

It is the light of enlightenment that Caravaggio shows appearing from the right with Jesus, manifesting the calling of St. Matthew (in the middle of the seated group).



Between Spotlight and Shadow

Caravaggio is one of the most influential artists of the Early Baroque. He is especially well known for his dramatic lighting effects. The technique he used to create these was something he guarded like a trade secret. As a result, legends surrounded the painter even during his lifetime. **Sybille Ebert-Schifferer**, Director at the **Bibliotheca Hertziana** in Rome, has taken on the task of demystifying Caravaggio's image.

TEXT **MECHTHILD ZIMMERMANN**

Rome, around 1600: The capital of the Papal State was a Mecca for painters. Here, they were able to study masterpieces from antiquity through to those by Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael. However, there was also huge demand for the new. Before he died in 1590, Pope Sixtus V had numerous churches built and renovated that now required adornment. On his trip to Rome, Montaigne noted that there were "barely any visual depictions" in the churches there – something that is hardly imaginable today.

Artists from all over the world arrived in the hope of being able to demonstrate their talent and be discovered. It was their chance to attain prosperity, or even affluence and nobility. But competition was tough. There were many who spent their entire lives copying works of art for a pittance. After all,

alongside the prestigious commissions awarded by the church and aristocracy, there was also a flourishing market for mass-produced artworks: copied portraits of saints that anyone could purchase for a few coins.

CARAVAGGIO STRUCK A CHORD WITH THE AGE

Michelangelo Merisi, who adopted the name of his parent's home town Caravaggio, was one of those who went to Rome as a trained painter in the early 1590s. He, too, must have started by eking out a living with copying. But within just a few years' time, he succeeded in establishing valuable contacts. Even more importantly, he developed a style that was new, and that struck a chord with the age.

Four criteria distinguish Caravaggio's visual language: sensuality, vibrancy, intelligent use of artistic quotations



Scientists reconstructed the scene of *The Crowning with Thorns* in order to reproduce the lighting. The result: not one spotlight – as one might think at first glance – but three were required to approximate the lighting of Caravaggio's painting.

and – especially striking – his space-defining use of light-dark conceptions. Caravaggio painted as if the light were falling at an angle from above, like a spotlight that in turn cast deep shadows. The background is often dark, and parts of the painting can only be guessed at. Landscapes or general spatial details are very rarely recognizable, with the result that the figures appear extraordinarily sculptural – in fact, almost too close for comfort, from the viewer's perspective.

In the first few years of the 17th century, Caravaggio was celebrated by many contemporaries for his "divine art of painting," and was glorified as a paragon. In his verses, the poet Gaspare Murtola, for example, praised the effect of his figures, which he claimed were barely distinguishable from living beings. The prices paid for Caravaggio's

paintings are further evidence of his success. As early on as 1600, he earned 600 scudi for two pictures – twice the annual salary of a university professor at the time.

MALIGNED AS A "MONSTER OF GENIUS"

Caravaggio's success not only attracted admirers – it also generated rivalry and envy. This was why, during his lifetime, and even more so after his death, a great many rumors developed that eventually grew into legends. In 1633, Florentine painter Vicente Carducho called his colleague "a monster of genius and talent" and an "Anti-Michelangelo," and even an "Antichrist."

In a biographical work by art theorist Giovanni Pietro Bellori published in 1672, Caravaggio is already described

as a degenerate failure. As Bellori had a major influence on European art theory, the image he propagated of Caravaggio has endured to this day – much to the irritation of Sybille Ebert-Schifferer: the Director of the Bibliotheca Hertziana, the Max Planck Institute for Art History in Rome, has been fighting to rehabilitate the artist for some time.

To this end, she has compiled copious evidence from the most diverse sources and writings, and published her findings in the monumental volume *Caravaggio: The Artist and His Work*. A key issue is what Ebert-Schifferer calls Caravaggio's "lighting direction" – the painter's characteristic application of light and shadow. She regards this feature of his work as part of a development in art history, as with the advent of the work of Leonardo da Vinci – 100

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years before Caravaggio – light phenomena attracted the interest of numerous artists.

The natural depiction of light and shadow became an important subject. In his treatise on painting, Leonardo himself stated explicitly that sharp shadows were to be avoided. An examination of his paintings reveals why: the use of so-called *sfumato* – bright segments that merge softly with darker ones, though even these are never completely dark. Up until the turn of the 16th to the 17th century, Roman painters avoided strong shadows.

During his training in Milan, Caravaggio had already been exposed to other approaches. In Lombardian art, there were paintings with strong light-dark contrasts, such as those of Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo and Antonio Campi. But such painters were a long way from their contemporaries in Rome, and their works were simply not known. According to Ebert-Schifferer's analysis, Caravaggio showed considerable skill in taking a form of representation that was previously unknown in Rome, adapting it to his own style, and marketing it effectively.

What's more, by focusing on the use of light, Caravaggio was, in fact, addressing a key criterion that artists were being called upon to pay attention to at the time: At the Council of Trent, the Catholic Church had initiated the Counter-Reformation in response to the spread of Protestantism, and art was expected to contribute to this. Orders were issued that called for church paintings to overwhelm the people and appeal to the emotions of the faithful by literally drawing them into the action in scenes of Biblical events and martyrdom.

"Caravaggio was most persuasive in implementing this requirement stipu-

lated by the Counter-Reformation," says Ebert-Schifferer. And she points out that light in his work is more than just illumination: in his religious paintings, it actually embodies Divine Light, enlightenment. One very early example is *The Calling of St. Matthew*, which remains one of Caravaggio's most famous paintings to this day. Together with *The Martyrdom of St. Matthew* of 1599, it was the artist's first major commission for a work to be put on public display. It's a remarkable painting, even to the non-expert. It's even more impressive when Sybille Ebert-Schifferer explains the details:

ART QUOTATIONS AS A POPULAR STYLISTIC DEVICE

"*The Calling of St. Matthew* shows Christ coming into a room where Matthew, a tax collector, is seated. Whether outdoors or indoors remains uncertain due to the darkness. The light appears with Christ from the right-hand side and reinforces the natural light of the scene, as there is a window behind the altar on the same side. But the light that comes in with Christ is also the light of enlightenment, which is at its brightest where it falls on the face of the tax collector as he looks up. He is the one to be enlightened and invested with a new life. The light also clearly emphasizes Christ's outstretched hand. This is what establishes the connection and depicts the crucial gesture: you are the one I mean."

The art historian also points out an example of another characteristic feature of Caravaggio's work to be found in *The Calling of St. Matthew* – the skilled quotation of other famous paintings: "Christ's gesture is the same as that of Adam in *The Creation of Adam* on the ceiling of the Sistine



Shed new light on Caravaggio with her book: Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, Director at the Bibliotheca Hertziana.

Chapel by Caravaggio's namesake Michelangelo. Art connoisseurs in Rome at the time certainly identified and appreciated this."

It is a fact that the mutual viewing and interpreting of paintings was a popular pastime among the upper classes of the time. The aristocracy and church dignitaries enjoyed showing each other their art collections and demonstrating their expertise by discovering quotations from other works of art. Caravaggio deliberately played on this penchant of his Roman clients. Later,

MICHELANGELO MERISI DA CARAVAGGIO

September 29, 1571	Birth of Michelangelo Merisi in Milan; childhood presumably spent with his grandparents in Caravaggio
1584 to 1588	Apprenticeship with renowned Milanese painter Simone Peterzano
from ca. 1592	Resident in Rome, work in various studios
from 1599	Prestigious public and private commissions for paintings
May 1606	Caravaggio flees Rome to the nearby principality of Paliano
from October 1606	Resident in Naples
July 1607	Period of stay in Malta
July 1608	Admission to the Maltese Order (barred again in December 1608)
October 1608	Flees to Sicily due to involvement in a brawl
October 1609	Second period of stay in Naples
July 18, 1610	Death in Porto Ercole

when he was forced to leave Rome and paint for less knowledgeable customers, this type of allusion is no longer to be found in his pictures.

Both of the St. Matthew paintings caused a stir in the Roman art world, and many painters attempted to imitate Caravaggio's visual language, especially his use of light. As Ebert-Schifferer reports with some amusement, some would have given any-

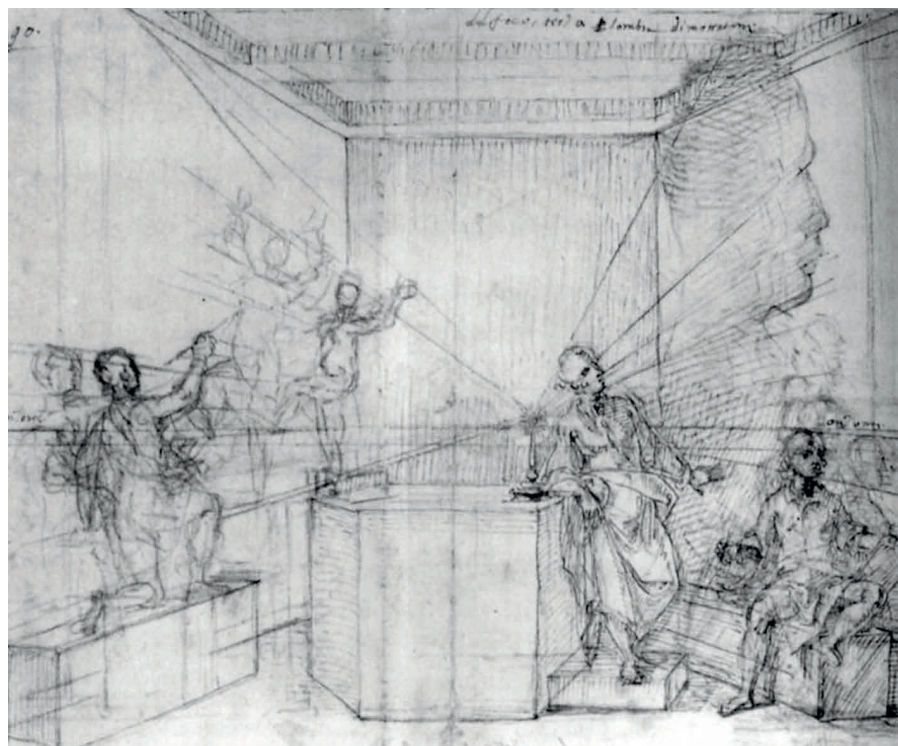
thing to be able to emulate the technique, as shown by trial records dating back to 1603. These indicate that young painter Tommaso Salini had quoted information provided to him by his friend and colleague Filippo Trisegni when giving evidence as a witness in a slander trial. When Trisegni himself was called to the witness stand, however, he denied having revealed anything to Salini. According to Trisegni, the deal

had been that, in exchange for the information, Salini was to show him how to paint a cast shadow – and Trisegni claimed that this had not happened. Ebert-Schifferer finds this anecdote very revealing: "The painting technique with which Caravaggio stirred the envy of many of his colleagues must have been so valuable that even painters who were on friendly terms didn't reveal it to one another."

In an age long before patents and copyright existed, Caravaggio himself did everything he could to keep his technique a trade secret and a unique selling point. Using present-day methods of analysis, it is at least possible to partly uncover aspects of this secret. One typical feature is Caravaggio's use of the so-called *imprimitura*, or foundation: after the obligatory chalk foundation, he applied one or more coarse, dark layers of paint so as to be able to work from dark to light.

Such foundations were quite widespread in northern Italy. Caravaggio perfected the system in that he left individual lines at the color contours in order to achieve a clear separation between light and dark areas. In his later work, he also used the foundation to avoid the need to further render areas of half-shadow.

Starting in the 16th century, painters were required to study shadow-casting as part of their training, as demonstrated by Carlo Urbino's collection of sketches.





Caravaggio is known not only for lighting effects, but also for the richly contrasting psychological nuances of his figures. Judith's expression at the beheading of Holofernes reflects both disgust and determination, while the caricature-like face of the old maid serves to emphasize Judith's beauty.

To elaborate the depicted figures, Caravaggio used a wide range of the most varied pigments. He especially disliked pure, vividly bright shades: in fact, he would often tone down parts that appeared white by means of thin, dark-toned glazes, making the bright sections more brilliant and the rest of the painting darker. This effect was first made visible in the painting *Judith Beheading Holofernes* of 1598/99 using X-ray fluorescence analysis.

It's worth noting that Caravaggio began to make use of such clever techniques while he was living in the household of Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte. The artist is thought to have been a member of the *famiglia* from 1595 onward. Del Monte gave him room and board, but above and beyond this, he acted as the painter's mentor, inspirer and protector. The period had a formative influence on Caravaggio in

many different ways. It can be assumed that he learned to fence and play the lute while living with del Monte, but it was mainly the Cardinal's interest in modern natural sciences that influenced him most.

Francesco del Monte was a friend and supporter of Galileo Galilei. He pursued a personal interest in alchemy as the precursor to the science of chemistry. His experiments may have encouraged Caravaggio to experiment with novel pigments, for example the then newly discovered "Bologna stone," familiar today as barium sulfate – a component of many emulsion paints and glazes.

Geometry and optics were other important areas of study pursued in the del Monte household. The Cardinal's brother, mathematician and physicist Guidubaldo del Monte, is regarded to this day as one of the founding fathers

of descriptive geometry. At the time, he was one of the most important researchers into light and shade. To what extent Caravaggio studied his work is no longer ascertainable today.

However, it is certainly the case that other artists delved into it very deeply, as Sybille Ebert-Schifferer relates: "There's a treatise by Guidubaldo del Monte with a separate chapter on shadows and cast shadows. The treatise is highly complex – virtually unintelligible to the non-expert today. Painter Ludovico Cigoli, who, incidentally, also corresponded with Galilei, found this impractical for the needs of painters and set about writing his own treatise. Painters' knowledge of and interest in the natural sciences during this period should definitely not be underestimated!"

A number of the art historian's colleagues have put forward the idea that Caravaggio used an elaborate system

of mirrors and lenses or a kind of camera obscura to project his figures onto the canvas – something she regards as far-fetched. “How would an artist have been able to paint his models on a canvas with a black-brown foundation in a darkened room in which they were illuminated by a single ray of light?” she asks.

In asking this, Ebert-Schifferer also deliberately challenges the much-debated “naturalness” of Caravaggio’s paintings. Admired by some contemporaries and art theorists, it is dismissed by others as mere “copying.” “Both miss the point entirely,” says the art historian. Because it’s only at first sight that Caravaggio’s paintings appear to provide a lifelike representation. A closer look reveals that the paintings rarely depict a “real” scene as might be captured by a photograph; in fact, they are the result of a complex composition.

ARTISTIC FREEDOM WITH LIGHT AND SHADOW

This particularly applies to the use of light: The scene from the painting *The Crowning with Thorns* from 1602/03 was elaborately reconstructed in Vienna using spotlights for illumination. In the process, the scientists paid particular attention to where the shadows fell – and there were several surprises. First of all, it took three spotlights to illuminate the painting the way Caravaggio painted it. And even then, none of the shadows were entirely correct. “That’s art, after all. He didn’t just copy light that falls somewhere,” says Ebert-Schifferer.

Wild theories abound regarding Caravaggio’s studio, which he set up in a rented apartment after his time in the Cardinal del Monte household. The rumors are based on a source dating back to 1605, in which the painter’s landlady makes a claim for damage to the *soffitto*, the ceiling. Several Caravaggio researchers have interpreted the source as evidence that the artist made a hole in the roof in order to get the light to fall into the room vertically.

This kind of interpretation exasperates Sybille Ebert-Schifferer: “That’s rubbish, it’s a matter of common sense:

firstly, the word *soffitto* doesn’t mean roof at all, but intermediate ceiling. And secondly, nobody would be stupid enough to make a hole in the ceiling if they were working on large canvases. It also rains in Rome sometimes, and what if the canvases were to get wet?”

The art historian was thus all the more pleased when Caravaggio’s rental contract turned up in the Rome State Archive in 2010, showing that he would have been within his rights to dismantle part of the intermediate ceiling. Ebert-Schifferer explains that this is understandable from an art historical perspective: “Caravaggio was working on *Death of the Virgin* at the time, as well as other paintings that were more than three meters high. Taking out the intermediate ceiling allowed him to set up the canvases to their full height – and he would get additional oblique light from the mansard window to boot. This type of diagonal light, not from a hole but from a window, is even recommended by Leonardo as a requirement for a good studio.”

According to the researcher, rumors such as that of the demolished roof can be accounted for by an image of Caravaggio that has persisted for centuries as a seedy criminal who preferred to keep the company of thieves and prostitutes. The 19th century tendency to associate genius with madness and crime only served to strengthen this image. The interpretation is still reflected in Derek Jarman’s cult film *Caravaggio* from 1986.

It’s an established fact, according to Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, that Caravaggio was involved in violent brawls on several occasions and, in 1606, was even

involved in an incident that today would be classified as bodily injury with fatal consequences. That’s why he was forced to leave Rome and couldn’t return for the rest of his life. However, to assess the artist’s behavior properly, it’s important to examine the history of crime in general during this period. This, too, is something Ebert-Schifferer has done, with remarkable results: “There were people we would regard today as very respectable, such as aristocrats and even lawyers of the consistory and the like, who would constantly get into fights and turn up at the police station.” The state monopoly on the use of force was not yet established at the time. What’s more, it was still common practice for the aristocracy to resolve conflicts by the rule of force rather than before a court. By similar means, Caravaggio might have been anticipating the hoped-for social advancement into aristocratic circles.

The Director at the Bibliotheca Hertziana certainly gained a very different picture of Caravaggio in the course of her intense work: “You simply have to look at whose company he kept, who he wrote to. He had lots of literary friends – the type of people who don’t talk to every clochard. And the paintings themselves indicate that he was an amazingly intelligent man with an excellent knowledge of art.”

Sybille Ebert-Schifferer’s research has provided a range of new insights into Caravaggio’s life and work. However, 400 years after his death, it is obviously no longer possible to shed new light on everything. Just like in Caravaggio’s paintings, where the cast shadow leaves a certain amount in the dark. ◀

TO THE POINT

- Caravaggio’s style is characterized by bright light falling at an angle from above that casts a hard shadow, giving the scenes depicted a very sculptural appearance.
- The style is both fascinating and polarizing: There were many imitators, but also many enviers and opponents who established a permanent negative image of the artist after his death.
- According to the latest art historical research, Caravaggio’s lifestyle was typical of his contemporaries. To some extent, his artistic techniques can be deciphered using modern methods.