

The Utrecht Caravaggisti

By

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The 17th century marked significant changes of modern development within the arts across the whole of Europe. This period had been identified as the “Baroque” which initiated in Rome. Rome was the accomplished religious and cultural centre of Italy at the turn of the 17th century and was the home of the world renowned artist Michael Angelo Merisi, otherwise known as Caravaggio whose optical values within painting would inspire the forward movement of artists known as the Utrecht Caravaggisti. (1571-1610).

The style of Caravaggio sparked major interest with the Baroque artists who were mostly active in the northern part of the Netherlands in the city of Utrecht. The work of Caravaggio was quite revolutionary for the Utrecht artists who adopted his intense use of light and shade otherwise known as chiaroscuro. His emphasis on naturalism and his use of dark shadowy and obscure colors were recognised as effective in creating co-existing space within a frame.

The Utrecht Caravaggisti was a term coined with the crystallisation of both the artists from ‘Utrecht’ and followers of “Caravaggio”.

The first initiation of the movement had stemmed from painters such as Jan van Bijlert, Dirk van Baburen and Gerrit van Honthorst. Jan van Bijlert and his fellow companions made the strenuous journey of over three thousand kilometers to Rome in the 1610s where they had stumbled upon a new scheme of composition based on tonal chromatism which Caravaggio fostered. The Utrecht Caravaggisti, took Caravaggio’s style, but fostered a lighter silver tonality instead of the earthy colors and darker tonality Caravaggio’s work displayed. The Utrecht artists did not strictly mirror Caravaggio’s work; they transported various stylistic approaches utilized by Caravaggio with their own unique interpretations.

In contrary to Caravaggio, the artists from Utrecht were widely known for their paintings which portrayed moralising, mythological and religious subjects they worshipped and valued within their own Roman Catholic Religion.

Jan van Bijlert’s painting of ‘St Matthew and The Angel’, we can see the angel accompany the disciple dearly on his quest to speak and spread the word of Jesus. Jan van Bijlert’s marvelous depiction of St Matthew and The Angel was painted in the late 1620s in the Utrecht Caravaggisti style. The painting was birthed when Utrecht Caravaggism attained most of its popularity in the late 1620s.

Jan van Bijlert’s use of precision and attention to detail is highlighted as St Matthew is positioned close to the frame and slightly cut off, thereby creating immediate intimacy with the spectator.

Jan van Bijlert’s aim was to convey this painting as a picture-perfect representation of what the occurrence looked like. The viewer feels as though they are in one continuous space with St Matthew and The Angel. Jan van Bijlert cuts the frame purposely from St Matthews’ waist

up to give the illusion of St Matthew sitting in front of the spectators' eyes in a real life perspective. This also aids the illusion of closeness and intimacy the viewer has with the painting. This stylistic technique of cutting frame was also something which was employed by Caravaggio himself.

Van Bijlert's mesmerising depiction of internal light composition from the left of the frame places unique and prominent emphasis on the ethereal being of the Angel. This intrigues the viewer.

Van Bijlert and the Utrecht Caravaggisti continuously compose their paintings to allude to a real-life perspective which in turn exerts immense impact upon the viewer. The viewer in turn feels closely connected to the religious phenomenon with a sense of higher knowledge and understanding of the religious message which is meant to be experienced from viewing the painting.

In addition, the Tenebrous (dark, gloomy mysterious, dramatic) illuminations can be seen to engulf St Matthew, helping to enhance the whole frame; creating exaggerated depth to the composition but also conveying a sense of naturalism - as much light would not have been available back then.

The Chiaroscuro style van Bijlert consciously took from Caravaggio, helps give the illusion that the subject (in this case St Matthew) is acquiring space; the heightened contrast between the dark and light tones also help bring the subject into reality.

Jan van Bijlert continued to paint in this new style throughout the 1620s along with other artists in the Utrecht Caravaggisti. The Utrecht Caravaggisti flourished greatly within the 17th Century and created quite the sensation for the art world of the Europe which ended in 1630.

The Utrecht Caravaggisti's main influence was inspired by the Italian artist Caravaggio who they happened to come across in Rome. Their use of silver and bright tonality and use of internal light sources, tenebrous techniques and study of religious figures have all been influenced by Caravaggio's work.

Jan van Bijlert and Utrecht Caravaggisti embellished the work of Caravaggio and made it into their own, depicting religious figures like no other artists in the turn of the 17th Century.