

Jan Van Bijlert and the Utrecht Caravaggisti

This painting, *St. Matthew and the Angel*, was painted by the Dutch artist Jan Van Bijlert. Van Bijlert was a member of the "Utrecht Caravaggisti", a group of painters heavily influenced by the Italian Baroque painter Caravaggio, whose short life ended in 1610 when he was only 32. The Utrecht group operated in the early 1600's and their output ended in around 1630, either due to the deaths of the artists or the development of the artistic styles of the remaining members of the group.

Van Biljert was producing work during the influential Golden Age of Dutch Painting which lasted from 1568 to 1648. He was a prolific artist and left around 200 pieces. His work, and that of the other group members, during the 17th century was heavily influenced by the works of Caravaggio, and their paintings went on to inspire other great artists, such as Rembrandt, Vermeer and Peter Paul Rubens.

Van Bijlert grew up in the city of Utrecht, which at the time was enduring political and religious turmoil. In 1585, he trained with, and studied painting under, Abraham Bloemaert, who was one the Haarlem Mannerists. He mainly painted historical and religious paintings along with landscapes and still life. Mythology also played a huge role within his work. Once he had finished his studies in Utrecht, he undertook an artistic pilgrimage to Rome to further study and produce art, along with many other contemporary Flemish and Dutch painters. This was a common practice for artists at the time and served as a kind of pilgrimage. It had risen in popularity after the publication of the "Schilder-Boek" or "Book of Painters" by Karel van Mander in 1604, which included a section on Italian art. With three thousand km to cover on the journey, travelling was often difficult and strenuous. The artists often had to sell and produce paintings on the way to pay for their board and transport. This meant that it often took months? years to get there, if indeed they ever arrived. Some of those that did complete the journey, would not return home again. The journey to Rome and Italy was considered a Rite of Passage and it often meant that the adventure was an education in itself. Quite often, by the time the artists had arrived, they had already matured and developed their own style to some extent.

Rome was a cultural epicenter at the time and was taking huge steps forward in innovations in the arts. This inspired many to come and learn in the city. Once these Dutch artists had arrived in Rome, they called themselves the "Bentvueghels", a group formed

in 1610, which lasted until 1710. The Dutch word "Bentvueghels" translates as "birds of a feather" and they were also known as "Schildersbent" or "painters' clique." They also gave each member of the group jokey nicknames, based on characteristics or personal appearance. The Bentvueghels were often looked down upon by other artistic groups and artists because of their drunken and often rowdy behaviour. They also sometimes displayed less respect for the traditional methods of teaching, probably due to the effects of the aforementioned journey to get there, where they had gained experience through practice and living on their wits. However, their work quickly became popular and influential among the arts community as they fused techniques learnt from their studies with the Northern Italian style and in particular, the work of Caravaggio.

The Utrecht Caravaggisti were formed through association with the Bentvueghels, as they were all members of this group. The main members were Dirck van Baburen, Gerrit van Honthorst, Hendrick ter Brugghen, Matthias Stomer and Jan van Bijlert himself. Each of them had also studied under Abraham Bloemaert.

Two of the main techniques that the Utrecht Caravaggisti inherited from Caravaggio were called Tenebrism and Chiaroscuro. Tenebrismo is an Italian word meaning "dark, gloomy, or mysterious" and is used to convey work with dramatic illumination. Chiaroscuro literally means light and dark. This method uses extremes of light and shade in order to convey drama and highlight particular aspects of the subject matter, whether it is people or activities or objects, by conveying distinct contrasts. This shows aspects of the scene in a hyper focused manner, drawing the viewer's eye towards particular parts of the painting that hold the most significance. Caravaggio was not the first person to use chiaroscuro but his compelling style and development of the technique inspired other artists to use it in their work. It was passed down from Caravaggio, via artists like the Utrecht Caravaggisti, to other masters like Rembrandt and Vermeer.

This use of light and dark can be seen in the painting we are studying. If we look at how St. Matthew and the Angel have been positioned, we can see how the light is being cast directly on them, illuminating their faces, and bringing direct focus on their faces and expressions. The painting uses, as do many of Van Bijlert's works, this method of illumination and focus, which can be seen as a direct tie to Caravaggio.

Another way the Utrecht Caravaggisti were influenced by Caravaggio was in subject matter. In many of his early works, he

painted scenes of religion and mythology, as well as producing paintings of musicians and everyday people of the era. Many of Caravaggio's paintings during his working life were considered controversial for the time, and some of his commissions for the Church were rejected. This was due to a perception that the work was disrespectful, in that it showed the figures in positions and situations that were considered inappropriate. In some of his works, the mythological or religious figures he was capturing, were placed in contemporary settings. He even put himself in his paintings; for example, in his "Sick Bacchus" he paints himself as the god of wine.

In his own painting of Saint Matthew, entitled "The Calling of Saint Matthew", the religious characters are dressed and placed in a very contemporary, informal manner and not to the same standards of traditional religious painting of the time.

The Utrecht Caravaggisti were mostly Catholics and were also inspired by this subject matter. So much so that in a strange twist, a lost work by Caravaggio - "The Taking of Christ" - was attributed for a few hundred years to another Caravaggisti, Gerrit van Honthorst, until the truth was discovered in the early 1990's.

Van Bijlert's "Saint Matthew and the Angel" is one of a four part series he produced of the Evangelists. Each is of a similar style and composition to that of "Saint Matthew". He would have already seen Caravaggio's work of the same subject matter, and as a result Van Bijlert's style and composition are very similar to this earlier work.