05 - Caravaggio - Painter of Stories (Part 2)

Hello, David here, welcome to Art Stories for English Learners, the place to improve your English with interesting stories about art and artists.

We're back for part 2 of our podcast about Caravaggio, who's art around the turn of the 16th Century would have a major influence on painting.

He's known as the painter of darkness and light, and we're about to find out why, but he was also a painter of stories - of drama - and it brings his paintings to life to this day.

In part two, we're going to look at two of his most famous works. The first is called Judith and Holofernes - a bloody beheading that shows off Caravaggio's most famous technique . And second, we'll look at his great commission for the Contarelli Chapel in Rome: The Calling of St Matthew - which you can still see there to this day.

They're two paintings that really show off Caravaggio's power, and what makes him a unique artist who still inspires in the 21st century.

As always, today's transcript is available on the website: artstoriesforenglishlearners.com. There's a link in the episode information as well as links to pictures of the painters we discuss.

First, here's a short recap of where we are: We saw how Caravaggio left his home near Milan as a young man, to make a career in Rome as a painter.

After building a reputation in the workshop of Giuseppe Cesari he was invited into the home of Cardinal Del Monte, a church leader and patron of the arts.

Caravaggio's early paintings showed his unique talent for naturalism, the almost scientific study of the visible world. He combined this approach with realism, which often means showing the nasty, social reality.

The final ingredient was his understanding of drama and how he could capture human emotion in an instant.

Drama was the key quality of a new style that was growing in Rome - the Baroque.

But drama had a purpose. The Catholic Church needed paintings to inspire the common people in the face of a Protestant challenge to the North.

But before Caravaggio would get a commission for a major work in a church or chapel, his art would develop in a darker, more violent direction.

In doing so, he would develop his most famous technique - earning him his title 'the painter of darkness and light'.

One of Caravaggio's most famous violent paintings is called 'Judith beheading holofernes'. It's also one of his early religious paintings.

According to the story, the brave and beautiful Judith seduces the general, Holofernes, who is about to attack her city and nearby Jerusalem. She waits for him to get drunk and fall asleep, before cutting off his head.

The story had inspired many artists to paint it, but they usually depicted the hero Judith after the act, with her victoriously holding the head of Holofernes. I think you can guess Caravaggio's approach.

He takes us back to the most dramatic moment of all: the beheading.

Everything about the scene has been designed for shocking impact.

Holofernes, just woken from his sleep, is twisting around in his bed to meet the intruders. But Judith has already grabbed his hair and pulled his head back.

With his eyes staring hopelessly, and his mouth wide open, he doesn't have time to scream. He realises as quickly as we do, that Judith has already sliced through his neck.

It's a theatrical death. The twisting of his body is continued by his twisting head and he looks like an animal being slaughtered. Judith carries out her bloody work like a farmer, with her strong, pale arms stretched out in front of her. But her face is not calm.

Her eyes are dark and lowered. Is she frowning with concentration? Or with disgust?

It's like she is only now realising the seriousness of her plan as she sees the blood squirting. She is leaning back, distancing herself from her own actions. A real human, caught up in the horror of her destiny.

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One face is not disgusted, however, but absorbed. An old woman, Judith's servant, watches the beheading with pure fascination. Caravaggio has captured every line and wrinkle in her face to intensify her expression. She stares as if hypnotised.

She has no doubts about what is going on. Holding the bag tightly, she waits to place Holofernes' head inside to carry it back to the city.

But doesn't her intense focus mirror our own? We also can't look away. Our eyes switch from the screaming holofernes, to the despairing Judith, to the observant servant and back again to the beginning. It's a horror story written in faces. The old servant is our representative in the painting.

It has become one of Caravaggio's most iconic works and one of the most memorable in art history. In part, it's because Caravaggio was the first to understand the potential of light to tell a story.

What keeps this scene in our minds is his use of his most famous technique. Chiaroscuro.

Chiaroscuro is the use of strong contrasts between light and shadow in a painting. The word comes from Chiaro, in Italian, which means bright, and Oscuro, which means dark.

Caravaggio didn't invent chiaroscuro. It was also used by artists like Da Vinci to make his figures look more three dimensional and naturalistic. But he softened the transition between light and dark in his paintings.

Caravaggio, on the other hand, uses more extreme contrasts to increase the drama. It was a shockingly original idea, and a way to focus the viewer's attention quickly on the important scenes in the picture.

The figures seem to emerge from the darkness, like they are coming from a dream, the depths of history, or a nightmare.

And then of course we have the light, which reveals the most important features.

But where does it come from?

Caravaggio never painted a candle. Instead, the light in his paintings often comes from some mysterious source outside the scene.

The supernatural nature of their light is lost for us, because we are used to streetlights and spotlights. In Caravaggio's day, it had something miraculous to it.

In some sense, it's a move away from naturalism. Artificial light could only belong in painting, and not reality. It is not the universal light of the renaissance: the light of reason that shone on everything and revealed its true nature.

It is instead the light of a single perspective - one that intensifies a certain view of reality. It is not timeless, but instantaneous. Like a flash of lightning that exposes the murder.

He even set up his studio to produce the effects he needed. Later in his life, a landlady complained that he made a hole in his ceiling for daylight to enter.

He would get his models to pose as he wanted them, illuminated by the beam of light. We can imagine how difficult it was for Caravaggio's models to stand there, hour after hour with the light shining down, or reflected in a mirror.

Because Caravaggio never made initial drawings like most other artists, it took longer. He painted the figures one by one, directly onto the canvas. One critic complained that "The moment the model was taken away from his eyes, his hand and his imagination remained empty."

But this unusual method allowed him to focus on the individuality of each figure, adjusting poses and expressions as needed, to create paintings that felt alive.

In Del Monte's eyes, Caravaggio had proven himself as an extraordinary artist. But he hadn't yet passed the true test of a painter.

He hadn't had a commission for a major religious work.

Luckily enough, in the summer of 1599, Del Monte was able to give his favourite artist an opportunity.

Another Cardinal, The Cardinal Matteo Contarelli had died nearly fifteen years before and he had left money to decorate a chapel. Known as the Contarelli Chapel, it is a small, square area inside the church of San Luigi dei Francesi: The Church of St. Louis of France, which had been built for the French community of Rome.

It is a typical gloomy Roman chapel, with just one window high up on the back wall.

Cardinal Contarelli had left specific instructions for it to be decorated with three scenes from the life of St. Mathew.

The famous Cesari was originally commissioned to paint them as frescoes, but he had been distracted by other commissions for the Pope. The project had already been delayed for years and it would soon be given fresh urgency.

Because there had been some excellent news. The French King had recently converted to Catholicism, which was a great political victory for Rome. But for Del Monte, who was in charge of the chapel's decoration, it meant pilgrims from France would be soon flooding into the church of San Luigi.

And the Contarelli chapel, dedicated to the French cardinal, would still be empty. Perhaps panicking, he renegotiated with Cesari, and got the job for his former student, Caravaggio. Fresco was not his speciality, so Caravaggio was to paint in oil paints.

The life of St Mathew was a politically suitable subject. In the bible, it's written that before becoming Mathew the apostle, he was a hated tax collector. When he was called by Christ to join him, he followed him and was saved from a life of sin.

The theme of transformation was meant as a reminder for the new French visitors, who were still suspected of disloyalty. Follow the true church, and all will be forgiven.

The first painting in the series would depict this important scene: The Calling of St Matthew. It would be hung on the left wall of the chapel, which is only revealed to visitors as they enter. At over three metres wide and three meters tall, it would be his largest work so far.

For this quiet corner of the church, Caravaggio produced one of the greatest paintings in art history. It didn't contain any violence or extremes of emotion. But he captured a profound moment. The moment a man makes a decision that will change his life forever.

The story in the bible is very short. It goes like this: "As Jesus passed, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he rose and followed him"

Caravaggio clearly had the freedom to imagine the scene how he liked. But the most crucial decision was his first. He decided to set the scene, not in ancient times, but in 16th century Rome: his Rome.

It takes place in a dark back room. Much like the ones in which Caravaggio drank and gambled. The window is dirty, and everything emerges from the darkness.

Instead of a tax booth, we have a table. It's not gamblers sitting around it this time, but tax collectors, and it looks like the five of them have been counting their day's earnings.

The first figure we notice is a boy near the centre of the canvas: an assistant. He is wearing fine, contemporary clothes and his moon-like face is the brightest point in the painting. Once again, we recognise him: it's young Mario Minniti.

The young man opposite him has his back to us. It's like we are sitting at the next table in a Roman tavern and we've turned around, just as the young man is turning, to witness something extraordinary.

Because there appears to be some disturbance. To the right of the table, two dark and mysterious characters have entered the scene. Compared to the tax collectors' nice leather shoes and silk shirts, they are barefoot and dressed in long, ancient robes. They seem to come from another time.

At the front, we have St Paul, whose body hides most of the second man from view. Still, in the background and half covered in shadow, we can see a figure who is without doubt Jesus, looking upon the tax collectors.

We know it's him by the thin, barely visible halo above his head. And there is something unearthly, too, in how he stands, just slightly taller than the other figures.

Like St Paul, he is pointing at the group sat at the table. His arm is fully stretched out in front of him. His hand hovers elegantly in the air, like a king's silently giving orders.

But who exactly are these time travelers pointing at? There seems to be some confusion.

The bearded man at the centre of the group looks stunned in disbelief. It's Mathew. His left hand, as if magnetised a holy force, turns to point at himself.

'Who, me?' he seems to say.

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As the confusion takes place below, the top half of the painting is largely empty. Nonetheless, there is a profound presence. Flooding in from the top right corner, perhaps from an open door beyond the scene, is a pale, miraculous light.

The first thing it hits is the window frame, which is in the form of a cross, a symbol of Jesus's future death.

Its path is then interrupted by the window shutter, leaving the top left corner of the canvas in darkness. But a narrower beam of light continues to reach the table and shine on the faces of our tax collectors below.

Remarkably, the angle of the light follows Jesus's hand, as though under his command.

It's no coincidence: Caravaggio has found an ingenious way to represent a miracle in the everyday. The light is both ordinary daylight, painted in a naturalistic way, but it is also a representation of the holy spirit.

Elsewhere in the bible, Jesus tells his followers: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

By representing God as light, Caravaggio could paint a miracle *realistically*. He didn't need to paint the heavenly clouds or choirs of angels that traditionally accompanied Jesus. He could show the presence of divine forces in a subtle way.

It made a uniquely persuasive image that combines reality and the supernatural. Just as he brought the lower classes into sacred art, he has brought the holy into the dirty world of Rome.

Our pilgrims must have thought: that if Jesus could appear as such an ordinary man, in such a regular place, then he could appear in their lives too.

But what exactly is the light showing us?

If we follow the diagonal path of the light, and Jesus's hand, it leads us to St Matthew. Yet, if we follow a line from St Paul's pointed finger along the same path, it takes us to another man. A younger tax collector at the end of the table. He seems disconnected from what is going on. Slumped in his chair with his head bent over his money, he is completely ignoring the miracle taking place.

St Mathew's finger adds to the uncertainty. Is it pointing at himself, or at the younger man? If we look closely, it seems to hover between the two of them.

Caravaggio has posed a question. Is St Mathew really the bearded figure, like we first thought? Or the other one, whose black hair covers his face in shadow.

The mystery deepens. On the table, we see each of them has one hand over the pile of money they were counting. But seen together, they look like a single pair of hands: one belonging to the shadowy figure. It's like the two men are working as one.

Caravaggio has mixed up the identity of St Mathew on purpose. In fact, both represent him. To the left, the young man shows St Mathew's past, greedily focused on money and the matters of the world.

It’s the path that he can continue to follow, in darkness, represented by the left side of the canvas.

And the bearded figure is St Mathew now, in this instant.

To his right is the light. The first face we noticed, the boy, modelled by Mario, looks angelic. Facing the holy pair with an innocent look on his face, he is a symbol of a new beginning.

Among all the confusion, St Mathew has a simple choice: between left and right, the past and the future, darkness and light.

If we pay careful attention to one detail in particular, we already know what choice he will make, because Caravaggio has left us a subtle clue. In fact it’s easy to miss.

In the bottom right of the painting, we return again to the bare feet of Jesus and St Paul. Yet, there is something not quite right about Jesus’s. Although the top half of his body is facing the table to the left, his bottom half is turned away, stepping in the other direction.

He has already started to leave the room. With this action, we understand that the holy work is done. He is certain that St Mathew will choose to follow him. It is inevitable.

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There is actually one more message that Caravaggio is telling us in the figure of Jesus.

It involves Jesus’s hand, which as we saw is held out in front of him. If we pay some attention to it, we notice there is something quite familiar about it.

That’s because it references one of the most celebrated paintings in the city, and indeed the world.

It is a copy of the hand of Adam, the first man in the bible, as painted by Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel.

At the moment where God’s and Adam’s fingers nearly touch, Michelangelo left a tiny gap between them. It symbolized that it was Adam’s responsibility to reach out to God.

Caravaggio’s decision to use Adam’s hand, not Gods, might come from the Christian idea that Jesus is the "second Adam," the Son of God who offers eternal life in heaven.

But, by referencing Michelangelo’s iconic work, Caravaggio draws on its powerful sense of tension, of a moment captured between the earthly and the divine.

In just one scene Caravaggio has compressed the past, present and future. It also offers two realities, two paths that are open to St Mathew.

Unusually for a Christian painting, Jesus is on the sidelines. Instead, the focus is on the sinner, St Mathew, just as the true focus for the painting is on the viewer.

Everything is designed to speak directly to the believers entering the chapel. It is supposed to bring the holy story into their world.

And it brought the world into the painting. Because Caravaggio planned his own little miracle. It involves the specific location where the painting is displayed in the chapel.

As the painting hangs on the left wall of the chapel, it means the window is to the top right of the picture. To this day, the light shining through the window gives the impression that real daylight is shining into the painting. You have to use your imagination a little of course.

The combination of naturalism, realism and the inspired composition had never been seen before. Visitors to the chapel felt like they were in the presence of a real event.

And it was an effective piece of propaganda. Through contemplation of St Mathew's choice, the idea was that they might make a decision in their own lives as well. To obey the pope.

Caravaggio had also made a radical statement. It was the first of many paintings in which he painted holy figures as normal people, with dirty feet, grey hair and sagging skin.

Perhaps he remembered the archbishop of his youth, Carlos Borromeo, who stood by the poor of Milan no matter what.

Caravaggio's inclusion of them in art caused a furious reaction by many critics inside and outside the church. They thought that dirt and poverty had no place in images of the holy stories. Peasant faces were too ugly to represent the divine.

But there was an appetite for Caravaggio's realism. The counter-reformation wanted art to teach the core values of the faith, and to be accessible to the common man.

There were enough church leaders who recognised the originality of the new art, and Caravaggio never lacked big commissions again.

But life got complicated.

Caravaggio continued his chaotic and sometimes violent ways. And in 1607, he committed a crime that Cardinal Del Monte couldn't defend him from.

What happened is uncertain, but it took place on a tennis court, so it was probably a duel. His opponent was Rannusio Tomassoni, a member of a local gangster family. During the sword fight, Caravaggio wounded Tomassoni's leg. Some say, it was supposed to be a warning and he didn't mean to kill him.

But, warning or not, he had sliced through a major artery and Tomassoni bled to death. Caravaggio was accused of murder.

He would spend the rest of his life fleeing the law.

He escaped to Naples then to Malta and Sicily, where the Roman authorities couldn't get him. It was a life on the run, but nothing stopped him painting.

His style became darker and his colour palette more earthy. The figures became more reflective and full of sorrow. They were an expression of humility.

But the baroque style that began in Caravaggio's youth was evolving. The promotion of poor Christianity turned out to be just a trend.

Emotion and dramatic lighting could stay, but realism was out. Bright, wonderful colour returned. So did the blue skies and beautiful angels.

Artists stopped trying to speak to the people on their level. Instead, the high Baroque aimed to overwhelm them. Painters and architects learnt to produce ever more ambitious displays that celebrated the wealth and power of the church.

Caravaggio died on a beach. He was returning to Rome from Naples in the belief that the Pope would finally forgive him.

His boat stopped at Palo, a coastal town near Rome. But because of some confusion and an arrest along the way, the boat left without him, along with all of his possessions.

Once again he had nothing. In desperation, he began to walk along the beach, hoping to catch up with the boat at its next stop.

On the 18th of July, 1610, while suffering from Malaria or an infected wound, he collapsed and died.

The Pope officially forgave him the next day.

After his death, Caravaggio's reputation was trashed, ruined by rival painters and biographers. He was remembered briefly as an immoral, yet talented artist, before being forgotten for centuries.

But his influence did live on in the work of other painters. Caravaggio had begun a profound change in the focus of art.

It was a shift away from the ideal, and towards the real. The poor and the dirty were pushing at the doors of art, and Caravaggio was the first to let them in.

His style was kept alive in Spanish art, reaching new extremes in the dark and devout images of Jusepe de Ribera and Francisco Zurburan.

And in the Netherlands, Rembrandt was inspired by Caravaggio's light and the honesty of his figures.

But, It wasn’t until the 20th century that Caravaggio’s reputation was restored. He was rediscovered, first by historians, and then by film directors. Movie makers such as Pasolini, who were experimenting with light and realism, recognised his genius immediately.

Martin Scorsese quotes Caravaggio as a direct influence, admiring the complexity of his violent characters.

Today we are much more sophisticated viewers of images. We are used to realism from newspaper photography. In Cinema, We are used to the most incredible special effects.

Yet, Caravaggio’s paintings still have a power to cut through. It’s in his paintings that the faces of history begin to feel real, to have a pulse.

Regardless of faith, we connect to the stories he told, and to the story of his life that is ever-present in his work.