

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

FROM MANNERISM TO BAROQUE: CARAVAGGIO AND DONNE

SRISHTI SHARMA

122 UGF Raja Garden, New Delhi.



ABSTRACT

This endeavor is to present a unique combination of visual art with literature. Visual art in literature is commonly referred to as “Ekphrasis”, or as Horace coined his famous dictum “Ut picture poesis”. Several other writers have rejected the idea of Ekphrasis, based on the fact that language is linear while visual art is spatial. I suggest that our ancients were correct in instituting a relation between the words and art. I feel that one can accomplish a greater understanding of the two if they are either compared or understood in companionship reading, running parallel to each other. In this paper I am trying to elucidate upon one such case in point which would add reasonable strength to Ekphrasis using the examples from Caravaggio’s artwork and John Donne’s Poetry. The painter Caravaggio and the poet John Donne were contemporaries. In their work one can find the manifestation from Mannerist to Baroque.

©KY PUBLICATIONS

It is perfectly legitimate and historically grounded to identify the dark bedrock of painting with matter. It is for centuries that the Catholic Church had viewed darkness as an inert matter or nothingness and light as the representative and the intervention of the Devine and the principle of creation. Many artists like Bernini, Michelangelo, and Masaccio including Caravaggio had adopted this metaphysical view and adjusted it to signify the dawn of their artwork.

An Italian painter Caravaggio was active in Rome, Naples, Malta and Sicily. His paintings which combine a realistic surveillance of human state both physical and emotional with a dramatic use of lightening had a foundational influence on the Baroque Painting.

It was Rome which enticed the young Caravaggio (in his early 20s) towards it, for there was a huge demand for paintings to decorate the new Churches. It was also a phase when the Church was

looking for a substitute to Mannerism¹. Caravaggio’s innovation and novelty was Naturalism² that united close physical observation with a dramatic. This unison was actually the*theatrical use of ‘Chiaroscuro’ which came to be known as ‘Tenebrism’³.

¹Mannerism – is a style in European art that emerged in the later years of the Italian High Renaissance around 1520, lasting until about 1580 in Italy, when the Baroque style began to replace it. Northern Mannerism continued into the early 17th century.

²Naturalism – or Realism in the arts is the attempt to represent subject matter truthfully, without artificiality and avoiding artistic conventions, implausible, exotic and supernatural elements. Tenebrism – is the shift from light to dark with a little intermediate value.

³ Metaphysical poets - they are all highly intellectualized, use rather strange imagery, use frequent paradox and contain extremely complicated

In Caravaggio's works the erotic is customarily a part of the scene even when the subject is a *spiritual* incursion. His religious scenes are habitually framed in terms of homosexual opposition or homoerotic comfort. Caravaggio, like his English contemporary John Donne, is a poet of erotic spirituality, but unlike Donne's, Caravaggio's spirituality is always homosexual. John Donne was English poet and ecclesiastic in the Church of England. He is considered the pre – eminent symbolic of the metaphysical poets⁴. Just like Caravaggio, Donne's works are also noted for this strong, sensual style and include sonnets, love poems, elegy, and sermons. For instance:

“Unpin that spangled breastplate which you wear,
That th'eyes of busy fools may be stopped there.
Unlace yourself, for that harmonious chime,
Tells me from you, that now it is bed time.
Off with that happy busk, which I envy,
That still can be, and still can stand so nigh.”
(From Elegy XIX: To His Mistress Going to Bed)

Caravaggio represented his psyche and perception through art. From a drift from Mannerism to Baroque*was expected at the time Caravaggio. Baroque painting was a reflection of the reflective political and cultural changes emerging across Europe. Caravaggio's work is pigeonholed under this genre. The sense of magnificence (or sensuous richness) and the blatant emotional content both dominate Caravaggio's paintings. Naturalism was another facet of Baroque art and was found high in content in Caravaggio's work. His paintings depicted sturdy

###thought. Literary critic and poet Samuel Johnson first coined the term 'metaphysical poetry' in his book *"Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets (1179-1781")*. In the book, Johnson wrote about a group of 17th-century British poets that included John Donne, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Andrew Marvell and Henry Vaughan. He noted how the poets shared many common characteristics, especially ones of wit and sumptuous style.

peasants, inn keepers, gamblers, though they sometimes are dressed as saints, apostles, and fathers of Church etc. This represented reality in its most rudimentary and punitive aspect.

The paintings were not lit uniformly but in patches, details struck by bright, intense light zigzagged with the areas of dark shadows. It was a dramatic, violent and tormented style of painting, eminently suited for an age of strong aesthetic contrasts as the Baroque period was.

Donne's poetry is illustrious with the*vitality of language and inventiveness of metaphor. Similarly, Caravaggio's paintings are prominent for his rejection of the usual conventional use of 'clouds' and 'putty' to mark the sacred scene while representing saints or holy family and figures in the most common surroundings rather than static. For instance in the painting "Madonna of Loreto" Caravaggio ignores the famous house that the legends embrace which was miraculously delivered by the angels to the Italian City and focuses instead on the Virgin and the Child standing in a shadowed doorway to greet two pilgrims with dirty feet and contorted fingers. No space gulfs the holy from the common. The pilgrims also epitomize the immediacy and entrée of the Divine in common life, this representation was prosaic in many ways yet presented Caravaggio as a virtuoso in that time which sets his work apart and in the category of deviating from the norms in the most uncommon yet sensible way possible.



(Madonna of Loreto by Caravaggio)

Caravaggio's marquee of Realism was extended by his experiments of light and darkness (Baroque art style) to represent psychological drama. A radical Caravaggio changed the course of European art. The "Psychological Realism" which comprehended depths of human feelings in a manner comparable in respect to his contemporary John Donne and its extraordinary sense of solid reality projected in actual space.

Donne's work like "Ecstasy", suggests a cause for stir for love, life, and its pleasures while also articulating deep emotions. "Ecstasy" expounds the theme that pure, spiritual and real love can only exist in the bond of souls established by the bodies. Donne criticizes the 'Platonic lover' who dismisses the body and gives emphasis to the soul. The poem is a *mien of Donne's philosophy of love. Donne agrees with Plato on the platform concerned with true love.

"Else a great prince in prison lies.
To our bodies turn we then, that so
Weak men on love reveal'd may look;
Love's mysteries in souls do grow,
But yet the body is his book.
And if some lover, such as we,
Have heard this dialogue of one,
Let him still mark us, he shall see
Small change, when we are to bodies
gone." (The Ecstasy BY JOHN DONNE⁵)

In Caravaggio's "Victorious Cupid" one can witness youth standing stark-naked, wearing fake wings. The Ragazzo grins cockily as he exhibits his flesh, in the light that leads all eyes directly to the penis of the cupid. It is blatant sexuality not the romantic notion of love.



(Victorious Cupid By Caravaggio)

Another example could be "David with the head of Goliath", a painting of Caravaggio. The scene is represented or rather framed in terms of homoerotic tones.



(David with the head of Goliath by Caravaggio)

In Caravaggio's work erogenous and erotic are habitually *the part of the painting. Similarly, we see John Donne standing on the same pedestal, categorizing his poetry under the section of erotic spirituality. In the poem "Satire of Religion," Donne addresses the quest for religious truth in the era of religious conflict. Finding and holding to spiritual truth mattered to Donne desperately and intensity of personal struggle and tumult give this poem an edge and vigor not often seen in his earlier work.

"Is not our mistress, fair Religion,
As worthy of all our souls' devotion
As virtue was in the first blinded age?
Are not heaven's joys as valiant to assuage

⁵The extract of the poem is taken from - www.poetryfoundation.com

Lusts, as earth's honour was to them?" (Satire
III John Donne)

By visual and written analysis of both Caravaggio and Donne I can also point out another dimension to this relationship between the two i.e.; the figures of the bodies that Caravaggio paints which are self-justifying and embracing, explicit in sensual vulnerability suggest the channels eroticism and closes proximity to Donne's work. For example:

"Batter my heart, three-personed God; for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new."

Donne is considered a master of metaphysical conceit, an extended metaphor that combines two vastly different ideas into a single idea often using imagery. An example of this is in his equation of lovers with saints in the poem "The Canonization":

For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me
love,
Or chide my palsy, or my gout,
My five gray hairs, or ruined fortune flout,
With wealth your state, your mind with
arts improve,
Take you a course, get you a place,
Observe his honor, or his grace,
Or the king's real, or his stampèd face
Contemplate; what you will, approve,
So you will let me love. (The
Canonization by John Donne⁶)

It is worth noticing that in Caravaggio's other paintings such as the "fortune teller" and "calling of St. Matthew" or the angel violinist in "Rest on the flight to Egypt" all figures are questionably sensuous and voluptuous for a supposedly asexual and grammatically masculine being. The critical question that many art historians wonder is that whether this homosexual content is simply a reflection of the

artist's erotic ideals and an individual attraction for this audience or is meaningfully purposeful.



(The calling of St Matthew by Caravaggio)

The link between Caravaggio's art and Donne's poetry is clubbed together by concentrating on various angels. They both enjoy a fluctuating relationship of camaraderie and dissimilarities. I have tried to diffuse boundaries by inspecting their psyches as well. When Caravaggio arrived in Rome at the end of the 16th century it was almost the end of the Renaissance. The standard style was insipid idealized – in a word 'academic'. But around 1600, Caravaggio started to engender a new style pictures that looked totally altered from the usual. His dark, violent, sinister sexy world is profoundly in touch with our contemporary sensibilities. This is because; during his 38 years Caravaggio committed murder and was involved in the fracas. Donne too was sent to jail for marrying Ann for eight long years. They both Donne and Caravaggio have lived the life which represents the ethereal and sinister passageways of humanity. Hence the psyche too seems to be similar if not same.

Literature points often to the visual, however its engagement with art can draw on more than the representation of an image and the subject remains open to further interpretation, for the eyes that look upon it always have a different perception.

Bibliography

1. Ekphrasis – dates back to antiquity: Simondes of Ceos, who claimed that painting was silent poetry and poetry a speaking picture.

⁶The extract of the poem is taken from - www.poetryfoundation.com

2. UtPicturaPoesis – written by Horace in ArsPoetica;
meaning as is painting so is poetry
3. www.poetryfoundation.com
4. The secret language of the renaissance by Richard
Stamp
5. The social history of art vol 2 chap 7 & 8 by Arnold
Houser
6. English literature from Wyatt to 19th century , an
anthology
7. Leon Battista Alberti on painting, tr John R.
Spencer
8. Baroque by john Rupert Martin
9. Continuity and change in art: the development
and modes of representation by Sidney J Blatt and
Ethel S Blatt, Chap 4
10. All the Paintings are downloaded from Wikipedia
page for each Painting.

Note

The astrixs (*) are for the missing spaces between
words

Red is the missing content Aplogies for that
Hashtag (#) is for the inappropriate continuation
to the other page. Kindly (if possible)shift the
entire content to the first page itself
