

Emma Barker - Caravaggio, Supper at Emmaus

EMMA BARKER: Hello, I'm Emma Barker, senior lecturer in art history at The Open University, specialising in 17th and 18th century art.

Today I'd like to talk about a picture by Michelangelo Merisi, better known as Caravaggio, after the place in northern Italy where he was born in 1571. The picture is called The Supper at Emmaus. It was painted in 1601 in Rome, which at the time, as it is now, was the centre of the Roman Catholic Church.

And it's a religious subject taken from the Bible, based on a story in the Gospel of St. Luke, which concerns the first appearance of Jesus to his disciples after he had been crucified and, so Christians believe, had risen from the dead three days later.

Saint Luke recounts how the disciples encountered Jesus on the road to a place called Emmaus, but they didn't recognise him until they sat down for the evening meal in Emmaus when he blessed the bread on the table and promptly vanished from their sight.

What we see here is the dramatic moment when the disciples suddenly realise who their travelling companion is. The Supper at Emmaus is a fairly standard subject in religious art of this period, but it's depicted by Caravaggio in an exceptionally dramatic and vivid way.

For one thing, it's not actually clear that what we're looking at is a picture, an oil painting on canvas, because the paint surface is so smooth with hardly any visible brush marks. Of course, what you're looking at is not an actual painting, but a photographic reproduction. But if you see the real thing, it's still got an extremely smooth surface.

What Caravaggio has done is taken the pigments, the powdered colours, and has mixed them with oil, walnut oil, as it happened. But a lot of oil, so that it's allowed him to apply the paint to the canvas in a fairly liquid form, certainly by comparison with other artists who use paint in a much thicker, grainier way. And the result is that we have this incredibly smooth surface that almost makes us think that we're looking at a scene taking place in real life. You feel practically that you could actually eat the food on the table.

It's important also to realise that the picture is really pretty big. It wouldn't have the same effect if it was much less than life size. But what really adds to the drama and the intensity of the moment is the incredibly strong contrast of dark and light that characterises it. It's a technique called *chiaroscuro*.

A very bright light is falling from the top left, which leaves the shadowed areas looking incredibly dark by contrast. This creates a strong sense of solid objects in three dimensions. Look, for example, at Christ's blessing hand extending outwards towards us.

Adding to the sense of three dimensionality is the way the figures stand out against the blank wall behind them. The whole scene is really very shallow, with the table right up close to the imaginary wall that separates the virtual space of the painting from the real space that we

occupy. So that it's almost as if we, the viewers of the painting, are actually present at the scene taking place.

Also adding to the vividness and the drama of the scene is the forceful body language of the disciples, who almost seem to be bursting out of the picture space. The right-hand disciple flings out his arms in astonishment, his fingertips almost seeming to touch the edge of the canvas. The other disciple grips the arms of his chair as if he can hardly believe what he's looking at. Notice the way that his elbow and part of the chair are cut off by the edge of the picture, so really adding to this sense that what we're looking at is a slice of life.

And the basket of fruit on the edge of the table looks as if it's about to come toppling down into our space to land at our feet. But the purpose of all of this is not to create an effect for its own sake, but to persuade the viewer of the truth of the Bible story. That Christ really has risen from the dead and Christ is the focus of the whole painting. He is the focus of attention, and his face forms the apex of a triangle formed by the other figures in the painting.

The message of the painting is that Christ is alive for us, for everyone, in the here and now. And it's important to realise, too, that the disciples are shown as very ordinary people of Caravaggio's own time. Look at the red nose on the one on the right, for example, and the clothes that they're wearing, and the furniture, and the tableware are all completely contemporary of the period. The period in which the picture was painted.

And there's even a stand in for the person who just doesn't get it, who still needs to be persuaded, in the innkeeper, the puzzled looking man gripping his belt.

The way that the picture is painted seems to suggest that it was designed to appeal to ordinary people, regular worshippers in their local church in Rome. But in fact, it wasn't painted to hang in a church at all. It was commissioned by a wealthy Roman nobleman to hang in his private gallery.

One clue as to its secular function is its format. It's not got the vertical shape of an altarpiece that you would find in a church, but a horizontal format, which is much more typical of paintings designed to hang in a gallery.

So here we have this paradox of this down to earth, unidealized painting that nevertheless seems to have appealed to extremely wealthy and sophisticated art lovers. Part of its appeal too then, seems to have been the very bold and innovative way that it was painted. It completely went against the conventions of religious painting of the time.

One particular feature of the work that defies convention is the way that Christ is painted. Not as a handsome mature man with a beard, but rather as a clean shaven youth with really quite pudgy features, and he's really rather androgynous. This would have been a really unfamiliar and perhaps even a shocking way of painting the Son of God at the time.

And it actually recalls the way that Caravaggio had previously painted ancient pagan gods, such as the Roman god of wine, Bacchus. But there wasn't actually any scandal about The Supper at

Emmaus, presumably because it wasn't on view to ordinary worshipers in a church, but would only have been displayed by the owner to his wealthy, art-loving friends.

But we know that some religious pictures painted by Caravaggio for churches did cause a scandal on account of the very down to earth, unidealized way that they were painted. And in at least one case, they were actually rejected by the priests of those churches because they were so scandalised by them.

Today, *The Supper at Emmaus* hangs in the National Gallery in London, where it can be viewed by anyone and so is going to be seen in all sorts of different ways that are completely different from the way it would have been viewed in 17th-century Rome.

For example, many people who see it today won't necessarily be believers. They may know nothing at all about the Christian faith, they might, perhaps, look at it in terms of their own completely different religious traditions. And equally, the way people look at the figure of Christ might be informed by the very different attitudes to gender and sexuality that we have today.

It's likely that the sexual ambiguity of the figure is going to seem a great deal less shocking than it would have done in 17th-century Rome. But the painting remains an incredibly compelling work of art, with the power to draw us in and to make us think.