

## Believing is seeing: reconciling Caravaggio's 'Supper at Emmaus' paintings.

Caravaggio's two paintings of the *Supper at Emmaus* from the Gospel of St. Luke's story of the *Road to Emmaus* focus on the culmination of a journey that becomes religious through the use of dramatic symbolism and revelation. The two protagonists in the story do not recognise Jesus until he blesses their meal. In this article we explore how Caravaggio uses symbol and revelation to reconcile art with reality, and faith with salvation to open the disciples' eyes to Christ.

### *Symbol and revelation*

'Symbol' derives from the Greek word *symbolon* meaning a 'token' and originates from Homer's use of the idea of throwing two things together and creating something new.<sup>1</sup> Revelation is *revelatio* from *revelare* in Latin and apokalypsis in Greek. It is the act of revealing something obvious in part or in full, through communication that is most commonly with supernatural beings such as an angel or prophet. The Christian faith is dependent on the divine revelation of God incarnate in the flesh of Christ. Unlike the Homeric example, a Christian object, place or person can symbolise the sacred while remaining exactly as it is.

Symbols help to make sense of our world and create connections between the ordinary and the transcendent, the particular and the universal, the present moment and eternity. They create bridges between the past, present and future. They depend on time and time reveals both their presence and significance. In western storytelling and art, the concept of time is as much a mystery as it is a revelation: the author, the artist, the reader and the viewer have all to confront it. It is a recurrent measurement of movement and the location of a focal point.

Luke's understanding of time is described in two ways, as he relates to past Israelite history and as he promises the Kingdom of God through the journey and mission of Christ. Caravaggio achieves a suspension of time in motion through the focus of one act that has consequences beyond his paintings' canvases, and the visual and the invisible moments are brought together. Caravaggio's visual insights and techniques prove in a different medium from the written word, that vision is greater than speech can show. We notice a further element in our concept of time, the difference between telling and showing.

### *Illusion and reality*

Caravaggio first painted the *Supper at Emmaus* in 1601 which now hangs in the National Gallery, London. He follows Luke's model description of the symposium meal, in which the artist places Christ at the centre and the disciples on either side. Caravaggio created a large space between the two disciples which enables the viewer to see and relate to Christ directly rather than via the disciples, and allows the viewer to participate in the symbolic meal. Jesus is seated at a table laden with food with the disciple Cleopas on his right and an unnamed disciple on his left wearing the pilgrim's symbolic scallop shell. The disciples were not on a pilgrimage since the concept had yet to be invented. Pilgrimages became popular from the fourth century A.D. through the encouragement of writers such as St. Jerome. Caravaggio probably appropriated this idea because he saw the symbol in other Emmaus paintings (cf. Melone, Titian and Veronese), and as part of the Counter-Reformation revivals in mediaeval religious devotion.

Caravaggio chooses the moment in Luke's story when the miracle is revealed in the blessing of the bread. He creates the ambience of bright illumination despite no signs of candles, torches or lanterns. His colours range from the darkest to the lightest in the illuminated areas such as on the unnamed disciple's clothing but unlike Leonardo da Vinci who relied on subtle gradations to achieve their effects, Caravaggio's innovative skill lies in shifting abruptly between one tone and another. This chiaroscuro technique ensures that the light is at the service of the whole picture and therefore, the whole meaning. We are invited in because the picture appears deceptively real rather than imagined. Its tension and force lie in the illusion that we are participators in this miraculous event. This ambiguity of presentation and revelation shows Caravaggio's conscious effort to enable reality to pose as art and illusion as reality.

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<sup>1</sup> The earliest example of the term is in the Homeric Hymn to Hermes where Hermes on seeing a tortoise exclaims σύμβολον ἤδη μοι μέγ' ὀνήσιμον "symbolon [symbol/encounter/chance find?] of joy to me!" before turning it into a lyre. *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, Classics in Translation, Mackendrick and Howe, p.81.

The ability to represent the subtleties and interactions between human relationships in purely visual terms is profoundly challenging. Yet Caravaggio creates this through the gestures and body-language of his characters which are clearly recognisable even when the themes he is addressing may not be immediately obvious (especially to a contemporary viewer not well-versed in the Bible). In Caravaggio's first *Supper at Emmaus* to prevent this meal being a passive event, he focuses on the reactions of the disciples and innkeeper. Caravaggio does not depict Christ with obvious credentials except that of his red and white cloak symbolising the triumphant resurrection; we cannot see any nail marks in his hands, nor a wound in his side or any facial features that would distinguish him from his companions. He is recognised in his gesture alone. The innkeeper is static and bewildered, he does not recognise the blessing symbol or understand the disciples' reactions; perhaps he represents the faithless who fail to recognise Christ as the Messiah, hence not removing his cap.

#### *Food for thought*

One of the painting's areas of controversy lies in the purpose of the fruit basket. Caravaggio placed it centrally as it was symbolically entwined with Christ's resurrection and the tradition of the 'first fruits'. In classical Greek, Roman, Hebrew and Christian religions, the first fruits were a religious offering of the first produce of the harvest which was offered to the temple or church. A full basket is a symbol of abundance and immortality but because of where it is placed it might also mean transience, fruit that will rot soon because it is matter not spirit. At this moment the fruit is not quite ripe even though Easter has just occurred. For Caravaggio the fruit symbolises various aspects of Jesus' Passion – grapes and plums inferred blood, sacrifice and death; the quince and pomegranate echo resurrection. Each serves as an earthly visual metaphor ensuring that salvation is close at hand.

The shadow underneath the basket is possibly symbolic of a fish indicating both the sign for Christ and a metaphysical quality of Caravaggio's chiaroscuro technique. This idea is enhanced by the innkeeper's shadow behind Christ creating the effect of a halo above Christ's head. The dramatic energy of the composition and the way in which the perspective shatters the picture plane is inspirational: the strong diagonals, the contour created by Christ's upper arm and his hand are a viewer's magnet. Christ's forearm and the shadow on his left hand, the parting in his hairline, the bridge of his nose, the edge of the table and the direction of light which all lead to the fruit basket compete with Christ for our attention. We also notice that the elbow of the disciple's torn sleeve is at such an angle as if to show that the canvas has also been torn in his gesture.

Caravaggio's bread is already broken whereas in Luke 24:30-31 Jesus "took the bread and said the blessing; then he broke it and handed it to them." Caravaggio's Jesus is focused more on the blessing as if to prolong the sublime gesture and to raise the symbolism to a heightened level of dramatic and divine intervention. The disciples are understandably overcome with shock which Caravaggio emphasised by having one disciple grasping the sides of his Savonarola chair while the other counterbalances this with outstretched arms bridging darkness and light, our world and the picture's. This disciple's arms may symbolise further, the shape of the cross, so could he be Peter? If the cross symbol was intentional, then Caravaggio was reminding his viewers that the Christian 'sacramental' meal occurs precisely because of Christ's crucifixion. Caravaggio is also demonstrating that time is inclusive: the breaking of the bread, its blessing, the disciples' reaction and the cross symbol are happening simultaneously on the canvas. The disciples are the conductors of this revelation.

#### *An unexpected Christ*

In Caravaggio's first painting Christ is shown young and beardless. All previous paintings of the *Supper at Emmaus*, mostly painted in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries portray Christ with a beard, it is in the early Christian mosaics, relief sculpture and catacomb paintings that Christ is clean-shaven and young, and this continues in various mediaeval manuscripts. By revealing an unexpected Christ - one who does not look like himself – Caravaggio was the first painter to show the disciples' lack of recognition along the journey to Emmaus. Luke never explains why the disciples failed to know Christ until the blessing – was it for dramatic effect and suspense and/or to illustrate their slowness to believe? Caravaggio combined that observation with the minimal text in Mark's Gospel where Mark states that Christ appeared to the disciples

“in another form”.<sup>2</sup> The problem of the two texts was reconciled in the one painting and aesthetically, it heightens the difference between Christ’s youthfulness and the wrinkled faces of the disciples and innkeeper. This becomes an example of breathtaking perception of the central mystery: that the symbol and what it reveals are united in the same person and his actions.

Within a few minutes the risen Christ will vanish from the table but the apparition will live on in their hearts and minds. Caravaggio shows this supernatural revelation because as Graham-Dixon states, his images “freeze time but also seem to hover on the brink of their own disappearance.”<sup>3</sup> What is important, however, is that Caravaggio was able to express both the symbol and its revelation in a didactic and catechetical manner so that the viewer is invited to join in and accept Christ alongside the disciples. Since it is only in the Eucharist that Christ reveals himself both physically and spiritually, in this way the painting becomes timeless. Any viewer and/or believer in any age is welcome to the table of Christ. Caravaggio offers the gift of salvation.

#### *Still life, but only just.*

Caravaggio’s second version of the *Supper at Emmaus* (Pinacoteca Brera, Milan) was painted in 1606 after five years of travelling and his inevitable flight from Rome to Naples since murdering his comrade Ranuccio Tomassoni. Compared with the first Emmaus painting, Caravaggio’s technique and approach, as well as his representation of light and colour are pared right down. This is partly because of his patron, Cardinal Mattei’s ascetic influence, a precarious existence and the rise of lesser painters now receiving more of the official commissions, all cast a profound shadow over Caravaggio’s life; as well as his having to paint without a studio or sufficient materials.

In this later version, we see that the hues are more muted, his palette is restricted to brown, green, yellow and white, and the paint is applied more thinly. We observe an increasing awareness of the precariousness of Caravaggio’s fugitive existence, a clinging onto life through a more tempered, sensitive style because the disciples (while the same size as the earlier painting) are notably less surprised. The composition is more intimate and Jesus’ hand is raised much lower, his blessing is more enclosed. Like the artist, Jesus is older and burdened with suffering. The light in the room is diminished alongside Caravaggio’s own life. The tones are softer, creating a greater gentleness overall. It is, as Graham-Dixon argues, a confessional painting as well as a revelation since “how much harder Caravaggio now finds it to see the possibility of salvation.”<sup>4</sup>

Caravaggio never allowed his models to pose in broad daylight, there are no landscapes, instead, he chose small rooms to create intimacy rather than remoteness. The still life is reduced to remnants of lamb - symbolic of Christ as the sacrificial lamb, bread and salad leaves; the emphasis is on the humble inn rather than the symbols of abundance and resurrection. He included a new character, a woman - probably the innkeeper’s wife. The revelation itself is more subtle so that in discarding much of the detail of the first version, the viewer can focus more fully on the blessing gesture rather than the symbolic journey on and around the table.

Caravaggio’s two versions are given some decorative furnishings. Apart from the obvious compositional parallels between the pictures, there are extraordinary similarities in the way in which the tables are appointed, both covered with late sixteenth century Anatolian carpets and presenting majolica tableware. It might be considered ironic for Muslim carpets to decorate what became a Christian meal. For Caravaggio, setting the scene in roughly the correct geographical area for his patrons outweighed the Christian associations.

#### *Journey’s end.*

Caravaggio, like Luke, was a visual reporter and presenter. They each offer the journey metaphor to map out their wider meanings through the use of symbolism and revelation. And through these symbols and what they reveal transformation is created. The Emmaus disciples are changed profoundly as they

<sup>2</sup> Mark 16:12.

<sup>3</sup> Graham-Dixon, A, *Caravaggio: A Life Sacred and Profane*, London: Allen Lane, 2010, p.3.

<sup>4</sup> Graham-Dixon, A, *Caravaggio: A Life Sacred and Profane*, London: Allen Lane, 2010, p.332.

exclaimed “Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?”<sup>5</sup> Only in these encounters, as Luke hints, there is more, the Second Coming is waiting in the wings. This is the Emmaus story but it is Caravaggio’s as well. He strongly felt the loss of what he called a religious sensibility in much art, the notion that powers of good and evil do exist and are at war in the world and in the human soul. Therefore, Caravaggio portrayed characters whose struggle between flesh and spirit is also their door to salvation.

The two disciples at last see Jesus as Luke tells us; Caravaggio paints this momentous realisation as an experience of dazzling grace. Grace naturally enters later in these revelations as it does in the Bible, but when it comes, the revelation is unmissable. Although the material Luke uses is from various written and oral sources, the ways in which he uses and manipulates his resources, is comparable to the ways in which Caravaggio distils from the gospel that which he wants to convey for his own purposes. They shared an interest in the device of the point of view, the individual perspective, which instantly engages the spectator. This transcendence that lives on beyond the page and canvas has yet to be fulfilled, but for Luke and Caravaggio, is open to everyone who desires it. It is the kingdom of God.



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, The Supper at Emmaus, 1601, National Gallery, London.



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, The Supper at Emmaus, 1606, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan, Italy.

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 24: 32