

The Utrecht Caravaggisti

The painter of this picture, Jan van Bijlert, was born in Utrecht in the Netherlands, a city today still known for its medieval centre and home to several prominent art museums.

In his beginnings, Jan van Bijlert became a student of Dutch painter Abraham Bloemaert. He later spent some time travelling in France as well as spending the early 1620s in Rome, where he was influenced by the Italian painter Caravaggio.

This brings us on to the Caravaggisti, stylistic followers of this late 16th-century Italian Baroque painter. Caravaggio's influence on the new Baroque style that eventually emerged from Mannerism was profound. Jan van Bijlert had embraced his style totally before returning home to Utrecht as a confirmed Caravaggist in roughly 1645.

Caravaggio tended to differ from the rest of his contemporaries, going about his life and career without establishing as much as a studio, nor did he try to set out his underlying philosophical approach to art, leaving art historians to deduce what information they could from his surviving works alone.

Another factor which sets him apart from his contemporaries is the fact that he was renowned during his lifetime although forgotten almost immediately after his death. Many of his works were released into the hands of his followers, the Caravaggisti. His relevance and major role in developing Western art was noticed at quite a later time when rediscovered and was 'placed' in the European tradition by Roberto Longhi. His importance was quoted as such, "Ribera, Vermeer, La Tour and Rembrandt could never have existed without him. And the art of Delacroix, Courbet and Manet would have been utterly different." He was also accredited by the influential art historian Bernard Berenson, who sang his praises thus: "With the exception of Michelangelo, no other Italian painter exercised so great an influence."

From these quotes we can clearly see why the Caravaggisti arrived in Rome from all over, to develop and take in the innovations of Caravaggio. His paintings combine a realistic observation of the human state, both physical and emotional, with a dramatic use of lighting. His influential, albeit short lived, following could be seen all over Europe, widespread in Italy, the Netherlands, France and Spain.

However the relevance of our artist here, Jan van Bijlert, comes from the fact that Catholic artists of the Netherlands travelled as students to Rome to study Caravaggio's work. This was possible due to the fact that Utrecht was a Catholic stronghold in the Dutch Republic, and so it was safe for them to return from their travels, and this they did for the first two decades of the 17th century.

Let us now turn to "St Matthew and the Angel" in front of us here. Like Caravaggio, Jan van Bijlert showcases here an unidealised and natural figure, with St Matthew and the angel quite close to the picture plane. This technique is used to suggest to our minds that we are very close to the action in the scene and to what's happening. We can also see attention to naturalistic detail and texture in the hair and skin features. We can see at least one if not all of these stylistic features within the works of the Caravagisti, and not just in van Bijlert's.

There are however other certain ways in which the Caravagisti's works tended to differ from Caravaggio's. There was typically quite a difference in use of colour and tone for one thing. Instead of warm, earthy colours and tonalities, many of the Caravagisti used lighter, brighter silver tonalities. We can see this clearly here in the lighter brighter colours used across the almost shimmering clothing and hair of the figures.

They also differed in their use of a religious based moralizing in their themes and scenes. This wasn't seen in Carravaggio's work as it was to become more of a northern tradition. As mentioned before, the city of Utrecht was that of a predominantly Catholic population, so depictions of Saints were at the forefront of many of the Utrecht Carvaggisti at the time. Paintings like this one here before us were never typically showcased in other parts of the Netherlands, in fact subjects like St Matthew seldom occur due to the Reformed Church rejecting such imagery. However, since the Catholic Church was so prevalent in the lives of the people of Utrecht, it was common for the art in these parts to glorify depictions of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

What this painting before us clearly shows is a definite number of Caravaggio's key elements, thus highlighting the huge influence he had on Jan van Bijlert and the Utrecht Caravagisti.

It was through his influence that the Caravaggisti became the renowned Dutch artists we know today, seizing from Caravaggio a more naturalistic approach that extended the influence of Baroque painting in Utrecht and the Netherlands.