

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/open-arts-objects>

Teaching Support Sheet

Presenter: Dr Emma Barker

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, 1601, *The Supper at Emmaus*, oil on canvas, 141 x 196.2 cm, National Gallery, London.

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/resource/open-arts-object-caravaggio-supper-emmaus-1601-national-gallery-london>

The Supper at Emmaus by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610) is one of the most famous pictures in the National Gallery in London. The artist was highly admired during his lifetime, though his work also caused controversy on account of the unusual and innovative approach that he brought to the subjects that he painted. Today, Caravaggio is renowned not only for his work but also for his dramatic life story; he was, among other things, a convicted murderer.

Before watching the film

Before watching the film, locate the work online and download an image of the work here that you can use to show to your class: <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/michelangelo-merisi-da-caravaggio-the-supper-at-emmaus>

Question to ask your students before watching the film (students to complete on the attached form)

1. What do you know about the work of Caravaggio? Have you heard of the artist before?
2. What do you think this picture depicts or represents? Can you identify any recognisable elements (figures, objects, etc.)? Describe what you see on the screen (you might think of things like the size of the figures, how a viewer might interact with the work, etc.).
3. What kind of picture is this? Do you have any sense of the media or materials out of which it was made?
4. What function do you think this picture might have served at the time it was made?

After watching the film

Questions to ask your students after watching the film.

1. What is unusual or striking about the way that Caravaggio depicts the *Supper at Emmaus*?
What kind of effect was he trying to achieve by depicting the biblical story in this way?

Dramatic, bold, down-to-earth figures and objects, modern setting; Christ is not easily recognisable. The effect is to make viewer feel present at the scene, share the surprise of the disciples and feel a sense of Christ being alive in the here and now.

2. How did Caravaggio use technical and formal means (such as medium, scale, line, tone, colour) to achieve this effect?

- Smooth painted surface that you are hardly aware of, using walnut oil
- more or less life size, triangular composition
- shallow picture-space with a strong perspective; cropping of objects, strong *chiaroscuro*, earthy colours, detailed painting of specific objects adds to the illusion. For a definition of *chiaroscuro* see:
<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/glossary/chiaroscuro>

3. Does the picture have a recognisable purpose or function? Can you relate this to the period in which it was painted?

Despite the subject, it doesn't have a specifically religious function, since it didn't hang in a church, but in the private gallery of a Roman nobleman. The function was rather secular and ostentatious, demonstrating the owner's wealth and taste. The painting, however, was still painted in Rome. It could be pointed out that this was the period of the Catholic or Counter Reformation, so that the striking effects could still be related to the use of art for the purpose of religious propaganda in this period (more resources on Counter Reformation below).

4. What sense do you now have of Caravaggio as an artist? Do you feel that you understand why his work was both admired and controversial during his lifetime?

Drama, intensity of painting could be related to artist's life and personality – though it would be good to encourage some scepticism of any overly neat conception of the painting as a form of self-expression. Issues to pick up on include tensions between religious subject and secular function and the potential shock aspect of a sexually ambiguous Christ as well as the 'ordinary' depiction of his disciples.

5. What is its relevance for today?

Potential to discuss in relation to representations of the divine, with reference to other faiths, e.g. controversies around representations of the Prophet Mohammed. Alternatively/additionally, students could discuss in relation to LGBTQ+ issues, with reference to sexually ambiguous Christ and potential connections with Caravaggio's reputed homosexuality, though the evidence for this is far from clear-cut.

Comparative analysis

Titian, *The Supper at Emmaus*, c. 1530. Musée du Louvre,
http://www.wga.hu/html_m/t/tiziano/03_1530s/3emmaus.html This provides an example of a more conventional treatment of the subject against which to compare Caravaggio's painting.

Online Activity

Search for the entry on the painting the National Gallery website,
<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/michelangelo-merisi-da-caravaggio-the-supper-at-emmaus>
You can also click on Caravaggio's name on this page to read a short biography of the artist and find links for two other paintings by Caravaggio in the National Gallery.

Listen to this audio discussion about the painting (Dr Beth Harris and Dr Steven Zucker, “Caravaggio, *The Supper at Emmaus*” *Smarthistory*, November 23, 2015, accessed July 2, 2017)

<https://smarthistory.org/caravaggio-the-supper-at-emmaus/>

Now discuss how the formal devices make the painting characteristic of Baroque Art and about how these devices could serve the purposes of the Counter-Reformation.

You can find out more about the Baroque, and test your knowledge with online quizzes, here:

<https://smarthistory.org/a-beginners-guide-to-baroque-art/>

And about the Counter-Reformation here:

<https://smarthistory.org/protestant-reformation-part-4-of-4/>

Bibliography

Caravaggio: The Final Years, exhibition catalogue. London, National Gallery, 2005.

Andrew Graham-Dixon, *Caravaggio: A Life Sacred and Profane*, London, Penguin, 2011.

Helen Langdon, *Caravaggio: A Life*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1998.

Letizia Treves, *Beyond Caravaggio*, London, National Gallery, 2016.

Resources online

Larry Keith, ‘Three Paintings by Caravaggio’ [extract from *National Gallery Technical Bulletin*],

<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/research/technical-bulletin/three-paintings-by-caravaggio>

Tour of the National Gallery’s paintings by Caravaggio with the director, Dr Gabriele Finaldi:

https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10157374022955557&id=83395535556

Lecture on Caravaggio’s life and work by Letizia Treves, Curator of Later Italian, Spanish, and French 17th-century Paintings at the National Gallery:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1KcdgFxmnb4&list=PLvb2y26xK6Y5RvnFbi2aZ_KKhaTz7kMBx&index=12

The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History:

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/baro/hd_baro.htm

Comparative Analysis Table

<p>Caravaggio, <i>Supper at Emmaus</i>, 1601, oil on canvas, 141 x 196.2 cm, National Gallery</p>	<p>Titian, <i>Supper at Emmaus</i>, c. 1530, oil on canvas, 169 x 244 cm, Musée du Louvre</p>
<p>Composition – horizontal, with Christ at centre and two disciples on either side; innkeeper standing at the left and a white cloth spread over a carpet on the table. Roughly pyramidal composition centred on Christ. Similarities indicate that Caravaggio took Titian (or tradition of painting the subject derived from Titian) as his model</p>	<p>Composition – horizontal, with Christ at centre and two disciples on either side; innkeeper standing at the left and a white cloth spread over a carpet on the table. Roughly pyramidal composition centred on Christ. Similarities indicate that Caravaggio took Titian (or tradition of painting the subject derived from Titian) as his model.</p>
<p>Figures – total of only four and large in scale relative to the picture space. Contributes to tight focus of composition. Figures also down to earth types – unidealised and even shabby e.g. hole in jacket sleeve of man on left. Unusual appearance of Christ – beardless, somewhat androgynous.</p>	<p>Figures – five figures since includes additional onlooker, smaller in scale relative to the picture space. Less tightly focused composition. Figures are somewhat more refined types – especially Christ, who is conventionally shown as a bearded, noble-looking man. More elaborate clothing e.g. page boy on left.</p>
<p>Picture space – shallow, only diagonal of table top to create sense of depth, plain black backdrop closes in space immediately behind figures. Figure in narrow space between table edge and invisible wall brings space forward towards us, as does basket of fruit on the very edge of table.</p>	<p>Picture space – sense of depth created by the architectural setting and the landscape backdrop on the left leads eye into the distance.</p>
<p>Viewpoint - high and close in so we look down at the food and drink on the table and the figures' legs are hidden from view.</p>	<p>Viewpoint – lower down and further away so we don't see so much of the food and drink on the table, but can see the dog and cat under the table – playful incident, adds to visual appeal but detracts from focus on central drama.</p>
<p>Pose, gesture and expression – forceful body language, Christ stretches out arm, wide flung arms of one disciple and hands on chair arms of the other. Down to earth attitude of innkeeper with hands on belt, but adds to focus on Christ since looks at him.</p>	<p>Pose, gesture and expression – more restrained, Christ just raises one hand in blessing, disciples respectively lean back and forward but not very dramatically. Innkeeper also has hands on belt, but here distracts from focus since looks at disciple not Jesus – other standing figure does look at Christ, but again less intensity.</p>
<p>Colour, light and shade – warm, earthy tones, mostly brown and red. Single light source – top left – in enclosed room. Strong contrast of light and dark – creating sense of 3D volume and also of dramatic intensity.</p>	<p>Colour, light and shade – colours more varied and also lighter and more refined – e.g. white of table cloth, Christ's delicate mauve and blue garments. More diffused light – coming from both internal source and the distant sky. Less strong shadows.</p>
<p>Overall effect – great naturalism and immediacy, concrete and down to earth – e.g. more focus on food on table. Everything functions to break down the imaginary wall between the space of the picture and the space of the viewer.</p>	<p>Overall effect – more dignified and distant, even grand, with imposing classical columns. Also more decorative and entertaining (e.g. dog and cat). Does have an element of naturalism too though e.g. the folds of the tablecloth.</p>
<p>Function/location secular painting for Ciriaco Mattei in Rome. Acquired by Cardinal Scipione Borghese and stayed in Borghese collection in Rome until 1801. Later owner, Lord Vernon, gave it to the National Gallery in 1839.</p>	<p>Function/location – secular painting for Count Nicola Maffei in Mantua. Later owned by King Charles I, sold by the Commonwealth, acquired by Louis XIV for the French royal collection in 1662.</p>