

Utrecht – a city and its artists as experienced by the painter Jan van Bijlert

Enveloped within the Dutch religious epicentre which was once the Lowlands, the ancient ecclesiastical fortress of Utrecht bore the artistic influence of various iconic Dutch-Renaissance practitioners known as the Utrecht Caravaggisti.

At a moment of great change in Dutch, and in actuality, European history, a painter called Jan van Bijlert took influence. Upon travelling to Rome, the Caravaggisti became visually enchanted by the modern Northern-Italian chiaroscuro paintings by Michelangelo Caravaggio.

Italian painting iconically is known for the heavy prominence of religious-iconography and the dedication of High Renaissance artists such as Michelangelo. This was thematically attractive to the young Dutch painters due to Utrecht's denominative status as an inherently Roman Catholic City. Utrecht held an role in Dutch-Italian tradin, due to its mercantile status. Italian merchants delivered Baroque ideals to Utrecht, exciting the younger artists of Utrecht diverting from colourful, brash and religious painting styles of older Utrechtian painters, in favour of a more contemporary, Northern-Italian route through their artistic practice. The seventeenth century saw intense changes to everyday life in Utrecht, seeing social movement of many artists, has bared the harsh experiences of civil conflict and a strong upsurge in anti-Spanish colonialism and nationalism, unforgiving plague and a mysterious storm that catalysed intense social change. As a result, Utrecht stood at a compelling intersection of two major political and social discussions, the commencement of a new wave of artistic vision. Socio-political relations and colonialism made Utrecht and the Lowlands very attractive avenues of mercantilism for both Britain and Spain - allowing direct access across the English Channel. The Lowlands, what is now known as the Netherlands and Belgium, was a religiously enriched area of land. There was a denominative spilt of Protestantism and Catholicism between the North and South - with Northern areas, such as Amsterdam and Rotterdam being predominately Protestant which felt chaffed under the rule of Catholic, King Phillip II of Spain. By the middle of the seventeenth century, a thirty years war climaxed with the division of the Lowlands into a Southern Netherlands under Spanish colonialism, and an independent self-ruling Dutch Republic in the North. Utrecht, confined within the borders of The Republic and The Southern Netherlands, had local ramifications which incited denominative-motivated protests against Nationalist Protestants and Catholic communities, both prominent at the time. One of the markets that flourished during this period of civil strife was the art market due to nationalist competition in an intersection of socio-political ideology. Young Protestant and young Catholic painters North and South began utilising different inspiration and art styles to create extremely thematically and contextually diverse artworks

which allowed for an immense artistic enrichment in both the Southern Netherlands and the nascent Dutch Republic. This nationalistic competition was prominent in both art and the trading systems of Europe at the time. The Dutch, so far, had resisted the long-distance trading systems of Europe, but with British, Spanish and French expansion and colonisation, the Dutch Republic became a universal buyer-seller and shipper within fierce competition of global domination. Utrecht's artistic community and the Golden Age of Dutch Painting in the city, no doubt had a magnificent role in the flourishing of the arts in the Netherlands at the time. There was a strong diaspora of artists from Utrecht to Italy in the seventeenth century due to failing social and political circumstances, in a city crippled by war, plague, storm and colonisation. This diaspora of young artists who had become interested in the work of Northern Italian Baroque artist Caravaggio.

Within the Plague came Typhus and Dysentery cases soared and with this, artists began to struggle financially to fund their practises. With many not even being to afford the utilitarian essentials, art-making began to decline momentarily and as a result, it comes as no surprise that the Dutch Republic sense a decline. However, what an artist does best is adapt to their surroundings. With the pandemic came refreshing and importantly modern methods of art making. Young painters liaised with Italian merchants who spoke of the wonders of Baroque painting headed Caravaggio.

It was against this backdrop that several young Utrecht painters including Jan van Bijert found an attraction of exploring the greater European continent, with Caravaggio as their shining light.