions, no tradition whatever, and simply relied on his own thought and feeling. Caravaggio did not bring this intense response to every religious theme. But throughout his life he showed unusual interest in conversion and in submission to the divine will. In later works he personally identified with many of his religious characters, in doing so leaving us with a visual record of his character. In the next chapter I will explain how Caravaggio broke much new ground by imbuing many pictures with a sexual quality, so potently individual as to sometimes seem disturbing.



Fig. 6; "Bacchus" by Caravaggio



Fig. 7; "Bacchus" (detail) by Caravaggio

CHAPTER ii

EXPRESSIONS OF CHARACTER

Caravaggio broke new ground and revealed an expression of his character and sexuality through his painting, from the explicit overtones of his early genre-based work, to the mature and moving sensuality of his late period. During the process of discussing this theme, specific emphasis will be placed on his paintings of St. John the Baptist, with whose character Caravaggio strongly identified.

While, at an early stage of his career, working in the studio of d'Arpino, Caravaggio painted many pictures of nude or semi-clad youths - doubtlessly identifiable as homosexual pin-ups. Among these is the Uffizi Bacchus (fig.6) of 1595 or 1597. A semi-clad youth is displayed offering the viewer a glass of wine, while suggestively tugging at his loose robe. This genre of paintings was familiar in Rome at that time, and it could be argued that Caravaggio was pandering to the tastes of his patrons, rather than satisfying his own artistic temperament. However, a developing trait was his portrayal of fruit, the shapes of which have sexual connotations. Specifically, the roundness of the Bacchus peaches echo the shape of male buttocks (fig.7); ironic in that Caravaggio was never to portray a naked male posterior as explicitly as implied here. The sexual themes of these early paintings are directly alluded to, albeit in a crass explicit manner. In their time they would fill the space that pornography occupies in ours.

That it took a picture on the subject of St. John the Baptist for Caravaggio to initially explore his own





Fig. 8; "St. John the Baptist" (Toledo) by Caravaggio



Fig. 9; "St. John the Baptist" (Rome) by Caravaggio

sexuality is not as surprising as it first seems. Freed from the conventions of specifically homosexual paintings, he developed what was to become a favourite preoccupation of his - an underlying subject in a painting whose direct theme was poles apart from this concealed content. Here Caravaggio forced the viewer to rethink an accepted version of events, pushing conventional boundaries to their limits.

The Toledo version of St. John the Baptist (fig.8), painted c. 1594/97, includes all the familiar attributes to scenes of the saint as a young man - a lamb and a reed cross. Yet the unclothed expanse of flesh, the revealing folds of soft drapery, and the look of innocent wonder in the young Baptist's eyes indicate that the subtext here must be read on a sexual level.

This association of the Baptist with his implied eroticism is developed to a greater extent in the Rome version of St. John the Baptist (fig.9). Attribution of the theme and subject has proved more difficult in this instance, as the more usual lamb has been replaced by a ram (perhaps in the context of the suggested imagery this is more appropriate). Nevertheless, the similarities between the earlier and later versions of this same subject helps to identify it as a Baptist. As pointed out by Gash,¹ Renaissance artists such as Raphael had presented the young Baptist as a handsome, semi-clad youth previously, and Caravaggio certainly borrowed from this well-established iconographical trend. But the sexual content is far more implied here than before, as though Caravaggio chose to expand on the Baptist's acquired connotations at the expense of his original Biblical significance. St. John is seen lounging on some bedding (as in the Uffizi Bacchus) in a pose which perversely both displays and conceals his genitals; the



Fig.10;

"Medusa" by Caravaggio

outstretched legs displaying, the shadow obscuring. He is embracing a ram, intended as an allusion to an older male, instead of the more usual and sexually ambiguous lamb, whilst smiling invitingly at the viewer. At the time, Caravaggio was placing a lot of emphasis on the emotive value of extreme facial gestures, from the flirtatious smile of this Baptist, to the horrific screaming head of the Medusa (fig.10). This emotional depiction of facial characteristics represents a break from the more sombre-faced models of the earlier Renaissance, and allows for more personality and individuality in the depiction of real people (one hesitates to think of Caravaggio's models as actors, such is their authentic tangible presence).

Facial expression is again evident in the three amazed onlookers in the Incredulity of St. Thomas (fig.11) of 1601/03. A more controlled composition, and less emotionally gestural than Caravaggio's earlier paintings, the more civilized ambience only serves to heighten the sexual quality which had overtaken his earlier eroticism - that of sadism. Christ, with a lowered, somewhat submissive, head, offers his wound to be explored, and even guides St. Thomas's finger into the open hole. The prominence given to the penetrated wound, the intensity of cutting off the picture below the knees, and the almost suffocating relationship between the four figures adds to the intimacy of the scene - one is almost tempted to explore the graphic wound oneself.

This sadistic quality had been becoming more dominant as Caravaggio's work progressed. It is echoed by the more frequent appearances of his name on police records around this time - culminating with the murder of Ranuccio Tomassoni by Caravaggio in 1606. Evidently his character



Fig.11; "Incredulity of St. Thomas" by Caravaggio



Fig.12; "Beheading of St. John the Baptist" by Caravaggio

was being reflected in his work - from the sharp pain of the Boy Bitten by a Lizard, to the submission of the weaker man in the Martyrdom of St. Matthew. Nowhere, however, is this sadistic streak more revealing about Caravaggio's personality than in the Beheading of St. John the Baptist (fig.12) of 1608. The setting, as with most of Caravaggio's works, is seen as a dimly-lit stage, with the figures spotlighted. A new departure, however, is the vast space which surrounds the group of people. The effect of this is to intensify the action, or as Friedlaender writes, to give a 'wider dimension to the given reality'². The drama is unmistakable - the Baptist's neck is cut, but not yet severed, so that we happen upon the scene between two crucial moments, the cause (the first blow of the sword), and the effect (the eventual beheading). This halfway point between events realises a surprising stillness, a silent pause, enhancing the sense of pain portrayed. The silence of the picture is equal to muted atmosphere of the viewer's space - likewise the intense agony of St. John is psychologically experienced by the viewer. The Baptist's torment is also Caravaggio's torment, and he even heightened his affinity by painting his signature ('Fra...michel' or 'brother michele') flowing with the Baptist's blood. This is the only known work which Caravaggio signed, and knowing his dislike for whim and fancy, and the importance he placed upon symbolic connotations, we can conclude that the Baptist's death (as in earlier paintings, with his life) had strong personal associations for Caravaggio. Gash suggests that the vast space in the painting enhances 'our perception of the fixed and tragic fate of man within the universe',¹³ and it is precisely this perception that Caravaggio associates with both his life and that of the Baptist.

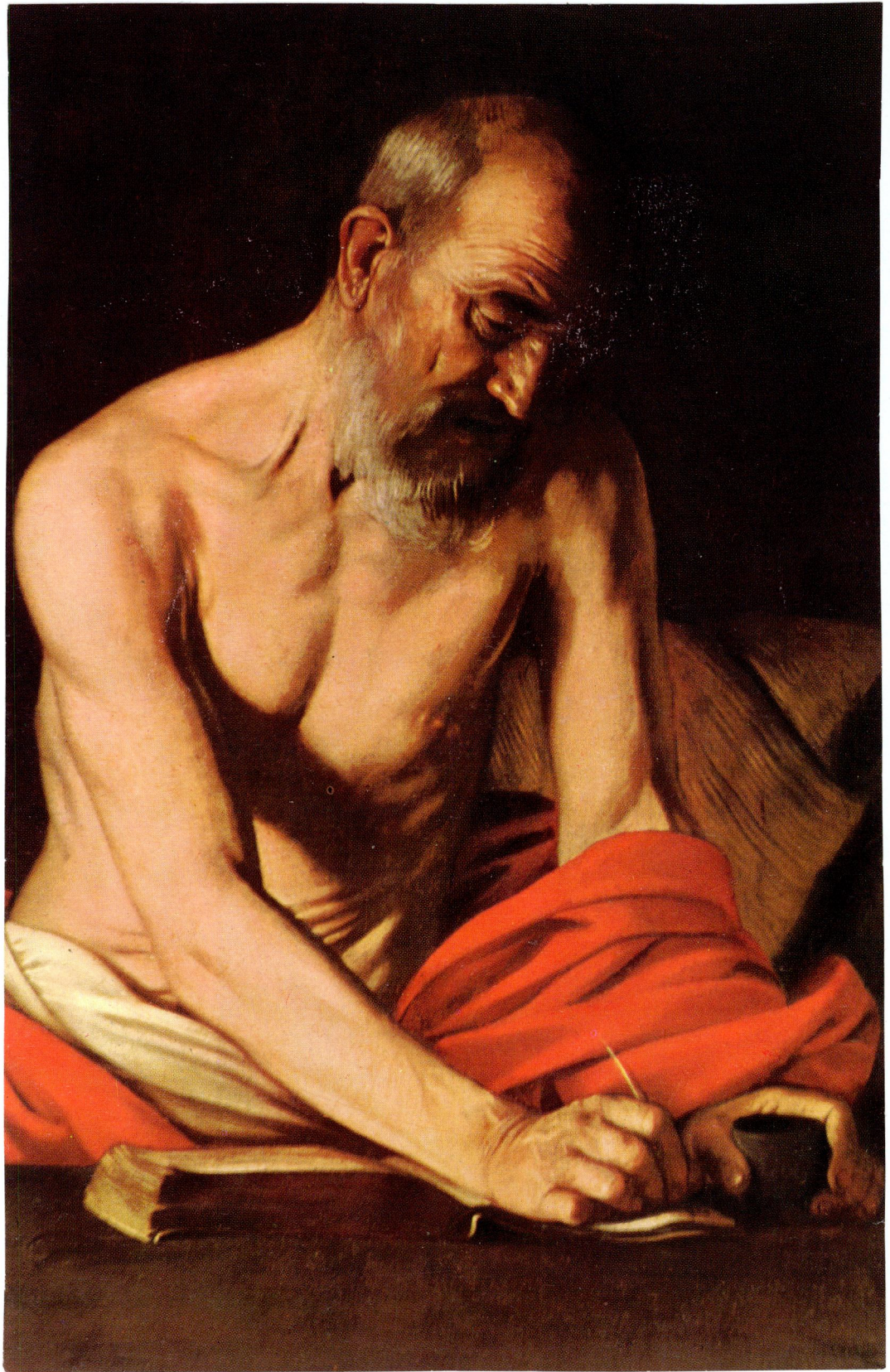


Fig.13;

"St. Jerome Writing" by Caravaggio

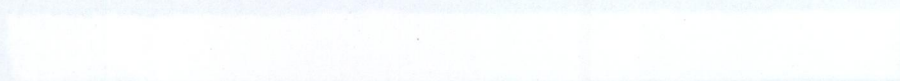




Fig 14. "Salome with the head of John
the Baptist" by Caravaggio

After this masterpiece, Caravaggio's work became more directly emotional, as he pondered on and questioned the various fates God bestows on mankind. His St. Jerome Writing (fig.13) of 1608 is a moving study of the wrinkled, aging skin of an old man, handled in a way that contrasts it with the supple flesh of the earlier Bacchus.

Towards the end of his life he painted two versions of Salome with the Head of John the Baptist (fig.14). In both, Salome, who was responsible for the Baptist's death, looks away from the severed head she carries on a platter, as if mocking the greatness of her deed. There is absolutely no sentimentality involved, Salome regards the head as though it were a plate of dead meat (perhaps Caravaggio's own view?). In the second version she looks directly at the viewer, challenging us to express horror at her deeds. As with the unexpected silence of the Beheading, so too Salome's defiance serves to increase the sense of emotion experienced by the viewer.

Finally, the last of his paintings of St. John, that of the Borghese Gallery in Rome, of 1610 (fig.15). It may well have been the painting he had with him at the time of his death, (as suggested by Gash,⁴ which would make a fitting testament to a subject which had fascinated him throughout his career. In severe contrast to the earlier Baptist paintings, this example portrays a less idealised and more sensuous approach to the male nude, with a relaxed St. John gazing out confidently at the viewer. The Baptist's face shares similar features to Ottavio Leoni's portrait of Caravaggio, and to other recognised self-portraits, with his arched eyebrows and low forehead. The paintings iconography refers to the earlier Doria version of the same subject, as the Baptist lounges on bedding, with a ram beside him. However, the earlier overt sexuality has been

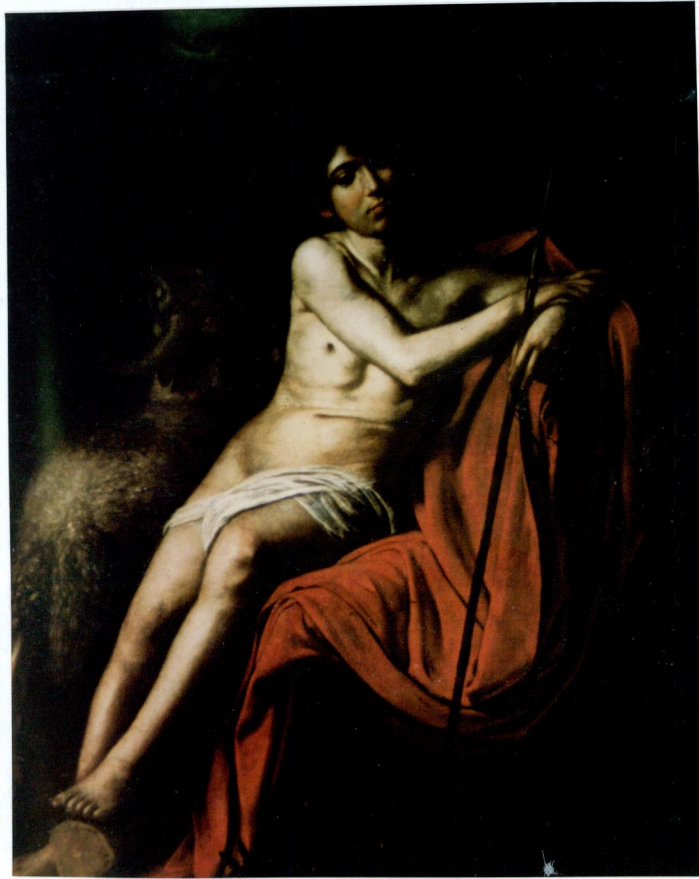
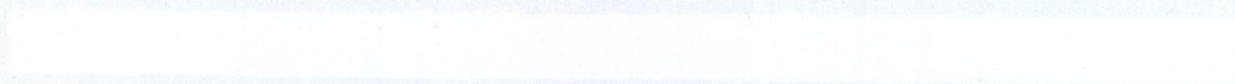
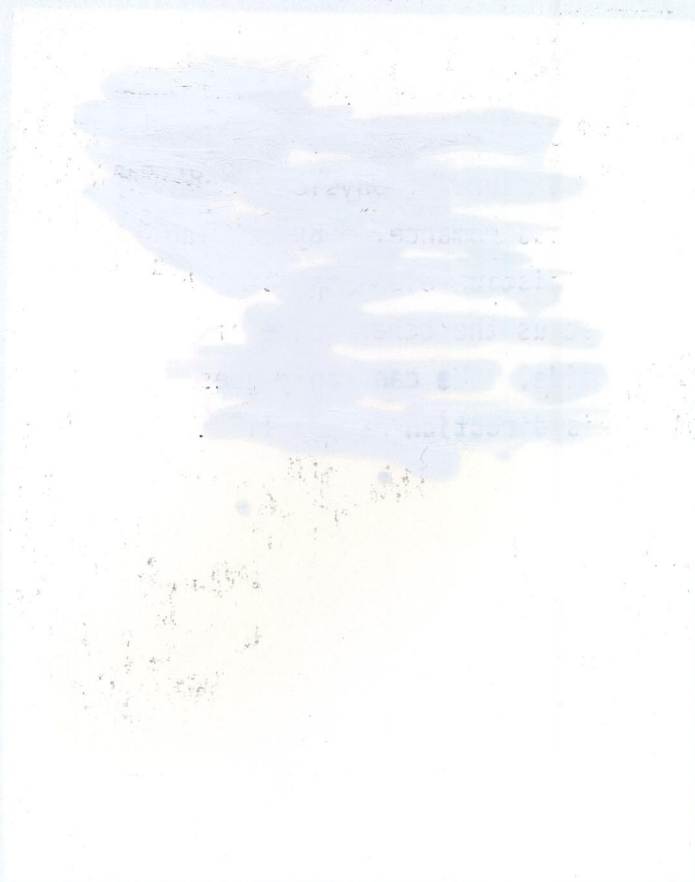


Fig.15;

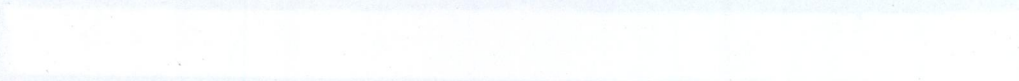
"St. John the Baptist" (Borghese Gallery) by Caravaggio



replaced with a more introspective sensuality. There is no longer the physical association with the ram, who instead looks upwards to heaven. In the place of physical love, Caravaggio has stressed a mysterious romance. By playing down the sexual, physical and sadistic elements of his earlier work, Caravaggio showed us the other side of his personality, a more spiritual side. We can only guess how far he would have moved in this direction had he lived longer.



Fig.16; "The Calling of St. Matthew" by Caravaggio



CHAPTER iii

FORMAL VALUES

The Calling of St. Matthew (fig.16) (1599/1600) of the Contarelli chapel represents the first use by Caravaggio of a group in a large-scale history painting. Although similarities can be drawn with earlier works such as the Cardsharps and the Fortuneteller, the Calling embodies Caravaggio's progress towards more complex compositions. The painting is divided horizontally into two deliberate spaces; the top one empty save for an unobtrusive window; the lower space filled with the rich and colourful group of figures. This division of space, used by Caravaggio for the first time here, occurs again in his later works, such as the Beheading of St. John the Baptist, but is also influential on many paintings of the next few centuries. One sees a similar spatial arrangement in one of David's greatest compositions, the unfinished Jeu de Paume (Fig.17).

The Calling is the conclusion to Caravaggio's so-called Giorgionesque period, but displays a developed understanding of certain formal values which for the most part became Caravaggio's style over the rest of his career. The colours express a reversal of the usual colour scale range, in order to enhance the spectator's perception of depth. In the Contarelli painting this is evident in the trouser leg of the young dandy with his back to us - a bright sharp yellow used for an object of secondary importance, which happens to be towards the front of the picture plane. As a rule, Caravaggio doesn't proceed from near to far, from the full heavy tones of fore and middle grounds to the thinner and lighter tones of the background. Instead, he



Fig.17; "Jeu de Paume" by David

David
"Jeu de Paume"
Figure 15

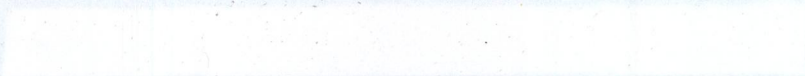
chacun d'eux en particulier confirmer par leur signature cette « loi sacrée et inébranlable ».

Cette journée n'avait pas seulement été portée directement politique, était en même temps l'une des premières expressions sensibles d'une « loi essentielle des hommes de la Révolution, qui va se répéter de façon constante, au moins jusqu'au 9 thermidor, celle de l'union patriotique de la nation, qui vaut bien plus que l'addition des volontés individuelles et qui est dans le moment privilégié du serment. Celui-ci est en même temps, quand vacillent les institutions fondamentales, l'expression élémentaire et qui sans cesse réitérer, d'un nouveau contrat social. Moment d'adhésion, où chacun sort de lui-même et se fonde dans une collectivité nouvelle ».

Peu après la journée du Jeu de Paume commencera le mouvement de la Fédération, en liaison avec la Grande Fête qui agit les campagnes « le 14 juillet, et qui s'accompagne de la formation des municipalités et des sociétés nationales. Le premier grand rassemblement eut lieu à Brédelle, près de Paris, le 29 novembre; on jura « de rester à jamais unis, de protéger la circulation des subsistances et de soutenir les lois émanées de l'Assemblée constituante ». Ce mouvement, qui se propage dans tout le pays, aboutit à l'armement national du 14 juillet 1790, qui rassemble à Paris la garde nationale de tout le pays.



Fig.18; "Entombment" by Caravaggio



tends to graduate this scale in opposite order - from the darkness of the background up to the brighter and lighter tones of the foreground. A similar colour device is used in the Entombment (fig.18), where the forward thrust of the stone slab is enhanced by the use of a bright lemon-yellow glaze. Caravaggio's colour scheme is, therefore, manipulated in order to augment our understanding of the painting. Friedlaender explains:

'We are no longer looking into a fictitious world set apart by design, colour and light; the entire construction seems to come physically toward us as if entering step by step into our world. We are made the recipients of the miracle.'¹

The spiritual light of the Calling transforms the reality of the spectator's space, engulfing us by its power. And as it changes our understanding, so too it symbolically converts Levi the tax-collector to St. Matthew the Evangelist. But as we see for example in the Conversion (in which the light converts Saul into Paul), Caravaggio's use of light was every bit as personal as his use of colour.

The Conversion of St. Paul (fig.19) is a masterpiece for its reductive minimalism of the two men and a horse. Caravaggio's horse, borrowed from Durers Large Horse (fig.20) of 1505, progresses from frame to frame, filling the painting with its immensity. Its illuminated torso is turned at a slight angle to the picture plane; its plastic energy roughly intensified by this relatively modest foreshortening. Light comes from above, and falls subjectively upon areas necessary to the composition, pulling them out from the dark background. The shape of St.

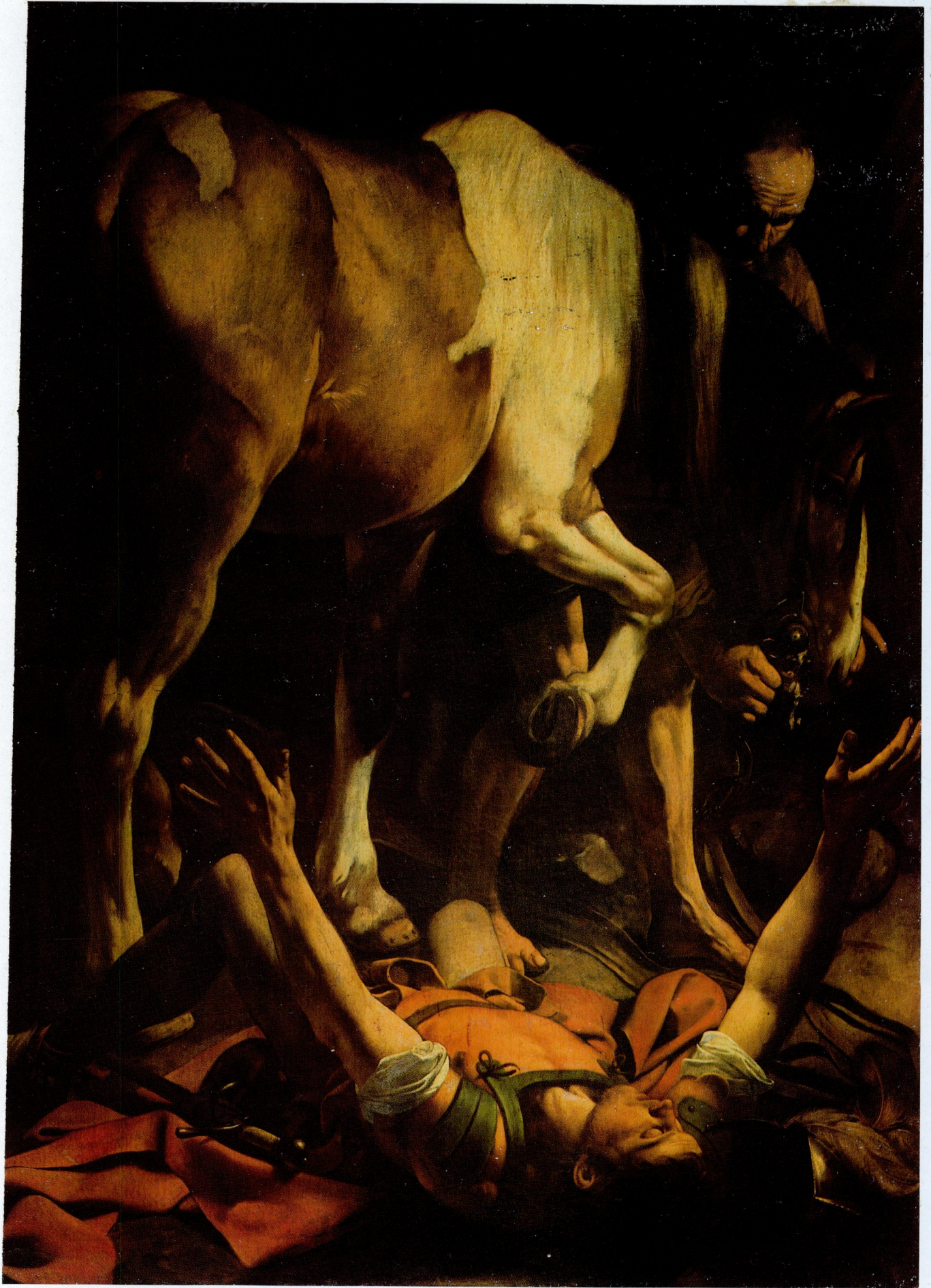


Fig.19;

"Conversion of St. Paul" by Caravaggio



Fig.20; "Large Horse" by Durer

Paul radiates on the ground - his receptive V-shaped arms stretching for the light of the horse. The light of his conversion is personified in the illuminated horse's torso.

The scene occupies a very narrow space. No background appears as such, rather a collection of interlocking shapes and planes emerging from the deep misty black. These shapes suggest solidity, but one feels as though the black will swallow them soon. It is as though the shapes will appear in this order only for an instant; then the scene will change with the shadows and be lost. A sense of time being frozen for the miraculous moment occurs.

This 'frozen time' appears again and again in Caravaggio's later paintings. Analysis of its occurrence in the London Supper at Emmaus (fig.21) reveals Caravaggio's structural working method.

If one divides the Supper at Emmaus (fig.22) with diagonal lines from the corners, the arrangement of figures appears built around these lines. Christ's heart is at the centre, where the two lines meet, suggesting associations with the centralised perspective of Leonardo's Last Supper (fig.23). Unlike the Last Supper, however, the diagonal lines are not shown as table edges, or ceiling beams, which only exaggerates their artificial presence. Rather, the lines are echoed and followed by details from the scene - the border of the white garment on Christ's lower forearm; the angle of the innkeeper's head; the direction of Christ's pointed finger. Further geometrical deconstruction of this grid system reveals similar sections.



Fig.21;

"Supper at Emmaus" by Caravaggio



fig 21

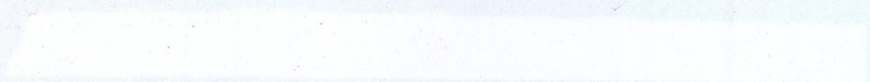




Fig.22;

"Supper at Emmaus" (diagram)

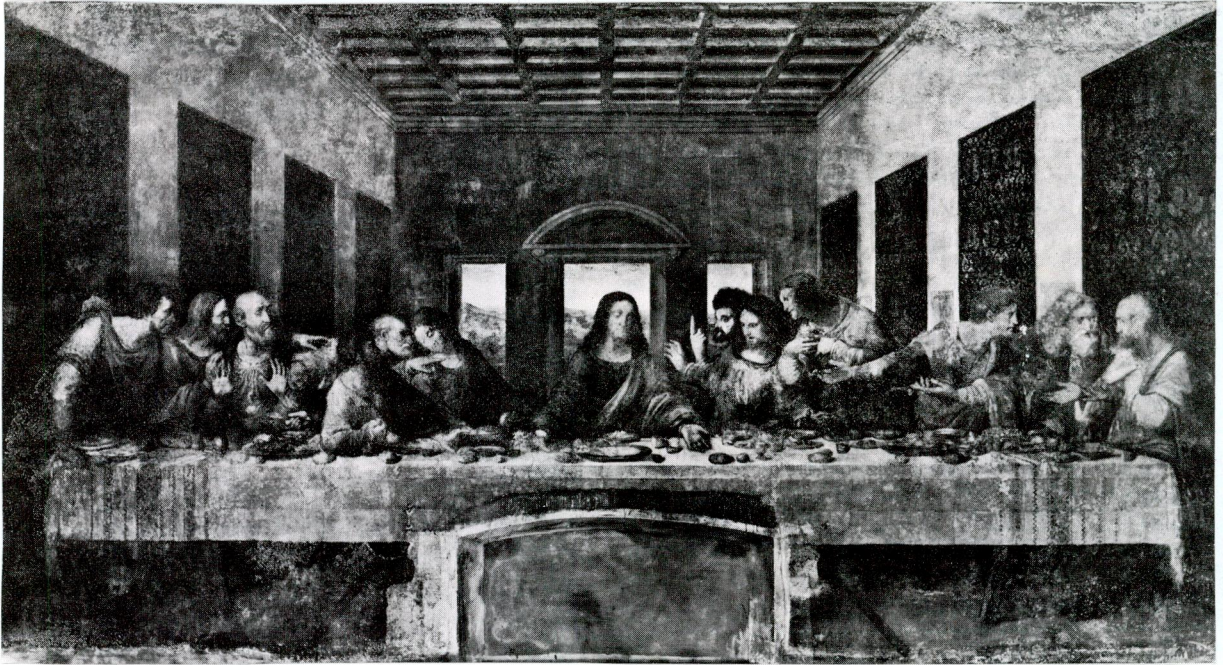


Fig.23; "Last Supper" by Leonardo

And yet a notable feature of Caravaggio's painting style is his reliance on natural shapes, on the organic forms of nature as opposed to the mathematical compositions of his predecessors. He had to show structure, but also wanted it to be more personal and emotional than before. Caravaggio's decision was to strike a balance - to build his natural, organic forms around a geometrically constructed grid. In this way, the fundamental movements and directions of the diagonal grid lines are apparent, yet subdued in their energy by the more rounded natural shapes. In the Supper at Emmaus the viewer's eye is led slowly into the centre of the picture, moving along the suggested diagonal lines, while at times tapering off to observe and comprehend important sections, and eventually resting upon the central figure of Christ. By using this directional start/stop guide for the eye, allowing his shapes to follow, then contradict, the diagonal 'scaffolding', Caravaggio subtly contains and controls the energy of the diagonals. Activity and motion are indicated, but one is more aware of their potential than their realised movement. The time is motionless, non-existent, frozen.

By constructing a two-dimensional geometric grid, and arranging his figures into the shapes and planes around it, Caravaggio laid the basis for the 'flattening' of pictorial depth of the twentieth century. Frank Stella, in 'Working space', suggests:

'The necessity of creating pictorial space that is capable of dissolving its own perimeter and surface plane is the burden that modern art was born with. No-one helped lighten this burden more than Caravaggio.'²

In The Crucifixion of St. Peter (fig.24), Caravaggio's space has dissolved not only its perimeter and surface plane, but in doing so has also dissolved its own staticness. The space and shapes suggest a spiral movement, focusing around the torso of St. Peter.

Elevation scenes were sparse before Caravaggio's version, a static Massaccio and a monumental Michelangelo being among the few, despite a growing Renaissance interest in motion. With the genre so young, it remained to Caravaggio to give the theme his own modern interpretation. Having viewed how his predecessors had tackled the scene, Caravaggio promptly reduced the number of figures to four, shaping them, as in the Supper at Emmaus, into a deliberate pattern. But whereas the London painting had been composed into a rigid geometrical grid structure, the Crucifixion displays a type of wheel arrangement as its backbone. The 'spokes' of the wheel are formed by the bodies of the saint and the three men. Each is struggling in his own space, but the clockwise upward motion is felt by all. Of the three men, all of their movements (a pull, a push and a lift) is necessary for the end result of an elevation. By suggesting that these 'spokes' are robotic manual workers, we do not concentrate on them, only on the body of St. Peter.

Before Caravaggio, artists used space only as a setting to tell a story, or set an action. By his use of space, Caravaggio increases the psychological drama of his scene. We do not feel as though we are standing looking in on a painting, but as though the events are occurring in our personal space. The Entombment, one of Caravaggio's



Fig.24;

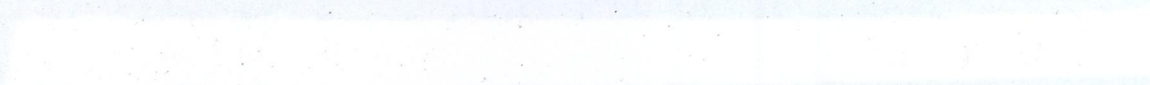
"Crucifixion of St. Peter" by Caravaggio

greatest works, draws upon this picture space/viewer space relationship until the viewer feels obliged to step in to the painting and help carry Christ. The scene is designed as a great diagonal that starts at the outstretched arms of the topmost Mary at the upper right, and descends to the horizontal of Christ's body, and the slab whose corner projects into our space. All the figures are immersed to a greater or lesser degree into the dark background. The exception is Christ's body, which, as the subject of the painting, occupies most space and is the most luminous figure. Although the composition is traditional, and it is Caravaggio's most classical painting, the Entombment has been rotated twenty degrees away from the frontal angle, like a piece of sculpture seen in the round. By challenging the way scenes were traditionally viewed, Caravaggio broke ground for Cezanne and Picasso, and their assimilation of different viewpoints.



Fig.25;

"Demoiselles d'Avignon" by Picasso



Chapter IV

CEZANNE TO MODERN ART

Picasso's Demoiselles d'Avignon (Fig.25) of 1907 is the cornerstone painting for abstract art in the twentieth century. Yet many of its fundamental aspects were approached by Caravaggio over three hundred years beforehand. Although Picasso never cited Caravaggio an influence, an association between the two painters, and their styles, is apparent.

The early preliminary sketches for Demoiselles suggest that Picasso may have been influenced by Cezannes early, romantic figures pieces, such as the various Temptation of St. Anthony's or La Toilette Funerainne (Fig. 26) of 1868.¹ Picasso was in all likelihood drawn to La Toilette's sombre, tragic treatment of the human body, as well as its compositional reduction to essentials. The painting, with its dark funereal hues, is in a typically Baroque manner, befitting its subject-matter. It is lit with a supernatural light, strengthening the shape of the bald head against the black background. Indeed, Gowing² suggests a deeper Baroque influence, comparing the series of bald heads in Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin (Fig. 27) with that in Cezanne's painting. It is known that the Frenchman had an interest in Caravaggio's work, even to the extent of copying his Entombment, but the two painters are strongly associated in a more indirect way.



Fig.26;

"La Toilette Funéraire" by Cezanne



Fig.27; "Death of the Virgin" by Caravaggio

Mémoires de la Commission de la Capitale

1971-1972

La route de la Vierge

Étude sur route

400 m x 4, 4, 40 m

Collection de l'Université de la Capitale

1971

1971

1971

1971-1972

1971-1972

Mary Tomkins Lewis, in "Cezannes Early Imagery", suggests that Cezannes broadest influence in his formative years was that of Baroque painting in the Aix-en-Provence area. This is evident in his early, chiaroscuro-based, paintings. Baroque painting first came to Provence with the arrival of Louis Finson (1570 - 1617), who studied in Rome and Naples prior to his arrival. Finsons influence on seventeenth century painting in Provence, and nearby Marseille, was so great as to earn him the title "Cavavage provençal". One of his paintings, La Madelaine Du Christ, is so similar to Caravaggio's style, it has often been considered a copy of a lost work. Lewis further states that in this painting, Finson anticipated the sacred ecstasies "that later artists in Provence, including Cezanne, would so often produce"

Having established Caravaggio's influence on the young Cezanne, it is the later Cezanne with whom the importance lies. The Cezanne who anticipated abstract art by urging to "see nature as cylinder, sphere and cone", recognised the important formal constructions upon which Caravaggio built his work.

In 1596 Caravaggio painted his "Basket of Fruit" (Fig.28). It is the sole still-life of his career, although a statement to his friend and patron Giustiniani that "it required as much craftsmanship to paint a good picture of flowers as one of figures",



Fig.28;

"Basket of Fruit" by Caravaggio



fig 28



suggests that he had painted others. It is an extremely important painting in the development of western art. By painting the earliest still-life, Caravaggio had freed painting from the all-consuming importance of genre and subject matter. Lionello Venturi in "Four Steps toward Modern Art" writes that -

"If Cezanne succeeded in finding his style by painting apples, it was because Caravaggio, three centuries earlier, had pointed the way."

The Basket of Fruit, based purely on formal aspects and spatial relationships, rather than a thematic representation, began the trend of modern art.

As Caravaggio's works matured and grew in importance, so did his consequence to future generations of artists. This late Cezanne landscape (Fig. 29) is a triumph of reduction, a minimalist composition of essentials in a similar vein to the pioneering painting values of Caravaggio. In its understanding of pictorial space and planer rhythms it is comparable to Caravaggio's Crucifixion of St. Peter.



Fig.29;

"Landscape" by Cezanne

I have discussed in chapter three how Caravaggio's reduced what he saw in this painting to basic essentials - abolishing all vanity and disregarding all that was superfluous to the compositional rendering of the movement. In a similar way, Cezanne eliminates most of what he sees in his landscape - we are left with a system of planer relationships between its limited shapes. The Crucifixion's figures react with their surroundings; filling and moving within their space. Cezanne's landscape interacts the positive planes of green and blue with the unpainted areas of negative space. Three-dimensional space is suggested - in places the eye follows evoked depth - but the flatness of the picture plane is equally evident. Movement and rhythms are indicated as the "limbs" of the unpainted canvas shift around the distant axis. Caravaggio's Crucifixion depicts a similar motion - but whereas his seems to be centrifugal on a flat plane, Cezanne's maelstrom recedes inwards towards the centre of the canvas. How the eye is led around and into the painting has become the dominant characteristic, not the mere depiction of a landscape. The abstract treatment of shapes visualised in nature, the importance of composition rather than content, initially discovered by Caravaggio and furthered by Cezanne, led the way for the majority of modern art of the 20th century.

In Picasso's Demoiselles, painted a few years after Cezanne's landscape, the figures share their forms with those of the background, as the space around them is broken up and related with the figures as a collective composition. As with both Caravaggio and Cezanne, the surrounding space is as important a factor in creating an overall composition as is the breakdown of the figures and their placement.

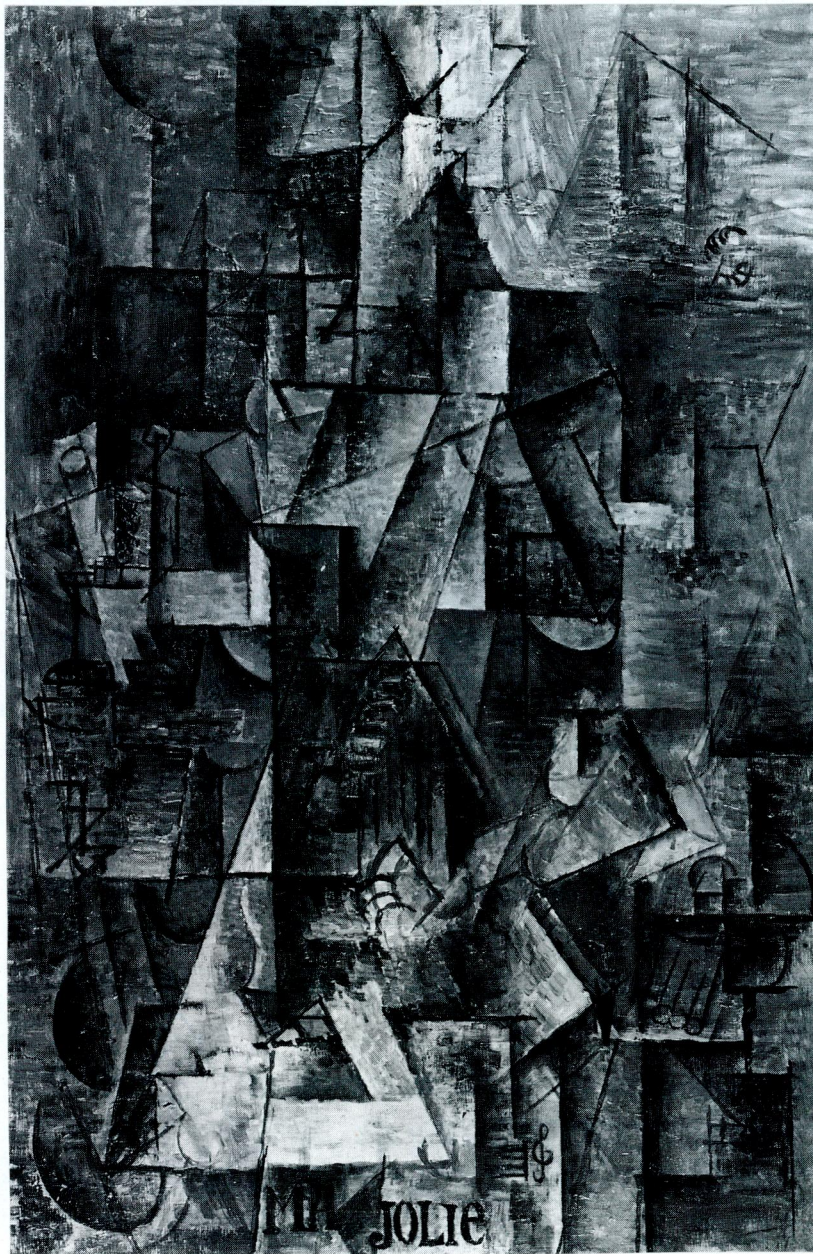


Fig.30;

"Ma Jolie" by Picasso

The painting is not just about five figures, but more importantly it is a struggle to find a new pictorial space. Caravaggio found his by creating a tight arrangement of interlocking planes emerging from a unifying, dark background. Cezanne added more depth, and more emphasis on the planer direction of his shapes. Picasso's genius lay in his ability to add a sense of physical movement to this planer composition - in Demoiselles one feels, from the angle of their postures, that the models have moved position, that a models front and rear may be depicted in the same "pose." Picasso advanced upon this process in the next few years, as he and Braque developed their analytical cubist approach. In paintings such as Ma Jolie (Fig.30) of 1911/12, Picasso breaks up the visualised subject (a woman with a zither) into a formalised arrangement of shapes and planes. Different views of the subject have been incorporated into the flat structure, as the figure appears here and disappears there into the dissected surrounding space. On a basic level this painting can be strongly identified with many of Caravaggio's works (including the Crucifixion) in its treatment of subject as planes and shapes, and has led Herbert Read to draw a connection between the two;

"The conventions of Caravaggio in the matter of light and shade are really every bit as arbitrary as the conventions of the modern cubist; the only difference is that Caravaggio wants to give us something more static. The one intensifies, the other abstracts."

Picasso (after Cezanne) brought back Caravaggio's use of spatial structure, which by the late nineteenth century had been usurped by the Impressionists use of colour as the basis for composition.

The space, or more correctly its condensed flatness, of Caravaggio's paintings was to influentially appear in a large number of twentieth century artistic movements. By the 1950s, artists such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning (Fig. 31) were actively pursuing paintings which emphasised the flatness of the painting surface, abandoning the illusionistic principles of pictorial receding space. These "Abstract Expressionists" were championed by the contemporary critic, Clement Greenberg. To these two names, Greenberg added those of Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, and Barnett Newman, championing the flatness of painting space in his capacity as an extremely influential art critic. Newman, whose work is characterised by large expanses of monotone colour, broken only by a slim vertical line (Fig. 32), explained the importance of flat space thus:-

"Instead of using outline, instead of making shapes or setting off spaces, my drawings declare the space. Instead of working with the remnants of the space, I work with the whole space."³

This wide expanse of blank space, together with the popular trend for large scale canvases, was a conscious decision by the Abstract Expressionists, and the later Minimalists such as Newman and Rothko, to enhance the presence of the painting, to let it be its own environment. In this way, the viewers associations with the painting are increased, as he becomes part of the overall pictorial space.



Fig.31; "Excavation" by Willem de Kooning

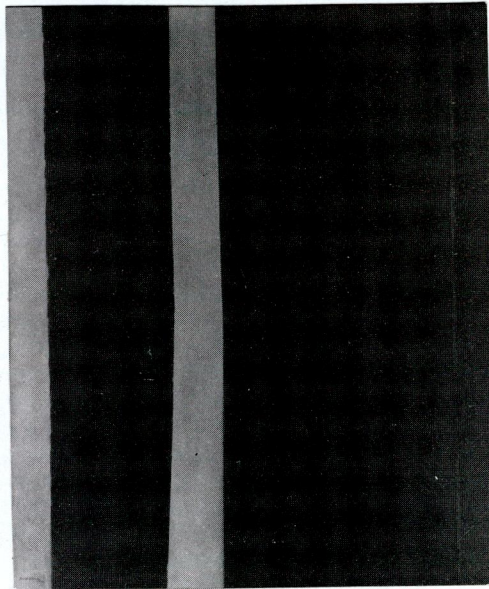


Fig.32; "Adam" by Barnett Newman

This may at first glance seem familiar to Caravaggio's earlier picture space/viewer space associations, as discussed previously in chapter three. However, pictorial space as its own ends, such as that expressed by the Minimalists, is severely limiting. What made Caravaggio's space so real was its existence only around other forms - as though the solidity of his figures accentuated the space and depth of his paintings. Newmans's expression of "space without shape" was too minimal. It seemed as though easel painting had come full circle, as artists disregarded colour as well as form and blank canvases were being exhibited on account of their spatial "importance", Louis Fontana began his series of canvas "cuts" in the late fifties. By slashing a cut into the canvas itself, he literally opened up the picture plane: the spectator can see through it to three-dimensional space beyond, which becomes an element of the composition. Fontana's destructive methods may also be taken as an ironic dismissal of easel painting. Since Fontana, Minimalism moved onto more obscure areas, where painting was infringed upon by a more conceptual approach. It seems ridiculous that the progressive shift from abstract painting to blank canvases (and therefore stripped of their conventional use) seems to have ended up in a world where painting has, since the 1960s, been very unsure of itself and its aims. Individually, there exists exceptional painters who are still interested in form, composition, colour, etc., but collectively, the art world seems ashamed to admit that there may be contemporary relevance in a painting by Monet, or Constable, or Caravaggio.

One such artist who believes that painting must now stop and look back before it marches any more forward, is the American painter, Frank Stella. In his book "Working Space", he uses the crisis of representational art in sixteenth century Italy to illuminate the crisis of abstraction in our time. The artists who followed Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael and Titian, searched for new directions to advance their work from beneath the shadows of these great painters. Caravaggio pointed the way. So today, Stella believes, the successors to Picasso, Kandinsky and Pollock must search for a pictorial space as potent as the one Caravaggio developed at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Stella suggests that:-

"Caravaggio's ability to convince us that he was able to paint on a suspended imaginary surface rather than on a literal, anchored one is probably what endears him most to our modern sensibility. Here he speaks to abstract painting."⁴

So how should modern abstract painting progress? Certainly, it has shunned "real, created space in favour of artificial illustrated space." It needs a turning around; one effort would be to reexamine the best abstract painting of the 1950s and 1960s. Abstraction still had an awful lot to resolve before it was prematurely ended by the Minimalists and Fontana. It needs to regain the substance that has been lost, the idea of painting something, which has been the common denominator of all painting of all times, except the last thirty years, where the artist was the art (conceptual, performance, and pop art), or new painting fashions and gimmicks (Julian Schnables painting/crockery "collages", for example) become this months topic for artistic discussion.

Basic, essential artistic conventions are being dismissed or parodied by painters of little artistic talent. What is Eric Fischl portraying that Monet or Ingres has not depicted already, and with more worth, besides a frustrated Oedipal complex? The situation is similar to that of four hundred years ago, when the Mannerists almost succeeded in bringing the Renaissance era to a dead end, before Caravaggio overturned their aesthetic mediocrity with his powerful realistic space. Abstraction needs to regain the freedom that it once possessed, in order to create a new space, a new aesthetic. A worthy start would be, like so many other eras, to rethink the essence and importance of Caravaggio's pictorial space.



Fig.33; "Marilyn" (detail) by Andy Warhol

CONCLUSION

There is an unmistakable crisis in modern art today. The problem seems to be one of direction, or rather the lack of it in our post-modern, pluralistic society. Since the demise of Abstract Expressionism, movement has followed movement with an increasing frequency and decreasing life-span. The Pop Art of the Sixties brought art down to the level of consumerism, as paintings began to parody other painting, and mass-media movie stars were exalted to the level of artistic icons (Warhol's "Marilyn" (Fig. 33). The Seventies brought such "Progressive" movements as conceptual art, environmental art, body art, et al, in which visual appeal was usurped by logical thought, which in itself became the artwork. For many, the position of the artist in society was on a par to that of a shaman or guru, whose thoughts and ideas themselves were of more artistic value than their expressions of these ideas. The growth of art as financial investment in the eighties saw a return to more specifically material ways of expression -at least part of which was due to the fact that a Kiefer painting has a resale value probably in excess of its original price, whereas an Earthwork such as Walter De Maria's "Lightning Field" (Fig. 34) is site specific, and therefore of less obvious investment value.

As we enter the 1990s, something of a return to figuration is evident. Abstraction is being discussed as though it may not be a spent artistic force, something that has not been considered for a while. And yet a feeling of deception is apparent, as though we are not being presented with truth.



Fig.34; "Lightning Field" by Walter de Maria

The situation is very similar to that of the Mannerist era encountered by Caravaggio, who disregarded their posed idealised compositions to produce a style of art which convinces the viewer of its artistic and spiritual truth.

I believe we must find a new direction to replace our modern Mannerists. In a similar way to Caravaggio, we must take the best elements from our centuries artistic achievements, and invest them with a potent understanding of our time now, as we are about to end a millenium. We must reexamine the best of abstract art, from Cezanne to the Minimalists, and consider our direction from here. In order to progress, we have to approach Minimalism not as the logical end to paintings progress, but as its emphatic new beginning. As Barnett Newman stated many times, Minimalism is about the space, whole and pure. It is how we arrange our forms in this space that will determine our success. Caravaggio's dramatic shapes in space suggest potential directions for us - flat space and receding space working both on our intellect and our senses.

Finally, we must believe in the power of nature as much as Caravaggio did. He understood that it is not nature and man that are separate, for man is part of Nature, but Nature and man-made. Every time we consciously do something (including paint), we are in a sense working against Nature - that is by imposing our conscious will against our natural will. By unquestionably accepting Nature over our conscious will (as Caravaggio did) we arrive at truth, and we begin again to have purpose as artists.

The only way forward is through a balance - between our understanding of the past, and our aspirations for the future, to produce a momentum for the present.

FOOTNOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. Bellori as cited by Hibbard, pg. 371
2. Hibbard, pg. 261

CHAPTER i

1. Hibbard, pg 67; "Caravaggio may have read...Vasari's 'Lives'".
2. Shearman, pg. 171
3. Bellori, "A Life of Annibale Carracci", (1672)
4. Hibbard, pg. 4
5. As in Giovanni Baglione's "St. Francis in Ecstasy" (1601)

CHAPTER ii

1. Gash, pg. 63
2. Friedlaender, pg. 211
3. Gash, pg. 97
4. Gash, pg. 128

CHAPTER iii

1. Friedlaender, pg. 18
2. Stella, pg 10

CHAPTER iv

1. Golding, pg. 37
2. Gowing, pg. 140
3. As quoted in "Modern Art", David Britt, pg. 269
4. Stella, pg. 46

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BRITT, David "Modern Art; from Impressionism to Post-Modernism".
Thames & Hudson, 1989
- FREEDBERG, S.J. "Circa 1600"
Pelican, 1975
- FRIEDLAENDER, Walter "Caravaggio Studies"
Schocken Books, 1969
- GASH, John "Caravaggio",
Bloomsbury Books, 1989
- GOLDING, John "Cubism - A History and an Analysis 1907 -1914"
Faber & Faber, 1988
- HIBBARD, Howard "Caravaggio"
Thames & Hudson, 1983
- HUGHES, Robert "The Shock of the New"
Thames & Hudson, 1991
- HUXLEY, Aldous "Chrome Yellow"
Grafton Books, 1977
- LEWIS, Mary Tompkins "Cezanne's Early Imagery"
Thames & Hudson, 1988
- LORAN, Erle "Cezanne's Composition"
University Press, 1943
- NICHOLSON, Benedict "The International Caravaggesque Movement"
Phiadon Press, 1979
- READ, Herbert "The Meaning of Art"
Faber & Faber, 1931
- SHEARMAN, John "Mannerism"
Penguin Books, 1984
- STELLA, Frank "Working Space"
Harvard University Press, 1986
- VENTURI, Lionello "Four Steps Toward Modern Art: Giorgione, Caravaggio,
Manet, Cezanne"
Greenwood Press, 1985