

A dark and complex beauty

Caravaggio: The Final Years at the National Gallery

Paul Bond
30 May 2005

Caravaggio: The Final Years at the National Gallery, London, February 23-May 22, 2005

This was something extraordinary. A relatively small exhibition (only 16 pictures), which had been showing for nearly three months, not only continued to sell out its advance tickets throughout its last week, but saw two and three-hour queues around the gallery waiting for the day quotas, which then sold out by midday. This has significance beyond the importance of the exhibition itself.

The exhibition was devoted to the crucial last four years of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1573-1610), when he was in exile. The painter led a turbulent and scandal-filled life. He was imprisoned for having carried out assaults and killing a man and forced into exile. He ended up in Malta, where he died. For the first time in Britain the National Gallery brought together paintings from the period of Caravaggio's exile, allowing the opportunity to see the final phase of his development and maturity. It by no means brought together all of the paintings from this period. It did not even contain all the pieces displayed when this exhibition was first mounted at the Capodimonte Museum in Naples. (That display held three other paintings, along with disputed works and copies of works presumed lost). It did, though, with intelligence and care, offer an opportunity to assess his development during this critical period.

Caravaggio was already famous by 1606. After an indifferent apprenticeship in Milan he had moved to Rome in the late 1590s, where he began working as an assistant to other artists. By 1595 he was selling his own paintings, which rejected the artistic conventions he had found in Rome. Rather than the lengthy preparatory work then customary, Caravaggio preferred to work in oil direct from his subject, painting still-lives and half-length figures as they did in Venice.

In 1595 he was brought to the attention of Cardinal Francesco del Monte. Through the cardinal's intervention, Caravaggio was commissioned to paint the Contarelli Chapel of the church of San Luigi dei Francesi. The three scenes he painted of the life of St. Matthew caused uproar with their dramatic realism.

In his quest to depict the truth in his painting, Caravaggio made dynamic use of dramatic tension, of intimacy and violent motion. Most especially, he sought to portray in his figures a physical truth: his saints looked like urchins, like the people he saw around him. It is this representation of physicality that makes Caravaggio so strikingly contemporary. It involved breaking from the idealised images of religious experience that had prevailed throughout the previous century, and rejecting the Mannerism that was then dominant. Because of this "naturalism," Caravaggio suffered the ire of his contemporaries. After his early death he was called the "anti-Michelangelo."

This condemnation extended to Caravaggio's wild and adventurous personality and lifestyle, which included numerous affairs. Despite this, he was commissioned to paint several large pictures. His work developed along naturalistic lines, using ordinary people for the models in his large-scale religious and mythological scenes. After 1600, as he developed this

trend in his work, patrons began rejecting pieces on the grounds of indecency or theological weakness.

His work aroused deep feelings. Although condemned by many, the influence of his innovation was already being celebrated. Caravaggio was envied. He was several times in trouble for violence. On May 28, 1606, he killed an opponent in a duel over a disputed tennis score. Sentenced to death, he fled Rome aged 35. He spent much of the next four years moving around the Mediterranean, constantly seeking the pardon that would allow him to return to Rome. He worked throughout this period, painting for collectors, for patrons who protected him, and as propitiatory offerings to those who were punishing him.

As an introduction to how his work changed over this period, the curators included one painting predating his exile. *The Supper at Emmaus* (1601) was included here because he returned to the theme shortly after his departure from Rome. He painted it again in the summer of 1606 while staying on the Colonna estates to the south of Rome. In Christian mythology, the resurrected Christ meets two disciples at Emmaus, but it is only at supper that they finally recognise him.

The two paintings are displayed side by side, and the contrast could not be more striking. The earlier painting is brightly lit from the left foreground, casting shadows of the standing figure onto the wall behind the table. The brightness lights up the table with its abundant feast, a still life in its own right. The moment of revelation is an expansive one: Christ's arm is stretched forward, the disciple to his right has his arms flung wide, the seated disciple to the left of the picture is pushing his chair back. This is revelation as a physical moment.

In the 1606 painting, the mood is altogether different. The resurrected Christ is not the young man of the earlier painting, but an older figure of calm based on experience, offering a much smaller hand gesture. The painting is lit from behind, so that there is a large dark space unlit in the top left corner of the canvas. This dark empty space is a recurrent element in these later paintings. Where the earlier disciples are expanding outwards, the later figures are moving in, almost eavesdropping on an intimate moment. The faces are worldly, more experienced. Even the meal before them has shrunk to basic fare. What is most striking, seeing them together, is the way the composition of the later piece almost directly mirrors the composition of its predecessor. This is a new way of understanding the same theme, so that the revelation now becomes a psychological event, rather than a physical one.

This sombreness of revelation is continued in *St. Francis in Meditation*. Here the saint is sunk in contemplation staring at a crucifix holding open a bible. The bible rests on a skull. The same elements are present in another painting of St. Francis completed at this time, but not displayed here. The light on the saint's forehead indicates enlightenment, but there is something profoundly remorseful in his expression. For a painter who had so successfully explored physicality, this represents a major development of psychological insight.

From the Colonna estates Caravaggio continued south to Naples, where

he waited for a papal pardon. The combination of the city, and the hope of the pardon, seems to have spurred on his work. In *The Flagellation* he revisited some of his Roman style. Caravaggio paints the tying of Jesus to the column prior to the whipping. Jesus is lit by a single beam of light. Above him the canvas is heavy with darkness. As one of his torturers pushes a foot against Jesus' calf, the central figure is forced into a beautiful and graceful pose that is offset by the brute ugliness of the one face we can see clearly. The pose shows the dreamy idealism that Caravaggio had rejected, but it does so by emphasising the scale of the rejection.

Caravaggio also sought to use the new developments in his work after 1606 in conjunction with this earlier style. *The Crucifixion of St. Andrew*, shown here alongside *The Flagellation*, has the darkness, and the cast of experience and humanity whilst retaining some of the physical grace. (Andrew, rather than being shown on the x-shaped crucifix of traditional iconography, is shown with his legs crossed.)

By the summer of 1607, Caravaggio had arrived in Malta. He sought a knighthood from the Knights Hospitallers of the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem in the hope that this would secure the papal pardon for him. He spent a year as a novice working towards this goal, which was achieved in 1608. He was made a Knight of Obedience, a discretionary knighthood awarded by the Grand Master.

The year was a fruitful one for him, as he completed many works commissioned by the Knights, including his largest work, *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*. (This was too large to travel, and remains in Valletta.) Included here were the *Portrait of a Knight of Malta* (here tentatively identified as Fra Antonio Martelli, although thought by some to be Alof de Wignacourt), and *Sleeping Cupid*.

Once again these are physical portrayals. The Knight, one hand on the sword, the other on his rosary, is lost in thought. His face is one of deep experience, and he looks a formidable character. For the cupid, his last mythological representation, Caravaggio returned to sensual fleshiness. The podgy child lies asleep on his wings, an arrow in his hand, his face turned upwards in repletion. This is not the sedate and genteel child image common to his contemporaries; this is something altogether more sardonic and disturbing.

There was no peaceful conclusion to his stay in Malta, however. He was imprisoned in October 1608 for brawling with other knights. He escaped to Sicily, perhaps with assistance. From Syracuse he travelled to Messina and Palermo, where he produced some astonishing altar-pieces. Two of the pieces from Messina were included here.

The Adoration of the Shepherds is a contemplative work. There is no pomp, just the exhausted mother and child, the shepherds and (dominating the background) cattle shrouded in darkness. *The Annunciation*, which belongs with this period, is perhaps in too poor a state to tell us much, but the column of light over the angel's back, and the areas of darkness suggest a similar compositional way of representing calm.

In *The Raising of Lazarus*, though, the top half of the huge canvas is sunk in darkness. The light source is Jesus, at the left of the picture. He is standing in his own shadow while the light falls directly onto the figure of Lazarus, returning from the dead. The amazing thing about this huge piece is the awed faces of the crowd, turned up towards Jesus, showing the dramatic energy that had marked his earlier work. The figure of Lazarus embodies that tension: although his left side is still dead, his right hand is reaching up towards the light source.

Caravaggio had returned to Naples by October 1609. In a portside bar his face was slashed and scarred. He survived, and remained in the city for the next nine months. During this time he produced some of the most astonishing pictures in this exhibition. *Saint John the Baptist* is almost sacrilegious in its carnality. The traditional symbols of the saint are rendered merely as a shepherd's staff and a ram, and the saint is surrounded by a corona of ivy. There is a sombre resignation to the saint's

expression bordering on the sullen, portending his impending martyrdom.

The only picture hanging out of chronological sequence in the exhibition was a painting of that martyrdom. As with the Supper at Emmaus, this was to allow comparison of two separate treatments of the story. *Salome with the Head of Saint John the Baptist* has been dated to 1606-07 on the basis of the painting style. It is a dark picture, with the light falling in a single beam across Salome's breast and the shoulder of one of the onlookers. The two bystanders look down, away from the viewer, lost in sorrowful reflection. Salome, meanwhile, looks down and right, out past the viewer. She is in control, her lips pursed, and there are no big gestures in the picture.

Salome Receives the Head of Saint John the Baptist is, if anything, even bleaker. Salome looks away from the head that is being offered to her (and away from the viewer, as if unable to confront the scene). The ugly face of the retainer offering her the head is seen full on, while the outstretched arm gives the picture a larger sweep. The severed head hangs from his hand, its mouth open in recrimination. There is a sense of distance from responsibility in this picture that is echoed in *The Denial of Saint Peter*, where the saint is in the process of denying he knows Christ. There is a physically intense closeness between the soldier and the woman with him that offsets Peter's isolation, and the dawning realisation that he has denied his lord.

It is this sense of rounded human character that is perhaps Caravaggio's greatest appeal to modern audiences. In *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula*, almost certainly his last work, Ursula is perhaps the least interesting character in the canvas. (This may be due to restoration problems, as the arrow piercing her heart is strangely transparent). She has the same attitude of calm as Mary in *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, but around her is a frenzy of intensity in the crowd. The rejected suitor has his mouth open, while faces appear from the crowd behind the saint, trying to see what is happening. One of these faces is Caravaggio himself.

In July 1610 Caravaggio received word that he would be pardoned by the pope. He set sail from Naples with his paintings, heading back up the coast to Rome. At Palo he left the ship and was arrested. By the time he had bought his way out of prison the ship had left with his paintings. He walked up the coast to Porto Ercole, hoping the ship would still be there when he arrived. It was not. Caravaggio collapsed with a fever, and died on the July 18, 1610.

The exhibition concluded with one of his undoubted masterpieces, a painting that may have been on the boat he took from Naples. *David with the Head of Goliath* is a large canvas that has much in common with some of the others from this period. Here is a handsome young man, looking wistfully sorrowful as he holds out Goliath's head. Goliath is only just dead, his eyes and mouth open. The face of Goliath is Caravaggio's own face.

It has been suggested that this painting was intended for Cardinal Scipione Borghese, the pope's nephew, as a metaphorical offering of Caravaggio's head. Whatever the case, its impact is immense. David is humane, tender. Goliath is no longer a monster, but a victim.

These paintings represent one of the truly breathtaking moments in art history, when a painter who had already revolutionised the art world around him came, in the words of one critic, "to revolutionise his own painting." His earlier works already show a modern painter seeking to represent a physical truth. They bristle with action and dynamism. These later works bring a darker psychological depth to that liveliness. They are fully-formed portrayals of life, and they are ambiguous, open to interpretation. There is nothing trite about Caravaggio's work, and it is this moral and physical complexity that strikes such a chord with a modern audience. The queues around the block represented not just a desire to see these paintings, but a desire to see something expressive of the complex truth of humanity.

Note:

Many of Caravaggio's works can be seen online, in chronological sequence, at the Web Gallery of Art: <http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?html/c/caravagg/>

Exhibition:

<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/exhibitions/caravaggio/default.htm>



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact