

The Influence of Caravaggio on Jan van Bijlert and His Followers

The Utrecht Caravaggisti, also known as the "Caravagesques", were stylistic followers of the sixteenth century Italian Baroque painter Caravaggio. The influence he had over the new Baroque style that came out of Mannerism was exceptional, and very few artists have had the same effect on other artists of their time.

The Caravaggisti embraced aspects of Caravaggio's style, technique and choice of subject matter, and were responsible for the spread of Caravaggism across Europe

It is a positively strange thing when we consider just how much influence he had over artists that followed him as he never opened a school or workshop. He neither set out his underlying philosophical approach to art, and the psychological realism we see in Caravaggio's paintings can only be deduced from his surviving work.

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was very, very sensitive when it came to matters of artistic originality: he threatened both the painter Guido Reni and artist and biographer Giovanni Baglione for copying his style. Despite his efforts to protect his singular style, however, Caravaggio became one of the most widely imitated artists in the history of Western art.

Although Caravaggio was famous while he lived, he was forgotten almost immediately after his death, and other artists' work he influenced have certainly stood the test of time just as successfully – for instance Rubens, de Ribera, Bernini and Rembrandt.

Similarly, the legacy of the Caravaggisti could not have happened without Caravaggio, yet its origins are often overlooked in art history compared to those other artists Caravaggio influenced.

The influential art historian Bernard Berenson stated: "With the exception of Michelangelo, no other Italian painter exercised so great an influence as Caravaggio."

After his untimely death in 1610, many Italian and non-Italian artists alike came to be considered his "followers", even although they had never met the artist or worked alongside him. Unlike the typical Renaissance master-follower relationship, these artists could claim no direct descent from the studio of Caravaggio (since he did not have one), and in some cases they had not even seen his paintings first-hand.

Some artists copied Caravaggio for only a brief phase of their careers - Baglione, Carlo Saraceni, and Guercino for example - while others remained committed to Caravaggio's stylistic model for the duration of their lives.

The painting we are looking at, by Jan van Bijlert, is part of the Caravaggisti tendency and style.

When we observe the painting, entitled "Saint Matthew and the Angel" and painted in the late 1620s, we can see the clear influence of Caravaggio through simple things like the carefully painted skin and hair – it's nearly as if a camera were present before photography's invention!

Another influence comes from Caravaggio also employing close physical observation with a dramatic use of chiaroscuro. Chiaroscuro is a fancy way of describing an intense contrast between light and dark within the world of painting.

Due to the strong impact of Caravaggio, the Caravaggisti's paintings are very difficult to distinguish between. It's obvious that Van Bijlert held Caravaggio in such high esteem because of how he very clearly translates his techniques and methods into his own painting style.

Look at the painting displayed...do you see how the highlights are brighter than bright, and the shadows are deeper than deep? That is the legacy of Caravaggio, and therefore the legacy of the Caravaggisti.

These followers, whether Italian, Spanish, French, or Netherlandish, were especially attracted to Caravaggio's tenebrism (yet another fancy term for light and dark!)

Caravaggio's employment of tenebrism and chiaroscuro, the strong contrast of light and dark, lends his paintings a dramatic effect that cause his subjects to seem like they are actors spotlighted on a stage.

By combining this theatrical dynamism with careful observation from life, Caravaggio achieved a naturalism and realism in his Biblical scenes.

Look again... Do you notice that Saint Matthew is really quite elderly? As the saying goes: "Respect your elders". Well, because Saint Matthew is depicted in his old age, and in contrast to the young angel by his side, the observers (that's us!) are induced into a similar sort of respect for this picture.

Most of us have grandparents or elderly relatives or friends, whose opinions we trust and uphold due to their wisdom learned over their many years

of life which we have yet to experience. Van Bijlert, painting Saint Matthew in his latter years, has a way of reminding us of the context of old age in the Bible. In the Old Testament there is a book called Proverbs, in which we find the words: "Grey hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life." Perhaps with this in mind, we can read a bit more into the painting, seeing Saint Matthew's old age not as mere coincidence, of Van Bijlert simply imagining him so, but rather a conscious decision to present Saint Matthew as a well-respected, well-thought of figure.

There is a clear relationship between the two subjects, of Saint Matthew and the Angel. The painting has quite a tender atmosphere about it due to this fact.

Every painting is open to interpretation, and that is the beauty of art. What do you see in this painting? Do you feel anything about it in particular? Have you ever experienced living in harmony with an elderly person?

These are only a few examples of questions to ask yourself when wishing to connect to this piece of art before you.

The visuals we experience from a painting are sometimes not enough to unlock the meaning behind it however. It is often vital to read up about its history and context before truly understanding it.

How will you approach the next painting you are introduced to? Step out, choose to learn and the magnificence of the art world will be at your finger tips.