

Caravaggio and His Followers

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers the artist Caravaggio and his followers. By the end of this lesson, you'll be able to identify and define today's key terms; describe the style of Caravaggio, focusing in particular on his dramatic use of light; and identify examples of Caravaggio's work and that of his followers. This will be accomplished through the exploration of:

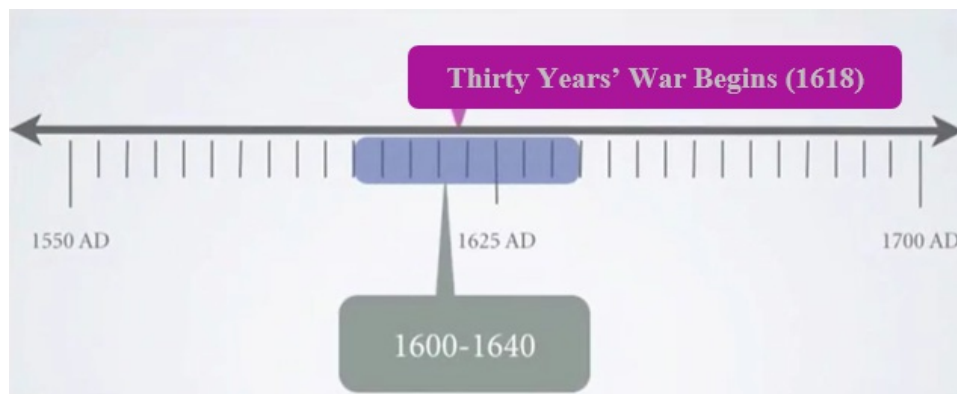


BIG IDEA

Caravaggio's style is most notable for his use of chiaroscuro and dramatic use of lighting, called tenebrism.

1. Period and Location: Caravaggio

The artwork that you will be looking at today comes from 1600 to 1640 and focuses geographically on Milan, now in modern-day Italy, where Caravaggio originates.



2. Caravaggio: The Artist and His Style

If the stories are true, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was a veritable “bad boy” of the artistic world. He was reportedly known as much for his temper, bad mood, and disdain for the classical artists that preceded him as he was for his artistic genius. Evidently, he was prone to fighting and trashing his apartment in Milan, Italy.



DID YOU KNOW

Supposedly, Caravaggio killed a man and had a death warrant issued for him by the pope, of all people.



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio

Despite his temperament, his influence and talent were unquestionable, particularly his use of light and perspective to enhance the drama of his work, giving it a theatrical quality that was entirely unique at the time. Caravaggio's career was short-lived, its greatest years extending only from 1600 until his somewhat mysterious death in 1610 at the age of 38. He was an intense figure who burned out quickly. But he was highly influential to a number of artists that came after him, even if he was largely forgotten by the rest until hundreds of years later.

3. Caravaggio: Examples of His Artwork

This first image by Caravaggio is of the “Calling of Saint Matthew”, and it's a great example of Caravaggio's unique style. He was known for incorporating the setting in which his paintings would be located, and this particular painting is actually set in the room of an Italian inn from Caravaggio's time.



Calling of Saint Matthew by Caravaggio

1600

Oil on canvas

Christ is the figure on the far right, almost hidden in the shadows, pointing at the figure of Levi, the tax collector, who became Matthew. Levi, in the same instant, is pointing to himself in seeming disbelief. Christ's gesture is reminiscent of the depiction of Adam's gesture in Michelangelo's ceiling fresco in the Sistine Chapel.

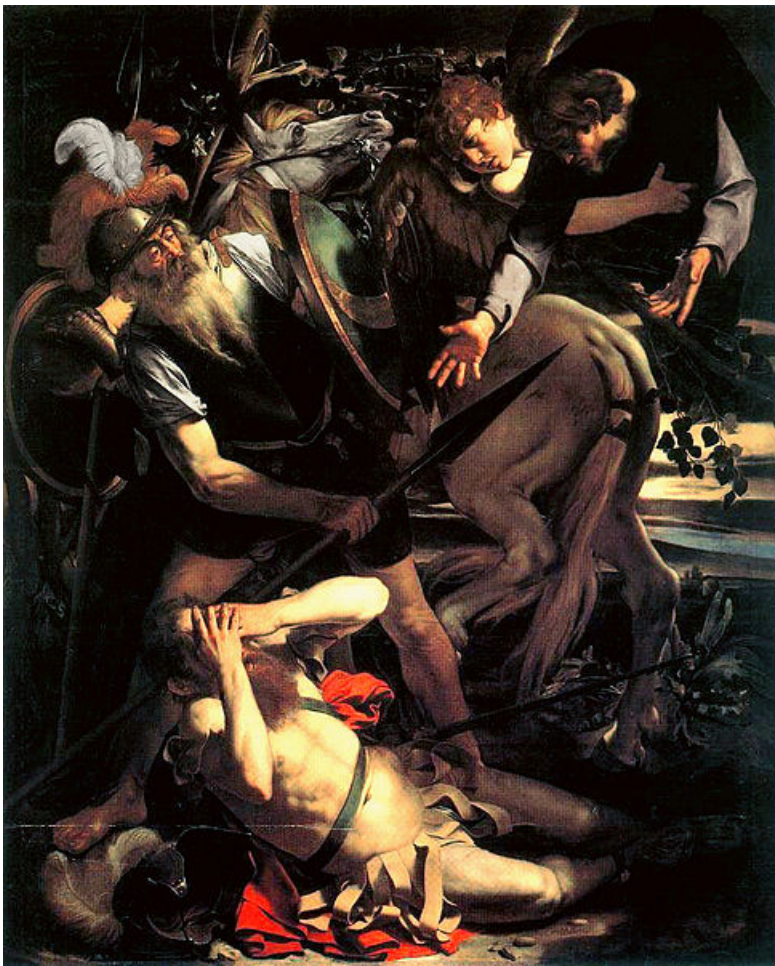


THINK ABOUT IT

Notice how the dress is modern for its time. This may not seem overly controversial, but consider a religious scene painted today with characters dressed in clothes that are modern.

The use of chiaroscuro is clearly evident, but Caravaggio's innovation of using a single source of light to illuminate Levi—thereby lending a theatrical or stage-like quality to his art—is one of the most notable qualities of his work. This technique is called **tenebrism**, and is employed not only by Caravaggio, but also by his followers, called **Caravaggisti**.

Caravaggio has two paintings attributed to him concerning the conversion of Saint Paul. The first, seen below, is the earlier work, by at least a year. It is often considered to be a more Mannerist than Baroque interpretation of the story. Saint Paul, covering his eyes, is just one of a collection of characters in this particular scene.



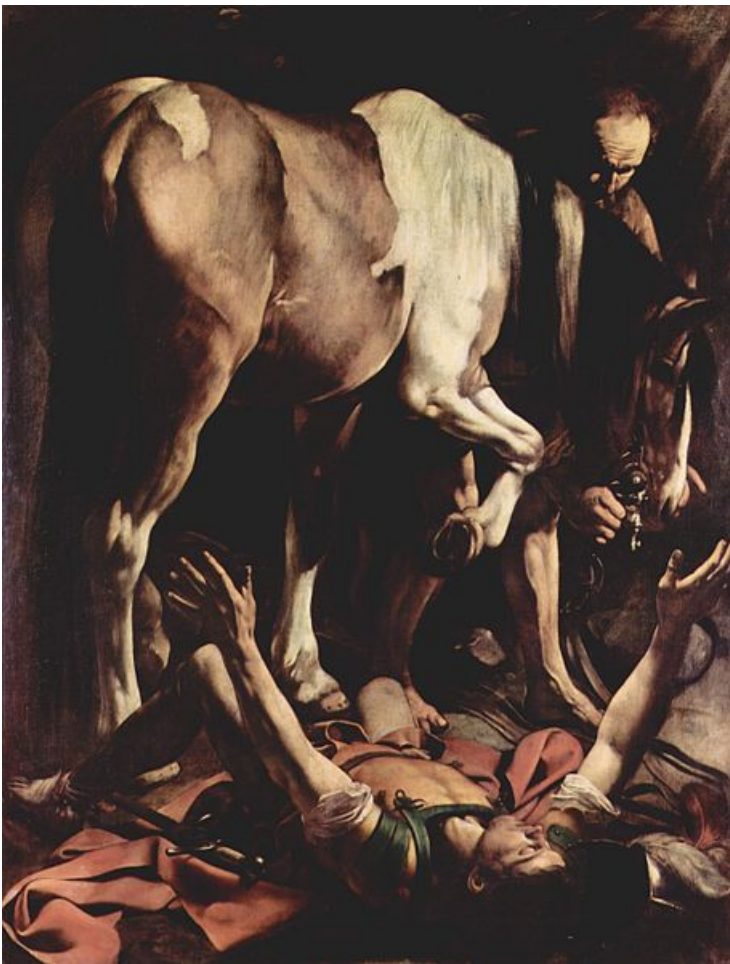
Conversion of St. Paul by Caravaggio

1600

Oil on wood

It's difficult to tell at first glance, but the figure of Christ is being held by an angel near the top right of the scene, and is creating a vision that overwhelms the figure of Saint Paul, which is why he's covering his eyes.

The next image, also called the "Conversion of St. Paul", or the "Conversion of St. Paul on the Way to Damascus", is considered to be a much more characteristic example of Caravaggio's work. It depicts the figure of Saint Paul lying on his back, apparently having fallen off his horse in the midst of a vision from Christ.



Conversion of St. Paul on the Way to Damascus by Caravaggio

1601

Oil on canvas

Again, Caravaggio uses a single source of light to illuminate the scene, and Saint Paul is dressed in clothing that would have been familiar to people at the time. Caravaggio utilizes a rather low point of perspective, taking into account the position of viewers, making them feel as if they're part of the scene, standing at the head of Saint Paul.

Caravaggio's "Entombment," shown below, again makes use of a rather low horizon, pulling the viewer in, and forcing the action to take place in the foreground.



Entombment by Caravaggio

1603

Oil on canvas



Notice how the subjects are aged, worn-looking, rough, dirty-looking, and in some cases, rather homely. This is another hallmark of Caravaggio.



There are no idealizations of his subjects. They agonize and struggle with the weight of the body of Christ (see closeup below), which is interestingly devoid of any signs of trauma, and about to be set on the stone slab in front of the viewer. Caravaggio uses emotion, lighting, and the theatrical depiction of his subjects to generate the emotional connection, rather than the gruesome depiction of a tortured body.



TERMS TO KNOW

Tenebrism

A style or method of painting characterized by large areas of dark colors and a ray of light.

4. Artwork of the Caravaggisti

4a. Artemisia Gentileschi

As mentioned before, Caravaggio's followers were known as Caravaggisti. One of them, Artemisia Gentileschi, is an important artist to discuss, not just because of her talent, but because of her gender. In a male-dominated world, Gentileschi's talent stands out as some of the best from this period.



DID YOU KNOW

Gentileschi was the first female painter to become a member of Florence's Academy of Fine Arts. Her painting of "Judith Beheading Holofernes" is typical of her desire to paint subjects with strong female characters. It's a particularly graphic and gruesome rendition of the biblical story. Judith was a beautiful Jewish widow who seduced the Babylonian general Holofernes of the invading Babylonian army and beheaded him while he was drunk, taking his head back to her people as a means of rallying the Hebrews to victory.



Judith Beheading Holofernes by Artemisia Gentileschi

1611-1612

Oil on canvas

The influence of Caravaggio is undeniable, particularly in the use of a low horizon pushing the action to the foreground, as well as the use of a single light source to illuminate the scene. This is inspired, undoubtedly, by the treatment of the same subject matter by Caravaggio himself in his painting from 1599, shown below.



Judith and Holofernes by Caravaggio

1599

Oil on canvas

4b. Georges de la Tour

Georges de la Tour was a French Baroque painter who showed influence from Caravaggio, particularly in his application of chiaroscuro and use of a single light source. However, his departure comes from the fact that you can actually see the source of light. This changes the overall mood of the painting from the theatrical, like you'd see with Caravaggio, to something intimate and private that you're looking in on.

In this example, called "Magdalen With the Smoking Flame," the viewer stands in the shadows and watches as a single candle illuminates the contemplative young Mary Magdalene. She holds a skull, perhaps an example of vanitas often associated with still life works in Flanders, which are works with which de la Tour would have been familiar.



Magdalen with the Smoking Flame by Georges de la Tour

1640

Oil on canvas



THINK ABOUT IT

How would you interpret Mary's contemplative state in this painting? Do you think it depicts Mary before her repentance and acceptance of Christ? Or perhaps Mary following his crucifixion? It's impossible to know for sure, but it is certainly a moving and touching scene that utilizes Caravaggio's tenebrism to emphasize self-reflection, rather than overt emotion.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about the artist **Caravaggio**. You learned how to identify and define today's key terms and about the temperament of the artist himself. You also learned how to describe the **style of Caravaggio**, focusing in particular on his dramatic use of lighting, called tenebrism. Lastly, through the exploration of **Caravaggio's artwork** and that of his followers—who were called **Caravaggisti**—you learned how to identify examples of their work.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Ian McConnell.



TERMS TO KNOW

Caravaggisti

Artists who painted in the style of the painter Caravaggio.

Tenebrism

A style or method of painting characterized by large areas of dark colors and a ray of light.