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History of Western Art
Part Three – Renaissance to Rococo

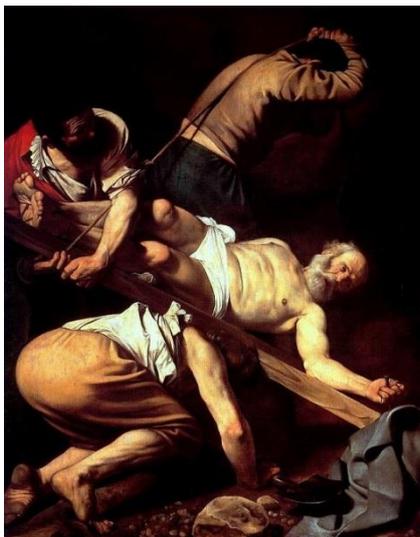
Assignment Three – Exercise 3

Analyse the stylistic differences between a seventeenth-century Baroque painter associated with the Catholic Counter-Reformation and a seventeenth-century painter from the Netherlands.

Caravaggio and Rembrandt

The Catholic or Counter-Reformation was a reaction to two distinct religious events. On the one hand, the rise of Protestantism following the rejection by Luther of Catholicism in 1517. On the other hand there was internal revolt within the Catholic Church against the perceived decline in the religious standards of the Catholic Church itself. There were concerns within the Catholic Church that the Church had become corrupted; indulgences were being abused, art was becoming less pious, its subject matter less religious. Ruling families were exerting undue influence on artists (Botticelli's Primavera for the Medici family for example) (Visual arts)

Counter-reformation art was intended to reflect the key differentiators between Catholicism and Protestantism; the importance of the Virgin and the Immaculate Conception, Transubstantiation and the Eucharist, the suffering of Christ on the cross, the saints. Art should be readily understandable by the lay person (many of whom were illiterate). (Smart History)

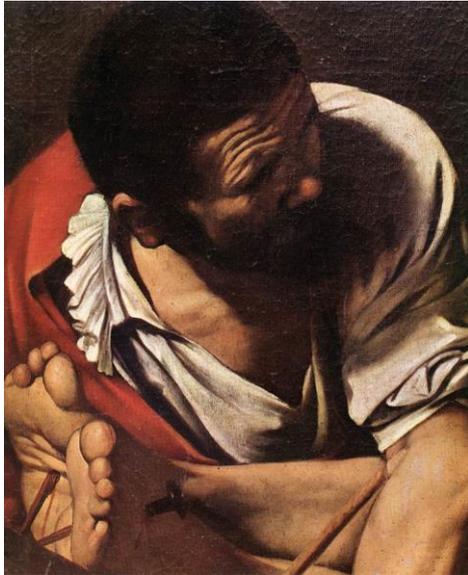


Caravaggio's Crucifixion of St Peter exemplifies the Baroque style and meets the demands of the reformers, being an image of the suffering of the saints. St Peter asks to be nailed to the cross upside down as he is not worthy of being crucified as Christ was (Caravaggio). The background is dark, almost black. This and the use of chiaroscuro, with strong shadows and highlights throws the figures into stark relief.

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There is energy as the men struggle to lift the cross. The lack of balance and instability of the pose give it a sense of realism and the angles and diagonals (characteristic of Baroque art) bring the image close to the viewer. St Peter's expression is full of emotion.



He is a real person and there is realism in the surroundings; the dirty feet of one of his crucifiers for example. (Smart history)

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By contrast, the Dutch painters were living in a more religiously tolerant time. There was little demand for large-scale religious or devotional work. Art became more populist, easel paintings were desirable, collected by the wealthy, bankers, even tradesmen and shopkeepers. Subject matter ranged across all genres (WHA, p591). However, Rembrandt did paint a number of religious works. Juxtaposed in a stellar exhibition in 2006, Caravaggio and Rembrandt were compared by a number of reviewers (Telegraph, Januszczak). Taking the Blinding of Samson as an example, we see similarities yet also many differences, in their work:

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Rembrandt also employs deep shadow and chiaroscuro, however, the effect is softer and more subtle; the darkness has some detail, deep in the shadow. The cave interior is dark but texture is visible. The light is golden, warm. Caravaggio's lighting is, by contrast sharp, almost cinematic although ironically film has adopted a technique to mimic Rembrandt, known in the industry as 'Rembrandt lighting' to acknowledge the 3-light style (YouTube, Rembrandt lighting).

Both images depict powerful emotions and expression. Samson grits his teeth, screws up his eyes and furrows his brow as the dagger pierces his eye. The image is uncompromisingly violent yet still somehow softly, delicately drawn. The open wound where Delilah has removed Samson's hair is bold and uncompromising but tells the story rather than deliberately aiming to shock the viewer.



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Rembrandt's subjects' clothing is more flowing with arguably greater attention to detail and drape. Caravaggio's use of light renders fabrics beautiful but somewhat stylised.

Caravaggio's style seems deliberately to shock the audience with high impact and an almost photographic way. Rembrandt seeks to share a moral story with us, violent yes, but not as immediately personal. (Januszczak)

Sources:

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For additional images of the works of Caravaggio and Rembrandt, see my learning log [here](#)

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