Spring 2015

Inspiring Piety: The influence of Caravaggio's paintings in Santa Maria del Popolo

Cara Coleman
University of Akron Main Campus, crc64@zips.uakron.edu

Recommended Citation

Inspiring Piety: The influence of Caravaggio's paintings in

Santa Maria del Popolo

Cara Coleman

Honors Thesis

Dr. Elisha Dumser

Italian artist Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was just coming into his own as Successful painter in the late sixteenth century as great social, religious and cultural changes were taking place in Europe, and in Italy in particular. Caravaggio's unique style depended on the close observation of nature, rendering it as he saw it without idealized beauty. He did not take the best and most lovely parts of nature and reassemble them into an idealized image as Raphael and Leonardo did in the High Renaissance; nor did he distort forms and space in the elaborate, impossible ways done by the Mannerists such as Parmiginino and Bronzino. Even going forward into the Baroque period many of Caravaggio's contemporaries such as Annibale Caracci and Guido Reni continued to make use of idealization in painting. By contrast Caravaggio represented true likeness in nature, both the beautiful and the vile. In this way his works came closer to the lives of ordinary people, who daily saw the effects of poverty and disease in sixteenth-century Italy. Following his death in 1610, Caravaggio's good friend and poet Cavalier Marino penned a memorial to him writing,

> Death and Nature, Michele, made a cruel plot against you;
> The latter feared to be bested by your hand in every image,
> Which was by you created rather than painted;
> The former burned with indignation,
> As many people as his scythe cut down,
> Your brush would recreate.[1]

---

[1]Cavalier Marino quoted by Giovanni Pietro Bellori, and translated in Alice Sedgwick
    Wohl. *The lives of the modern painters, sculptors, and architects: a new translation and
    critical edition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 184.

Caravaggio painted people as they were; in his *Crucifixion of Saint Andrew*, in the Cleveland Museum of Art, a woman with a goiter looks mournfully up at the crucified Saint. In his *Conversion of Saint Paul*, the dirty legs and bare feet of the groom holding the reins of Paul's horse are clearly visible. It is these details in Caravaggio's paintings that bridged a divide that previously existed in art, between the imagination of the artist and the lived experience of the viewer. The breadth of Caravaggio's influence on other artists throughout Europe as well as the interest his works continue to hold for viewers testifies to the significance of his works.

The change Caravaggio brought to painting could not have come at a more significant time in the history of Italian art. When Martin Luther posted his *Ninety-Five Theses* on the doors of the All-Saints Church in Wittenberg Germany on October 31, 1517, he set into motion a powerful reaction by the Catholic Church that would have a profound effect on nearly all aspects of Western European religious, social, and political life, including the arts. Italy was the heart of Catholicism. The rising popularity of the Protestant movement and the longstanding discontent among the laity over perceived abuses by the papacy created unease among the leaders of the Catholic Church. A significant area of the debate between Reformers and Catholics centered on the use of sacred imagery in worship. Many in the Reformation movement believed that worshiping before paintings or sculptures of religious figures was equivalent to

idolatry. A leading sixteenth-century reformer and theologian John Calvin explained

this position in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* from 1536 writing,

> …sculpture and painting are gifts of God, what I insist for is, that both shall be
> used purely and lawfully…shall not be preposterously abused, nay, shall not be
> perverted to our destruction. We think it unlawful to give a visible shape to God,
> because God himself has forbidden it, and because it cannot be done without, in
> some degree, tarnishing his glory… If it be unlawful to make any corporeal
> representation of God, still more unlawful must it be to worship such a
> representation instead of God, or to worship God in it. The only things, therefore,
> which ought to be painted or sculptured, are things which can be presented to
> the eye; the majesty of God, which is far beyond the reach of any eye, must not
> be dishonored by unbecoming representations.[2]

Calvin acknowledges the Catholic argument that imagery is integral to the teaching of

doctrine to the illiterate, however he asserts, "…every thing respecting God which is

learned from images is futile and false."[3] Going forward the two sides, Reformers and

Catholics, would approach religious art in remarkably different ways. The Reformers

gradually shifted to secular themes in art such as landscapes, which reflect Calvin's

goals of demonstrating divinity through images that "can be presented to the eye." The

Catholics however poured renewed energy and money into increasingly large and

elaborate religious figural art works.

---

[2] John Calvin, translated in Henry Beveridge. "Institutes of the Christian Religion."
    Christian Classics Ethereal Library. August 1, 2002. Accessed December 1, 2014.
    http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.html. 75.

[3] John Calvin, and translated in Henry Beveridge. "Institutes of the Christian Religion."
    71.

While Italy would never become a Protestant nation, in the sixteenth century it was in no way certain to the Catholic leadership in Rome that the fervor and appeal of the Reformation would not sweep through Italy as it had through Northern Europe, toppling the status quo. The concern was real. The Catholic Church wielded enormous wealth and power and nowhere more so than in Rome. The leadership of the Church represented some of the most powerful families in Italy and set the trends for the rest of Italian society. Significant to this study, they also commissioned far more art than any other group or individual over the preceding two centuries.

To maintain their position, the leaders of the Catholic Church reacted to the threat of the Protestant Reformation by making changes to doctrine that would shape the path of the Catholicism going forward from the mid sixteenth century. Nowhere are these changes so evident as in religious art. The shifting goals of the Catholic church can be seen clearly in the treatment of religious images. No artist's works depart so dramatically from those of his predecessors or so strongly reflect the needs of the Catholic church at this time than those of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. Despite frequent backlash from his critics, who often disparaged his work for its lack of decorum, as well as for his penchant for untempered realism, Caravaggio's style was copied by artists throughout Europe.

Notwithstanding the Catholic concern over the threat the Protestant reformation posed to the Papacy, the Church's reaction slow to start. It wasn't until 1521, after

refusing to retract his writings that Luther was excommunicated by Pope Leo X and

declared an outlaw by The Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. Following his

excommunication nearly another twenty-five years passed before Pope Paul III

convened The Ecumenical Council of Trent in 1545 to address issues of doctrine,

respond to the criticisms of the Church and denounce the Protestant Reformation. The

Council itself took twenty-five sessions and eighteen years to complete.

In the last session, in December of 1563, the council made a decree on the use of

sacred images, in which they defend the use of images in holy buildings, and lay out

clearly the intention of such images. The final decree on the use of sacred image states

> …Images of Christ, of the Virgin Mother of God, and of the other saints,
> are to be had and retained particularly in temples, and that due honour and
> veneration are to be given them; not that any divinity, or virtue, is believed to be
> in them, on account of which they are to be worshipped; or that anything is to be
> asked of them; or, that trust is to be reposed in images…; but because the honour
> which is shown them is referred to the prototypes which those images represent;
> in such wise that by the images which we kiss, and before which we uncover the
> head, and prostrate ourselves, we adore Christ; and we venerate the saints,
> whose similitude they bear… great profit is derived from all sacred images, not
> only because the people are thereby admonished of the benefits and gifts
> bestowed upon them by Christ, but also because the miracles which God has
> performed by means of the saints, and their salutary examples, are set before the
> eyes of the faithful;…and may be excited to adore and love God, and to cultivate
> piety.[4]

---

[4] James Waterworth. The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Ecumenical
     Council of Trent, Celebrated under the Sovereign Pontiffs, Paul III, Julius III and
     Pius IV. London: C. Dolman, 1848.
      https://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/trentall.html, 233-36.

Responding to critiques by reformers such as the Calvinists, the Catholic leadership made clear that the purpose of representing religious figures and events in art was to teach the laity of the example set by Christ and the Saints and to be a constant reminder of the articles of faith. Visual imagery should inspire piety in the viewer, reminding them of the great gifts they had been given by God. Furthermore, the decree issues a warning against abuses in art. Imagery that would confuse the layperson about the narrative being depicted or that would show holy figures in a way that excites lust or denigrates them with profane or indecorous themes were forbidden.[5] The Synod's intention here was clear: contrary to the position of the Reformers, not only were religious images allowable, they were incredibly important in the teaching of doctrine as well as an integral part of worship. Successful religious imagery should allow individuals to feel a connection with holy figures, and experience true piety by relating to the figures depicted. Caravaggio was remarkably successful in this. The realism of his paintings captivate the viewer by drawing them in to the scene. By reducing the number of figures in the scene and the use of chiaroscuro, he created a sense of intimacy previously unseen in Italian art.

The Council of Trent addressed many of the specific criticisms of the Catholic Church; the most significant change that occurred was a shift in overall attitude that focused on the active learning and participation of the laity. Strong emphasis was

[5]James Waterworth. The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Ecumenical Council of
        Trent, Celebrated under the Sovereign Pontiffs, Paul III, Julius III and Pius IV.

placed on developing a sense of renewal in the Church. That rebirth is evident in the

development of Baroque Catholicism. The exuberance that is so marked in art could be

found in all areas of religious life. There existed in Italy "an immense new banquet of

religious options for laypeople…(sermons) now took place as only one part of a vast

liturgical, artistic and devotional revival."[6]

 Caravaggio was beginning his career as an artist in the decades immediately

following the Council of Trent's 1563 decree, in the years known as the Post-Tridentine

period. Church officials participating in the Council were aware of the emotional

impact that art could have on an individual and saw it as one more tool to generate

devotion and maintain the dominant position of the Catholic Church. The Protestants

offered the appealing idea of a deep personal relationship with God. The Catholics

needed a way to match that and they knew they had it in art.

All religious art for public display was under the scrutiny of the Catholic Church,

even that commissioned by private patrons. The Church monitored religious imagery

to ensure that it did not reflect negatively on scripture, or the Church. Leading up to the

Council of Trent and following the High Renaissance, the Mannerist style had

developed in Italy and with it more obscure narratives and unnatural physical

proportions in figural work. Mannerism focused on complexity of design and pushed

proportions to the extreme. It acted in a way to impress the viewer with the artist's skill

---

[6]Emily Michelson. "The Generation After Trent." In *The Pulpit and the Press in Reformation Italy*, 142. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013.

rather than impressing on them the importance of the narrative. This style would have

been particularly problematic in religious art where the goal was to garner a connection

in the viewer with the characters depicted.[7] The unnatural appearance of figural

representations would have made connecting with them on an emotional level difficult

for the average viewer. When considering the needs of the post-Tridentine Catholic

Church it is correct to say that the goal was first to inspire awe in the stories or figures

depicted. The artist's skill should support the religious nature of the work.

Caravaggio's use of realism would have been more readily able to create a connection

for the viewer with the lives of the saints represented than a mannerist work of the

same theme. Examination of two of Caravaggio's works, will illustrate this difference.

   The subjects of both *The Conversion of Paul,* c. 1600-1601 and *The Crucifixion of

Peter,* c.1600-1601 have earlier examples in the Renaissance and Mannerist style.

Caravaggio's break from traditional patterns becomes evident when compared to earlier

example of the same subject matter. His innovative style was extremely controversial

and while many praised his realism, others found it disturbing to see their religious

icons depicted in a way many believed to be indecorous. Still others criticized him for a

lack of creativity. It is significant to note that naturalism in painting was already

commonplace in Northern Europe by the mid sixteenth century, however its use was

---

[7]   A notable example of the type of painting that met with strong disapproval from
Catholic leadership was Paolo Veronese's *The Last Supper* c.1573, subsequently renamed
Feast in the House of Levi, for which the artist was called before the Roman Catholic
Inquisition to answer for including dogs, buffoons and Germans in the work.

largely limited to genre painting. Scenes of everyday life depicted the peasant class

engaged in often humorous but indecorous behaviors: Examples can be found in the

works of such Northern artists as Pieter Brugel the Elder and Quentin Massys. The

works of such popular Northern artists would certainly have been known to

Caravaggio. Many of his early paintings, such as his *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* c.1593, *The*

Cardsharps c.1594 and *The Fortuneteller* c.1594, are in fact genre paintings similar to those

that were being produced by Northern European artists of the time. Caravaggio's

choice to combine the naturalism of genera painting with religious narrative is where

one can see the reason for both his success and the criticism brought against him by his

detractors. In a scathing condemnation of Caravaggio's work, his contemporary,

Giovanni Pietro Bellori wrote "…he fell short of the best elements of art in many

respects, for he possessed neither invention, nor decorum, nor design, nor any

knowledge of painting, and the moment the model was removed from before his eyes,

his hand and his mind remained empty."[8]

   Artists working for post-Tridentine church patrons walked a fine line when

trying to be innovative while still maintaining the integrity and decorum of religious

---

[8] Giovanni Pietro Bellori, Translated by Alice Sedgwick Wohl. *The lives of the modern*
    painters, sculptors, and architects: a new translation and critical edition.(English
    Edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 136-39.

figures.[9] However, Caravaggio's inventive combination of realism and dramatic

chiaroscuro became and remained widely popular. Bellori, in spite of his harsh

criticisms of Caravaggio's lack of creativity in the absence of a model, readily concedes

his enormous influence and popularity with both patrons and other artists. He writes,

"Without a doubt Caravaggio advanced the art of painting, for he came upon the scene

at a time when, realism being not much in evidence, figures were according to

convention and in a mannerist way, and the taste for beauty was better satisfied than

that for truth…this man restored flesh and good to his figures, thus reminding painters

once again what imitation could achieve."[10]

The two large scale paintings *The Conversion of Saint Paul,* 1600-1601 (fig.

1), and *The Crucifixion of Peter,* 1600-1601 *(*fig. 2) by Caravaggio, both in the Cerasi chapel

in the basilica of Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome, demonstrate the innovative style that

attracted wealthy Italian patrons, and inspired artists throughout Europe to replicate his

work. The works were commissioned by Tiberio Cerasi shortly before his death, for his

private family chapel. Baglione, another of Caravaggio's critics records in his *Le vite de'*

pittori c.1672, that originally Caravaggio had made two other versions of the paintings

---

[9] The quantity of Caravaggio's paintings that were rejected for a lack of decorum testify
    to the difficulty he faced in balancing the realism that made his works popular
    and honoring religious figures properly.

[10]   Giovanni Pietro Bellori, and Alice Sedgwick Wohl, 2005, 136-39.

for the Cerasi chapel but that they were rejected by the patron.[11] The second versions of

the paintings are positioned on opposite sides of the altar of the Cerasi chapel flanking

the painting, *The Assumption of the Virgin* c.1600, by Annibale Carracci. (Fig. 3) It is likely

that the altarpiece by Carracci predated Caravaggio's commission.[12] The dark intensity

of the chiaroscuro in Caravaggio's paintings stands in stark contrast to the lighter tones

of Carraci's *Assumption.* In spite of this stylistic difference in the handling of color and

value between the two artists, the paintings work well together in the space. Carracci as

the more prominent artist in the year 1600, received the larger commission for the altar.

Caravaggio when considering how his own paintings would work in the space,

undoubtedly would have looked to Carracci's *Assumption* to inform the design of his

own two ancillary works. Both artists place the figures in the fore of the picture plane.

The position of Saint Paul's arms, thrust wide as he lies on the ground in Caravaggio's

composition mimic the Virgins open gesture in Carracci's painting. The choice to

juxtapose the conversion of Paul with the crucifixion of Peter was not a common one.

While there were ample earlier examples of Paul's conversion for Caravaggio to draw

---

[11] The first two rejected paintings were purchased by Cardnial Sannesio. The original
version of Paul's conversion is now in a private collection in Rome, but the first version
of the crucifixion of Peter has been lost.

Giovanni Baglione, and Jacob Hess. *Le Vite De' Pittori, Scultori Et Architetti: Dal
     Pontificato Di Gregorio XIII Del 1572 in Fino A' Tempi Di Papa Urbano Ottavo Nel
     1642.* Città Del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1995.136-9.

[12]   Catherine R. Puglisi, *Caravaggio*.(London: Phaidon) 1998. 146.

from in his own composition, there are very few previous examples of the crucifixion of

Peter. The themes are centered on two stories from Christian tradition. The story of

Paul is told in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 9: 4-6). In the biblical narrative, Saul of

Tarsus, a Jew, was one of the most zealous persecutors of early Christians.[13] With

permission from the High Priest, Paul traveled to Damascus to bring any Christians,

whether men or women, bound to Jerusalem so that they may face charges. As he

approached Damascus, Paul was suddenly surrounded by a divine light and fell

blinded to the ground as the voice of God spoke to him saying, "Saul, Saul why are you

persecuting me?' to which he replied "Who are you Lord?' and the Lord replied "I am

Jesus whom you are persecuting, now get up and travel to the city and you will be told

what you are to do." Following the exchange Saul, still blind, was led by hand to

Damascus where he remained for several days until his sight was restored by Ananias,

another of Christ's disciples. After his experience on the road to Damascus, Saul was

baptized a Christian. He spent the remainder of his life traveling, spreading the

message of Christ's sacrifice and converting people to Christianity. He used his Latin

name, Paul among the gentiles so that he might more easily move among them. In the

story, only Paul sees God's light, but his companions can hear the voice speaking. It is a

powerful story of spiritual metamorphosis.

------

[13] Saul and Paul are the same figure in the Bible. Saul had a Jewish mother and a Roman
Father. Saul is the name he went by among the Jews however, after converting to
Christianity he used his Latin name, Paul which would have been more acceptable
among the gentile society he was working to convert.

The choice of these two themes in tandem was undoubtedly influenced by a commission of Pope Paul III for frescos of the same two scenes for the Capella Paolina in the Vatican. Pope Paul III Commissioned Michelangelo for the paintings. They would be the last two frescos he ever completed[14]. Michelangelo painted, *The Conversion of Paul* (fig. 4*)* from 1542 through 1545 and following that *The Crucifixion of Saint Peter* (Fig.5) from 1545-1550, finishing them just fifty years before Caravaggio was hired to decorate the Cerasi chapel. Peter and Paul were the patron saints of Rome and according to his will, Saints Peter and Paul had special significance for Tiberio Cerasi as well.[15] The commission for Carracci's *Assumption of the Virgin* likely reflected the dedication of the basilica to the virgin Mary.

The stark realism of Caravaggio's paintings could not be more different from Michelangelo's Mannerist frescos. Caravaggio's, *Conversion of Saint Paul* demonstrates a distinct departure from both Michelangelo's composition as well as conventions in the treatment of earlier examples of the subject. Multiple examples of this scene would have been known to Caravaggio. In most cases, artists such as Michelangelo in his fresco in the Capella Paolina, and Tintoretto in his 1545 painting of Paul's conversion,

---

[14]   The two frescos were commissioned when Michelangelo was at the hight of his career, however they have been harshly criticized when compared to his works in the Sistine Chapel. The two works were completed in the Mannerist style and as such lack much of the clarity of his earlier works.

[15]   Catherine R. Puglisi, *Caravaggio*. (London: Phaidon, 1998.) 146.

resort to portraying Christ in the sky above the scene. This is done to justify the source of the light and illustrate its divine nature and further the narrative.

Parmigianino, in his 1528 mannerist painting of Paul's conversion (fig. 6) while not including the figure of Christ as the source of the light makes his source distinct and unnatural; rays of light streak through the clouds in discrete lines. Whereas most other examples portray Paul surrounded by men on the road to Damascus, Parmiginino reduces the figures in the composition to just two: Paul and his horse. While it is not specifically mentioned in the biblical narrative that Paul was on horseback it was a common convention in portraying the narrative during the Renaissance. Parmigianino's dapple grey horse rears up as a light pierces the clouds above him. In this instance the horse is an outsider to the action taking place between Paul and Christ, functioning mainly as a symbol to assist in identifying the narrative. Paul lies outstretched on the ground in a pose that would be fitting in any classically inspired Renaissance painting; an idyllic landscape stretches out behind him as Paul looks up to the heavens with his arm raised as if to ward off a blow. Parmigianino's Paul is a beautiful figure. His sinuous muscles are visible beneath his flowing clothes. However, this Paul is firmly outside the realm of reality and thus relatability. There is a distinct sense of the unnatural in the painting that places it in the realm of imagination.

The rearing horse, reacting perhaps to the bodiless voice of Christ, is a common convention in scenes of Paul's conversion. In this respect Caravaggio's painting is

notable because he makes the horse a part of the action, in essence a witness to Paul's

conversion and a participant in the scene. Caravaggio's horse is the sturdy sort of work

horse one would see in the street. Stout and muscular with intelligent and expressive

brown eyes, Caravaggio's horse is a conscious and relatable character rather than a

prop. The horse gingerly lifts his foot to avoid stepping on his fallen rider as he looks

back with good natured concern at Paul on the ground beneath him. His anxious

expression is mirrored by that of the groom holding his reigns.[16]

It is likely that Caravaggio looked closely at *The Conversion of Paul* painted by

Moretto for the Mint of Milan, c.1540-1541 (fig. 7).[17] The painting exhibits several of the

elements found in Caravaggio's composition. The reduction in figures in the scene, the

light from an unidentifiable source off the picture plane, as well as the scale of the horse

relative to the total composition are all found in Caravaggio's version. Most

---

[16]   Friedlander suggests that the horse in Caravaggio's *The Conversion of Saint Paul*
was directly influenced by Albrect Dürer's 1505 print, *Large Horse.* While it is commonly
accepted that Caravaggio looked to Northern European artists like Dürer for
inspiration, in this case it is a stretch to say that Caravaggio borrowed directly from
Dürer's print in his conception of *The Conversion of Saint Paul.* Rather, Catherine Puglisi
offers a more likely theory by suggesting that Caravaggio studied Dürer's engraving
noting its pose and physical type, but then completed his work after studying a living
horse. This argument is far more convincing in light of the knowledge that Caravaggio
used live models for his compositions.

Walter F. Friedlaender. *Caravaggio Studies. (*New York: Schocken Books.) 1969, 27.

Catherine R Puglisi. *Caravaggio.(*London: Phaidon.) 1998. 88.

[17]   Walter F. Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies* 1969, 27.

importantly the position of Paul on the ground at the very front edge of the picture plane, turned away from the viewer, is the most similar to Caravaggio's interpretation than to any other example of the theme. However, while Caravaggio may have looked to Moretto and other artists for inspiration, his composition is utterly unique. The quality of the light in Caravaggio's composition is one of the most significant breaks from tradition. The horse's side reflects the divine light of Christ onto Paul as he lies on the ground. The divine nature of the light in Caravaggio's painting is only identifiable by its context. The light in Caravaggio's composition relies on Paul's Roman dress and supine position in combination with his horse to carry the message of divinity. Only the area immediately surrounding Paul, his horse and his groom is illuminated giving the light a tangible quality, that in itself communicates the presence of god as a fourth participant in the scene. Using the light in this way makes the presence of Christ explicit, without the need to illustrate his form. Leaving the background in complete darkness creates a dramatic effect which gives the viewer a feeling of inclusion in the scene that conveys a sense of intimacy. Paul is shown at the moment of his transformation as Christ speaks to him. His sword and helmet lie on the ground at his sides, perhaps representing a break from his old life as a persecutor of Christians. Paul's position on his back, arms and legs spread, eyes closed, illustrates his defenselessness before God. Paul, a sinner, is completely at the mercy of Christ who redeems and converts him. A viewer in this sense can be a witness to Christ's

intervention in Paul's journey and to the moment of Paul's acceptance of Jesus as God.

Paul's prone form on the ground places him both physically and spiritually down to the

level of the viewer, making him accessible as both an illustration of spiritual rebirth and

as an individual. A viewer standing before the painting in the Santa Maria del Popolo is

closest at eye level to Paul's head as if they too are on the ground listening to God speak

from above. There is a sense of awe created by the combination of chiaroscuro, realism,

and setting that draws viewers in and hold them there to ruminate on the story of

Paul's conversion.

In his choice to use live models and to depict them with all their flaws,

Caravaggio placed religious icons in the realm of the everyday as experienced by the

viewer. In life it is usually easier to connect and empathize with those one feels they

have something in common with. This is true of art as well. The sense of intimacy and

inclusion in the action created by the reduced number of figures, the dramatic lighting

of the figures separates Caravaggio's painting from earlier examples. Parmigianino's

Conversion for example lacks relatability; Paul's gaze is up to the sky while his horse

stares blankly as he rears up in panic. Despite the reduction of the number of figures in

the scene, they neither engage with each other or the viewer. By contrast in

Caravaggio's C*onversion* the horse's eyes are the only ones visible and his gaze directs

the viewer to Paul illuminated on the ground, in effect pulling the viewer into the action

of the scene. The effect is an increased emotional intensity that is lacking in other

paintings of this theme. This is the characteristic that most significantly separates

Caravaggio's works from those of his predecessors and contemporaries; the sense of

inclusion, that would allow the viewer to feel true empathy with the characters in the

scene, thereby increasing their devotion to Christ and the saints and subsequently to the

Catholic Church. In this, Caravaggio's painting of Paul's conversion most closely

adheres to the ideals for religious art as they were described by the Council of Trent, in

particular that the images should aid the faithful so that they may be "…excited to

adore and love God and to cultivate piety."[18]

The second work Caravaggio painted for the Cerasi Chapel, *The Martyrdom of

Saint Peter* (fig 8) is particularly interesting given that there are so few previous

examples of the crucifixion of Peter in Italian art. The story of Saint Peters's crucifixion

is not recorded anywhere in the Bible, however reports of it exist in the Catholic

tradition. Saint Peter was one of the most important figures Christianity. He was the

first leader of the Catholic church and Jesus's most loyal follower. According to most

accounts of his death, Saint Peter was captured by the Romans and was set to be

executed by crucifixion. Peter was so devout in his faith that he reportedly requested to

---

[18] James Waterworth. *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Ecumenical Council of Trent, Celebrated under the Sovereign Pontiffs, Paul III, Julius III and Pius IV.* London: C. Dolman, 1848.(://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/trentall.html.). 233-236.

be hung upside down on the cross because he felt himself to be unworthy of the same

death as Christ. [19]

Michelangelo's 1550 fresco for the Vatican was the most recent example of the

theme. Prior to Michelangelo's work the only other widely known example was a

fresco from 1424-1427 in the Brancacci Chapel in Padua (fig. 8). It was begun by

Massaccio and Completed by Filippo Lippi. There is none of Massaccio/Lippi's version

in Caravaggio's *Crucifixion of Peter.* In the Massaccio fresco Peter is lifted by a pulley

onto the cross. His rigid body mirrors the cross on which he is lifted in an unnatural

way that conveys the narrative without emotion. Michelangelo's fresco has stronger

similarities to Caravaggio's work in its composition. In the former, Paul strains to look

up at a crowed assembled to view the spectacle as he is hoisted upside down on his

cross by Roman soldiers. A hole is already prepared in the ground in which to place the

cross, but the soldiers are only just beginning to lift it from the ground. As such Peter's

body is still somewhat upright rather than upside down. By placing Peter in this

position that is more horizontal, Michelangelo avoids having to place Peter in a

compromised position. Caravaggio's choice to also place Peter in the act of being raised

on the cross while looking out over the scene may have been directly influenced by

Michelangelo's fresco. However, the similarities end there. In Michelangelo's fresco the

scene takes place in a wide open space in the middle of the day surrounded by

---

[19] Bernhard Pick. *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul, Peter, John, Andrew and Thomas*, (Chicago: Open Court Pub. 1909.) 118-119.

spectators. It has none of the dark intensity of Caravaggio's work. Caravaggio strips

down the number of figures in the scene to four: Paul and the three men who lift his

cross. Paul is in the process of being hoisted on the cross while the men strain to lift it

into position. Caravaggio's take on the crucifixion of Peter creates a powerful impact on

the viewer. Paul is an old man with a white beard, stripped of his clothing except for a

white cloth at his waist. He strains against the nails holding his arms in place in order to

look out from his restrained position on the cross. His brow is furrowed and his mouth

hangs open in a cry of pain. Light reflects off his bare chest and arms. Peter's is the

only face fully illuminated in the scene. The three men straining to raise his cross are

cast in shadow as if their sins place them in a darkness that they don't recognize. A rope

presses into the back of one of the men as he struggles to pull the cross up. The

backside of one of the persecutors takes up a large section of the left of the picture

plane. As he bends to lift the cross his bare feet press into the ground. The third man

wraps his arms around the cross at Peter's legs and a vein bulges in his arm with the

effort of lifting. The men struggle under the weight of the cross and perhaps under the

spiritual weight of their act. A rock placed in the middle foreground references Peter's

place in the scripture as the rock on which God built his church. The viewer in the

intimacy of the small private chapel becomes a spectator in the scene. They are a mute

observer witnessing the final act of piety by one of the Christianity's most significant

figures. The intensity of the chiaroscuro in Caravaggio's painting is unprecedented and

matches the intensity of the act of Peter's martyrdom. Peters open mouth conveys his

pain and agony in a way that elicits deep compassion. Caravaggio often uses

expression to convey vocalization and add another layer to realism of his paintings.

The open mouths of many of Caravaggio's figures imbues them with life that conveys

recognizable emotions to the viewer, "…Caravaggio's sounds express the inarticulate

utterances of direct and raw feelings and as such are intrinsic to human existence."[20]

Through his unrestrained realism Caravaggio adroitly conveys intense emotions to the

viewer, asking them to imagine themselves in the scene. His paintings invite viewers to

empathize with the characters, thereby increasing their personal investment in the

biblical narrative and to the religious figures as individuals capable of pain and fear.

It is significant that though Peter is the foundation of the Catholic Church, there

are so few representations of his crucifixion commissioned for the church. This may

reflect a conflict in the goals of the Catholic Church to both depict the narratives of

biblical figures while also maintaing decorum in those representations. In the case of

Peter, this balance becomes particularly difficult due to the nature of his crucifixion.

Peter has a significant position among saints in Catholic tradition. As one of Gods

disciples , the "rock" on which god built his church, and the keeper of the keys to the

Gates of Heaven, Peter is deserving of the utmost respect in the Catholic Church and in

[20]Catherine Puglisi."Talking Pictures: Sound in Caravaggio's Art." *Caravaggio: Reflections and Refractions*, edited by Lorenzo Pericolo and David M. Stone (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014.) 105-121.

religious art.[21] Peter's choice to be hung upside down, humbling himself before God at

the moment of his death, presents a quandary for artists portraying the event. How can

one both present the narrative as it exists within the Catholic tradition while

maintaining the high level of decorum due to Saint Peter as a leader in the Catholic

Church. Peter's choice to be crucified upside down is in itself a denigrating act. It is

perhaps indicative of a discomfort on the part of Catholic patrons toward portraying

this scene that there are so few examples of it.

Peter's symbolic significance, specifically in the post-Tridentine Catholic Church

must also be addressed. Though Peter was one of Christ's most fervent disciples, he

denied Christ three times, before ultimately seeing him resurrected and committing his

life fully to the church. When considering this story in the context of the Counter-

Reformation there is a powerful message conveyed concerning denial and redemption.

Just as Peter denied Christ, but eventually returned to the fold, individuals who had

entertained the idea of joining the Protestant movement and strayed from the Catholic

------

[21]Bernhard Pick. *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul, Peter, John, Andrew and Thomas*,
   (Chicago: Open Court Pub. 1909.) 118-119.

Church could be redeemed by returning with renewed commitment to Catholicism.[22]

In his *Martyrdom of Saint Peter,* Caravaggio was able to take the idealized conceptual

Saint Peter down from his lofty position in the Catholic religious canon and deliver him

to the masses as one of their own; Peter the ordinary man whose sacrifice and pain can

be seen as real through Caravaggio's painting. It is these elements of his work, its

relatability and intensity, that made it so well suited to the needs of the post-Tridentine

Catholic Church .

Caravaggio frequently straddled the line between innovation and impropriety.

Many of his works were rejected by his patrons for being indecorous. However the

very things that made Caravaggio's paintings so incredibly successful are also the

elements that earned him derision from many of his contemporaries, most notably

Baglione and Bellori. A bitter dispute between Baglione and Caravaggio permeates

Baglione's narrative of him in his *Le vote de'pittori,* however he echoes many of the same

criticisms as Bellori and others: namely, that Caravaggio lacked good judgment in

choosing subjects for his paintings and representing their flaws; that he cared more for

---

22   Erin Benay suggests a similar message in another of Caravaggio's painting *Doubting Thomas,* 1602. Benay writes, "Thomas's singular reputation as a skeptic was also precisely what defined him as a useful model for modern believers: good Catholic Christians could waver and return to the fold stronger in their convictions."

Erin Benay,"Touching Is Believing: Caravaggio's 'Doubting Thomas' in Counter-
        Reformatory Rome." In *Caravaggio: Reflections and Refractions*, edited by Lorenzo
        Pericolo and David M. Stone. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company,
        2014.) 59-82.

color than design and as such couldn't put two figures together in a coherent way and lastly; that his paintings demonstrated a lack of proper respect for religious figures. In spite of this even Baglione with his obvious contempt for Caravaggio felt compelled to include him in his list of the most prominent contemporary painters. Furthermore, at the very end of his entry, Baglione, like Bellori remarks on Caravaggio's incredible popularity, though he does so with barely concealed venom writing,

> If Michelangelo Amerigi had not died so soon, he would have accomplished much in his art because of the good style of painting from nature he had taken up…Nevertheless, he acquired a great reputation, and people paid more for his heads than for the history pictures of others, such is the value of popularity, which does not judge with its eyes but looks with its ears. And his portrait hangs in the Academy."[23]

Baglione's vitriol is evident is evident in his writing. While many if his criticisms were founded in the popular central Italian beliefs, that design was significantly more important than the use of color, much of his animosity may be due to jealously.

Caravaggio's erratic and volatile behavior forced him to move frequently throughout his career, so that he never spent too long in one place. Given this, it is not surprising that he did not have an established studio in which to train younger artists. Nevertheless his style was so widely popular that is was copied by artists throughout Europe. His wide spread influence was so marked that the young artists following his

---

[23] Giovanni Baglione, and Jacob Hess. *Le Vite De' Pittori, Scultori Et Architetti: Dal Pontificato Di Gregorio XIII Del 1572 in Fino A' Tempi Di Papa Urbano Ottavo Nel 1642.* (Città Del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1995.)139.

style became known as "Caravaggisti". Even long after Caravaggio's death in 1610,

many artists mimicked his use of tennebrism and chiaroscuro as well as his choice to

ground their artistic efforts in realism. Artists influenced by his style included Carlo

Saraceni, Peter Paul Rubens, Rembrandt van Rjin , Diego Valesquez and Jusepe de

Ribera among many others.

   Caravaggio's critics were shocked by his untempered realism and scandalized by

his behavior. Unable to look beyond their conception of the perfection of the idealized

beauty as the highest possible achievement of an artist they failed to see the intrinsic

value that his paintings have in forging connections for viewers with the stories and

lives behind the imagery. Furthermore many of his critics missed how through these

connections the viewer could be renewed in their faith and devotion to the Catholic

Church. However, Caravaggio's long lasting influence on art throughout Europe and

the appeal his works have continued to generate over the past four centuries contradicts

the assessments of his critics.

Fig. 1. Caravaggio, *The Conversion of Saint Paul.* 1600-1601. Oil on canvas, Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome. Available from: ARTstor, http://www.artstor.org
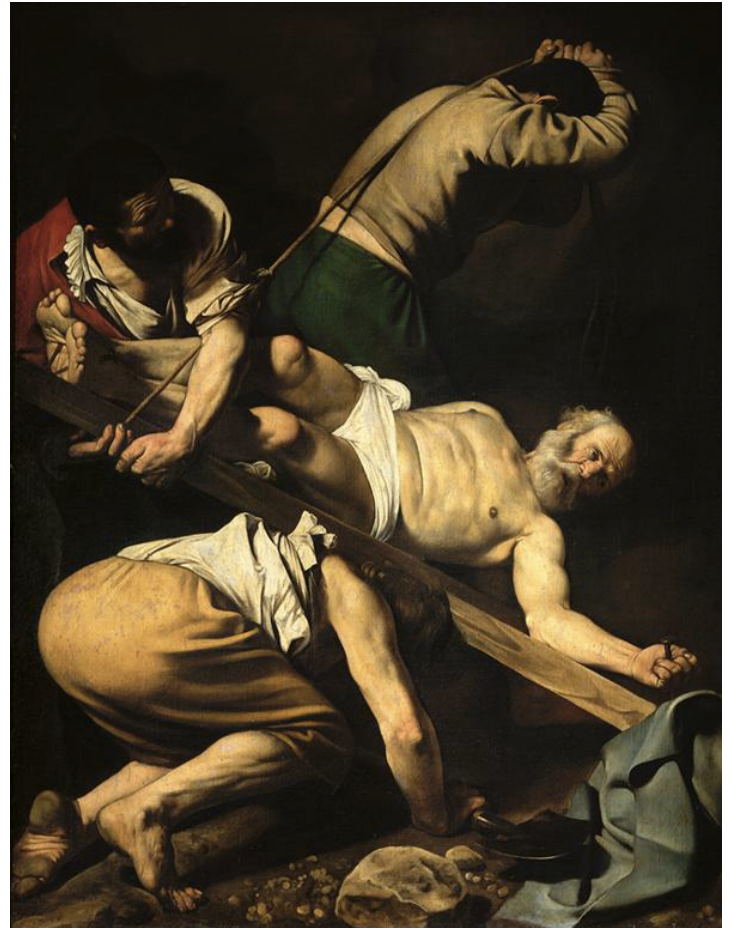

Fig. 2. Caravaggio, *The Martyrdom of Peter.* 1600-1601. Oil on canvas, Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome. Available from: ARTstor, http://www.artstor.org

Fig. 3. Annibale Carracci, *The Assumption of the Virgin.*1601. Oil on canvas, Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome. Available from: ARTstor, http://www.artstor.org

Fig. 4. Michelangelo, *The Martyrdom of Saint Peter.* 1545-1550. The Vatican, Rome. Available from: ARTstor, http://www.artstor.org

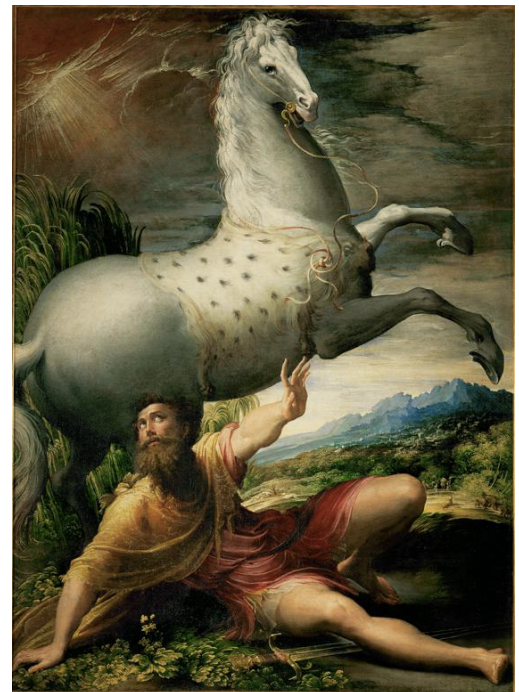Fig. 5. Michelangelo, *The Conversion of Saint Paul* 1542-1545 The Vatican, Rome. Available from: ARTstor, http://www.artstor.org

Fig.6. Parmigianino, *The Conversion of Saint Paul* 1527-1528. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Available from. ARTstor, http://www.artstor.org

Fig.7 Moretto, *The Conversion of Saint Paul* 1540
San Paolo Converso, Milan, Italy. Available from.
http://www.to.chiesadimilano.it/or4/or?

Fig.8. Masaccio, *The Martyrdom of Saint Peter* 1426.
Brancacci Chapel, Church of Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence Italy
Available from. ARTstor, http://www.artstor.org

Bibliography

Baglione, Giovanni, and Hess, Jacob. *Le Vite De' Pittori, Scultori Et Architetti: Dal Pontificato Di Gregorio XIII Del 1572 in Fino A' Tempi Di Papa Urbano Ottavo Nel 1642.* Città Del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1995.

Bellori, Giovanni Pietro, and Sedgwick Wohl, Alice. *The lives of the modern painters, sculptors, and architects: a new translation and critical edition.*(English Edition) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Benay, Erin, "Touching Is Believing: Caravaggio's 'Doubting Thomas' in Counter-Re formatory Rome." In *Caravaggio: Reflections and Refractions*, edited by Lorenzo Pericolo and David M. Stone. Chapter 4, Burlington VT, Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014.   59-82.

Calvin, John. Translated in Henry Beveridge. "Institutes of the Christian Religion." Christian Classics Ethereal Library. August 1, 2002. Accessed December 1, 2014. http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.html

Friedlaender, Walter F. *Caravaggio Studies*. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.

Michelson, Emily. "The Generation After Trent." In *The Pulpit and the Press in Reformation Italy* 142-171. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013.

Pick, Bernhard. *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul, Peter, John, Andrew and Thomas*, Chicago: Open Court Pub., 1909.

Puglisi, Catherine R., *Caravaggio*. London: Phaidon, 1998.

Puglisi, Catherine R.,"Talking Pictures: Sound in Caravaggio's Art." In *Caravaggio: Reflections and Refractions*, edited by Lorenzo Pericolo and David M. Stone, Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014.

Waterworth, James. *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Ecumenical Council of Trent, Celebrated under the Sovereign Pontiffs, Paul III, Julius III and Pius IV.* London: C. Dolman, 1848.(://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/trentall.html.)