



Journal of Arts & Humanities

Volume 09, Issue 06, 2020: 01-11

Article Received: 26-04-2020

Accepted: 05-06-2020

Available Online: 13-06-2020

ISSN: 2167-9045 (Print), 2167-9053 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18533/journal.v9i6.1920>

Caravaggio and Tenebrism—Beauty of light and shadow in baroque paintings

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ABSTRACT

The following paper examines the reasons behind the use of tenebrism by Caravaggio under the special context of Counter-Reformation and its influence on later artists during the Baroque in Northern Europe. As Protestantism expanded throughout the entire Europe, the Catholic Church was seeking artistic methods to reattract believers. Being the precursor of Counter-Reformation art, Caravaggio incorporated tenebrism in his paintings. Art historians mostly correlate the use of tenebrism with religion, but there have also been scholars proposing how tenebrism reflects a unique naturalism that only belongs to Caravaggio. The paper will thus start with the introduction of tenebrism, discuss the two major uses of this artistic technique and will finally discuss Caravaggio's legacy until today.

Keywords: Caravaggio, Tenebrism, Counter-Reformation, Baroque, Painting, Religion.

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1. Introduction

Most scholars agree that the Baroque range approximately from 1600 to 1750. There are mainly four aspects that led to the Baroque: scientific experimentation, free-market economies in Northern Europe, new philosophical and political ideas, and the division in the Catholic Church due to criticism of its corruption. Despite the fact that Galileo's discovery in astronomy, the Tulip bulb craze in Amsterdam, the diplomatic artworks by Peter Paul Rubens, the music by Johann Sebastian Bach, the Mercantilist economic theories of Colbert, the Absolutism in France are all fascinating, this paper will focus on the sophisticated and dramatic production of Catholic art during the Counter-Reformation ("Baroque Art and Architecture," n.d.).

In 1517, the Catholic monk, Martin Luther, the seminal figure in the Protestant Reformation, proposed his Ninety-five Theses in opposition to the corruption, mainly the sale of indulgences he perceived within the Catholic church. In response, Luther was criticized for his disloyalty by the church, resulting in his ex-communication by Pope Paul III. Luther challenged the papacy, which led the Pope to summon the Council of Trent in 1545 and resulted in matters of doctrine being reformulated over the

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next eighteen years (Langdon, 1999, p. 2). The Council of Trent was the start of Counter-Reformation, which lasted until the end of the Thirty Years' War in 1648.

Facing the challenges from Protestants, various new religious orders within the Catholic Church were founded, of which the Jesuits were perhaps the best-known in Rome. In 1560, all the Jesuits were required to teach the counter-reformation goals, which started the very early Jesuits schools. Besides education, the Jesuits also played an essential role in patronizing a vast range of artists during the early Baroque period, including Annibale Carracci in northern Italy, Diego Velazquez in Spain, and Peter Paul Rubens in the Flanders. Artworks were even exported to the "New World" in places like Mexico and Brazil to spread religion. I would be only focusing on the innovator of these artists who worked for his patron, the Jesuit Cardinal del Monte: the great master Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio.

Different from the previous style of Mannerism in the late 16th century, which elongated the human body, bleached the palette, and received support from the elites, Baroque artists chose to depict figures with Naturalism and added dramatic elements including a limited palette, the extreme contrast between light and dark, and diagonal composition. Unlike the Renaissance master Leonardo da Vinci who used chiaroscuro, the gradation of light and shadow, the genius Caravaggio invented tenebrism, which is the use of large dark areas in paintings together with one light source. In Leonardo's universally praised *Madonna of the Rocks*, both chiaroscuro and sfumato, a painting technique for softening the transition between colors to create a smoky view, were used. While entering the Contarelli Chapel of San Luigi de Francesi in Rome, standing in front of one of Caravaggio's largest paintings in his life, *The Calling of St. Matthew*, one would be amazed. Caravaggio's painting is dramatic. Jesus stands just under the beam of light, calling Matthew. This is the power of tenebrism. The light shining on St. Matthew's face helps the viewers understand Faith's idea Faith and the calling to follow Christ as the Savior. This revolutionary idea of tenebrism thus became a method used to invigorate the Catholic Faith during the Counter-Reformation.

Giulio Mancini, one of the most important sources of biographers of Caravaggio, wrote about the importance of Caravaggio's use of colorless than a decade after Caravaggio's death: "Our age owes much to Michelangelo da Caravaggio for the coloring (colorito) that he introduced, which is now widely followed" (Mancini, 1956, p. 223). It is accurate that in the next century following Caravaggio's use of tenebrism, artists including Peter Paul Rubens, Artemisia Gentileschi, Rembrandt, and Georges de La Tour all included traces of extreme contrast between light and darkness to increase the dramatic effect in their paintings. To art historians today, Caravaggio's tenebrism also requires a more thorough and deeper research. Even though in general, Caravaggio used tenebrism for religious purposes, art historians, including J. C. Bell, proposed how Caravaggio's tenebrism may indicate a unique naturalism (Bell, 1993, p. 106). On the surface, it may seem nearly contradictory that an artist needs to fulfill Naturalism and religious quality at the same time. As a result, Caravaggio is worth studying for religious purposes and for understanding the natural and unnatural elements in religious paintings.

I would like to discuss the origin of tenebrism and examine the different factors that contributed to Caravaggio's use of tenebrism in the late 16th and early 17th century Italy in the following paper. The paper will 1) trace back to the origin of tenebrism, 2) explore the relationship between Caravaggio and religion, 3) dig into the religious quality of tenebrism in Caravaggio's paintings, and 4) discuss how the tenebrism also reflects Caravaggio's unique Naturalism in art.

2. Tenebrism and its origin

Tenebrism, while deployed by Caravaggio in the early Baroque, had its origin in the High Renaissance when Leonardo da Vinci developed the primary idea of light and shade in paintings, later known as chiaroscuro. Tenebrism distinguished shadow (*ombra*) from total darkness (*tenebra*) and introduced the idea of gradations in light and dark values of color on a figure or an object, which, according to Leonardo, produced the illusion of light and shadow ("*Tenebrism*," n.d.). Nevertheless, Leonardo warned against using such illumination as it would give too strong a contrast and be of "little use to a painter" (Rzepinska & Malcharek, 1986, p. 97).

Leonardo's theories entered the next phase in a Treatise written by Lomazzo, composed in 1584. Lomazzo first separated light into two categories: primary and secondary. He declared primary light was metaphysical, also known as *lume divino*, emanating from divine people and angels (Rzepinska & Malcharek, 1986, p. 98). Lomazzo believed that this *lume divino* emerged independently,

but still followed the "Law of real light"—the brightness being set off because the objects intercept and produce shadows, even partial shadows, and reflections. Lomazzo used various examples to show that this *lume divino* appeared as a condensed light surrounded by darkness, usually achieved within light passing through a small aperture into the dark interior (Rzepinska & Malcharek, 1986, p. 98).

The theory of *lume divino* proposed by Lomazzo established a base for the formal structure in religious paintings, which ultimately led to Caravaggio's tenebrism. Based on the concept of *lume divino* in religious paintings, Caravaggio was revolutionary in the way he used only one light source in a painting with a completely dark background to create a dramatic and, most importantly, a sacred effect in the painting.

Besides being known for creating exaggerating effects in religious paintings, scholars also claim that Caravaggio's use of tenebrism is an indication of a "certain naturalism" applied by the artist (Bell, 1993, p. 106). Compared to contemporary artists during Caravaggio's time—e.g., Carracci—Caravaggio did not choose to use natural light, usually a bright, omnipresent source in Carracci's paintings, which in turn created a wide range of colors. When looking at Caravaggio's works, the extremely dark background, which is even darker than shadows, is not believed to be natural by viewers today. Nevertheless, this is not to say that Caravaggio completely ignored scientific principles of light and shadow in nature; it is just that he had chosen a situation that rarely, if ever, occurs in nature (Bell, 1993, p. 107).

In addition to his unique "naturalism," Caravaggio advanced light and shadow in religious paintings, which appealed to his patron, Cardinal Francesco del Monte. Del Monte might also have influenced Caravaggio's use of tenebrism. Supporting this claim, Giudobaldo del Monte, Cardinal's brother, wrote the *Perspective Libri Sex*, in which he devoted a critical chapter to the projection of shadows (Rzepinska & Malcharek, 1986, p. 106). Also, the Cardinal's friendship with Galileo might also have led to an interest in darkness as del Monte's study of astronomy was focused on the darkness of the universe at night. The Cardinal also studied alchemy, a subject that highlighted *nigredo*, which also acted as a potential link to the Cardinal's interest in the contrast of color in paintings.

As a result, major factors that contribute to the use of tenebrism by Caravaggio as discussed above include: 1) the emphasis on dramatic and sacred effects in religious paintings during Counter-Reformation and 2) the unique "naturalism" that Caravaggio used in his paintings. In turn, both of these factors will be discussed in this paper.

3. Caravaggio and his religious inspirations

There is debated about when Michelangelo Merisi Caravaggio was born. It was sometime between September and December 1571, and in a town called Caravaggio near Milan. Although Caravaggio shared a similar name with one of the greatest artists of his age, Michelangelo Buonarroti, Caravaggio's parents did not have that in mind when they named their son (Graham-Dixon, 2012, p. 13). They called him Michelangelo for reasons of Faith and superstition based on the Archangel Michael (Graham-Dixon, 2012, p. 13). In addition to his name's correlation with religion, his family, most importantly, his maternal grandfather, Giovan Giacomo Aratori, also was a devout Catholic. He was elected at various times to be the administrator of the shrine erected to the honor of the 'Madonna della Fontana' from the mid-1560s in the town of Caravaggio (Graham-Dixon, 2012, p. 10). As a result, Caravaggio, since birth, had been destined to be connected with the Catholic faith, which later was reflected in his paintings.

Caravaggio started his art career as an apprentice under the Milanese painter Simone Peterzano, beginning in April 1584. During that time, Milan was ruled by Philip II of Spain, but it was dominated by Archbishop Charles Borromeo, who led Milan through the Catholic Reformation era (Hibbard, 1983, p. 2). According to Howard Hibbard, "perhaps some splinter of Archbishop Charles' zealous spirit embedded itself in Caravaggio" (Hibbard, 1983, p. 2). In 1592, Caravaggio moved to Rome, which, according to rumor, was because of the crime of killing a companion. In Rome, Caravaggio worked on secular paintings, including portraits and still-lives until he received patronage from Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte. Del Monte was born in Venice and followed a Sforza cardinal to Rome in his twenties and became cardinal when Cardinal Ferdinando de' Medici found it necessary to resign from the cardinalship. Also, he was a practitioner of alchemy and was a friend of Galileo. He was also

interested in music and art, which contributed to his patronage of Caravaggio. The great Catholic zeal of Cardinal del Monte during the Counter-Reformation played an essential role in Caravaggio's use of dramatic elements in religious paintings. .

4. Caravaggio's tenebrism in religious paintings

Before the Counter-Reformation, the light had always been recognized as the most necessary element in religious paintings. From the 12th to the 15th century, the light was considered as the essential principle of being in the world, and there had been no place for darkness in any religious paintings (Rzepinska & Malcharek, 1986, p. 97). There was a shift toward more shadows in the paintings in the Renaissance, but the light was still the main emphasis. Heaven was believed to be an image of spiritual bliss, the latter being nothing aside from light emanating from God (Rzepinska & Malcharek, 1986, p. 97). Therefore, paintings in the Middle Age and early Renaissance were mostly covered with the golden background, which was believed to be the sign of sacredness.

It was not until the late 16th century and early 17th century when an element of darkness took an important role in religious paintings. St. John of the Cross mentioned in his manuscripts in the late 16th century the theology of darkness, which emphasized that darkness and night are positive (Rzepinska & Malcharek, 1986, p. 100). He indicated that for a soul approaching its final union with God, it had to go through the night. He further explained that "according to theologians, Faith is the soul's faculty, sure and dark. It is a dark faculty because it makes one believe in the truths revealed by God himself (...) Faith is a night for the soul, but it also gives it light, and this light is God's light, which leads us through the darkness" (Rzepinska & Malcharek, 1986, p. 100).

In addition to the basis of this theory, St. John repeatedly emphasized that Faith required that one should close eyes to everything that pertained to senses and particular cognition (Rzepinska & Malcharek, 1986, p. 100).

Although an archival connection between the Counter-Reformation and a sudden change in the dark element in paintings lacks, we should infer that with challenges by Protestants, the Catholic Church used art as a response. Caravaggio, patronized by a Catholic cardinal, would indeed have used tenebrism to increase a sacred feeling in his paintings, matching the new belief of Faith through darkness proposed by St. John of the Cross.

Caravaggio's first religious painting under the patronage of del Monte is believed to be the Ecstasy of St. Francis. According to Howard Hibbard, this painting could have been made specifically for Cardinal del Monte as his Christian name was Francis (Hibbard, 1983, p. 55). The painting has two main figures: St. Francis of Assisi and the angel. Calmly lifting the saint's neck, the angel appears to be even heavier than the saint. With immense darkness in the background, the only light source in the painting seems to arrive from the left corner and shines on the saint and the angel. With the divine source of the light from the left, the angel presumably imprints the stigmata on the saint's hands, feet, and chest (Hibbard, 1983, p. 56).

Originally from the text according to the Golden Legend, St. Francis' stigmatization continued through the night and toward morning, which was described as "in a vision saw a crucified seraph above him who marked the signs of his wounds so visibly upon him that he seemed to have been crucified" (Ryan & Duffy, 2012). Before Caravaggio, various artists had painted within the same context, in which the process of stigmatization was always the focus. Nevertheless, Caravaggio made two major innovations in this unique piece of art.

First, Caravaggio's use of tenebrism is clearly emphasized in this painting. He recorded religious ecstasy, which was conveyed through light and manifested by the collapse of Francis into the arms of a comforting angel. As mentioned previously, the background is immense darkness besides tiny lights penetrating the gloom. The one and only light source that Caravaggio here used is believed to be the heavenly light of God. The force of the sacred light shining on the angel and the saint had been emphasized by contrasting with the extreme darkness in the background (Hibbard, 1983, p. 58). Before Caravaggio, the most well-known painting on the ecstasy of St. Francis was painted by Giovanni Bellini, in which the background was completely illuminated, showing no sign of nocturnal setting in the original story in the Golden Legend.

As mentioned in the introduction of tenebrism, Lomazzo emphasized in his treatise that the *lume divino* appeared invariably as a condensed light surrounded by darkness (Rzepinska & Malcharek,

1986, p. 98). This new experiment used by Caravaggio presented a completely more powerful and insightful meaning of the stigmatization of the saint.

Because of Caravaggio's innovative use of tenebrism in the painting, this masterpiece reflected another innovation of Caravaggio, which was: the saint was now depicted in an unconscious state when receiving the stigmatization, although he was usually shown in an active movement. This reception of the stigmatization while eyes closed again reflected St. John the Cross' belief that Faith required one to close eyes to everything that pertains to the senses. Here, St. Francis was no longer the suffering saint who walked a path of asceticism in a "super-eminent way." The pain and isolation of the stigmatization had been lost. St. Francis seemed more like a child, happy and loving everything (Hibbard, 1983, p. 58), which was emphasized through the divine light shined on his face. The stigmatization in Caravaggio's painting thus became a gradual, calm, and peaceful unification with God. The Ecstasy of St. Francis indicated a strong use of tenebrism, which expressed the passion of religious Faith to viewers through a calm and joyful image.

In 1599, Caravaggio received his first public commission and painted two paintings in the Contarelli Chapel of San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome, one of which had become the most remarkable masterpiece Caravaggio ever painted in his life. Originally, Cesari d'Arpino was commissioned to paint the fresco the chapel in 1591, but due to his increasing commissions in 1598 in Naples for Pope Clement VIII, it left him with no time to paint the chapel. Therefore, Caravaggio took over the commission "per opera del suo Cardinale," meaning through his Cardinal del Monte, according to Baglione, an earlier biographer of Caravaggio (Hibbard, 1983).

As for the job, Caravaggio needed to create two paintings, and both showed extreme and even unnatural use of contrast between light and darkness. Perhaps because of the dark interior of the chapel, the light of the painting remained the focus of viewers when looking up the front of the painting and had been thus exaggerated through the technique of tenebrism. In this paper, only the Calling of St. Matthew will be discussed due to its deliberate example showing the tenebrism of Caravaggio.

The story of the calling of St. Mathew would be very familiar to artists as it was told in the Gospel of Matthew (9:9) that "as Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him" ("Matthew 9 - New International," n.d.). In Caravaggio's painting, the artist captured the moment when Christ called St. Matthew, and at that exact moment, a beam of light illuminated on the men sitting around the round table in the painting. St. Matthew was identified as the one who pointed at himself, seemingly saying, "me?" The people surrounding the table included a tax collector called Levi and his friends, identified as sinners.

Despite the absent physical source of light, the light source was believed to be the divine light, the divino lumino. The painting seemed like a drama presented on the stage: as Christ entered, everything in the room became dark, and only the divine light remained, leading the viewers from Jesus to Matthew.

In this painting, the purpose of the divine light, the only light source in the painting, became different from the Ecstasy of St. Francis. In the Ecstasy painting, the divine light in the darkness appeared to elevate the saint to another level of sacredness, while here in the St. Matthew painting, the divine light, acted as salvation for sinners. All the darkness on the left and the light on the right seemingly represented the path leading to Faith in Jesus as the Savior.

In the original text of the gospel, it further mentioned how the Pharisees asked St. Matthew, 'Why is that your master eats with tax-gatherers and sinners?' Hearing it, Christ responded, 'It is not healthy that need a doctor, but the sick. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners' (Hibbard, 1983, p. 100). Thus, Matthew potentially became a symbol of a sinner who was saved through Faith and this Faith, again going back to St. John of the Cross' belief, is the night of the soul, but gives the soul itself light (Rzepinska & Malcharek, 1986, p. 100).

From a phenomenological viewpoint, seeing this painting in the darkness of the chapel, together with the extreme darkness in the background of the painting, viewers would sigh at the magnificence of the light Caravaggio used in the painting. This contrast of light and darkness, the use of

tenebrism, directly dramatized the belief that a normal person, even a sinner, could be saved by the divine light, love, and mercy of Jesus.

Right after finishing his celebrated works in the Contarelli Chapel, Caravaggio gained the commission from Tiberio Cerasi, the Treasurer-General of Pope Clement VIII, to create two paintings in the Cerasi Chapel of Santa Maria del Popolo. One of these two masterpieces, *The Conversion of St. Paul*, remains phenomenal even until today. Saul's dramatic conversion is described in chapter nine of the Acts of the Apostles "as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: And suddenly there shone round about him a light from Heaven: And he fell to the earth and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutes thou me?" (Friedlaender, 1955, p. 3). At that moment, he was temporarily blinded and transformed from a zealot persecutor of the disciples to the most influential apostle of Christ, St. Paul.

Caravaggio painted the moment when Saul fell from the horse onto the ground, and the sacred light shined on his face from the sky. On the one hand, Caravaggio painted naturally, following the account from the Acts, by depicting St. Paul falling from the horse. On the other hand, the use of tenebrism again increased the sacredness and drama. In addition, the inherent humility of falling into Faith is also palpable within the divine light. St. Paul's hands were raised in the pose of prayer immediately after dropping on the ground.

In the painting itself, there is no visible source of light—no fire, not even torches, and although the background is very dark, it is not night. In addition, there is no indication of any natural light source shining from the background (Friedlaender, 1955, p. 10). Again, the light here is the *lume divino* proposed by Lomazzo. As the light shines on the face of the sinful Saul and illuminates the horse, it also creates shadows on the back of Saul's left arm, for instance, and follows the rule of natural light. The creation of extreme darkness again strengthens the power of his conversion.

For viewers, after walking into the dim chapel, they would see the hands of the blinded St. Paul raised in prayer, which is illuminated by the use of tenebrism. Their first impression of the painting may be that this is a realistic scene of a commonplace happening—a man fallen from his horse—vanishes before the realization that the light itself is the cause of the helplessness of the man lying before them (Friedlaender, 1955, p. 10). To the people in the 17th century, this light here is the light of miracle.

Just like *Calling of St. Matthew*, commissioned by the Catholic Church, Caravaggio's painting here spread a belief to people during that time. The use of tenebrism, not only exaggerated the setting of the painting but also acted to strengthen the Faith for people during the Baroque by showing how Saul, once a persecutor of the early Christian communities working for the Roman government, could also be saved by Christ.

The three artifacts discussed above were during Caravaggio's brightest career in Rome for Cardinal del Monte. Entering his later years in Rome, Caravaggio's use of tenebrism became more mature and sophisticated. More importantly, the theme of a religious conversion taking place on normal people was even deeper in his paintings. In the *Madonna di Loreto*, the use of tenebrism highlighted the humble people on the lower right corner as they had a miraculous vision of the Virgin Mary standing in the upper left corner of the painting.

As one of Caravaggio's very rare altarpieces that remains, *The Madonna di Loreto* rested in the Cavalletti Chapel in Sant'Agostino, located in Rome. It is believed that Caravaggio received the commission around September 1603, during which he might have continued to live in the neighborhood even after he moved out of del Monte's palace (Hibbard, 1983, p. 184).

Shown as a common theme in the late 16th century, the Madonna or Virgin Mary was often portrayed holding Christ as a child in her hand and standing in front of people praying. Here, the traditional icon of the Madonna was transformed into magic life by Caravaggio's brush (Hibbard, 1983, p. 187). In the painting, the Madonna, identified by her violet clothing, appeared miraculously from the left side and lowered Christ in her hands to bless the two worshippers kneeling on the right. The light passing through the faces of Christ and the Virgin ultimately reached the Faith in prayers surrounded by darkness.

Caravaggio again used his power of tenebrism to describe the strength of Faith, hope, and love. The figures in the painting share similarities with those in the *Calling of St. Matthew*; they are common people. Different from the sinners in the *St. Matthew* masterpiece, the two people here seemed old, poor, and contemporary to the seventeenth century. With barefoot, the dirt emphasized the pilgrims'

humility (Hibbard, 1983, p. 188). Here, the appearance of Madonna was no longer the Savior of Christ towards St. Matthew, but the reward of humble Faith.

In extreme darkness, as one enters the Cavalletti Chapel, the faithful person could still pray through the shadow towards the light. When looking up to the Madonna and Christ, a worshipper would be amazed, and his or her Catholic Faith would be strengthened. Therefore, the power of Caravaggio's tenebrism surpassed the pure exaggeration of darkness and light and entered the intense drama.

The last painting, I would like to discuss in the section of religion is the Supper at Emmaus Caravaggio painted in 1606 in Milan. In Caravaggio's life, he completed two versions of Supper at Emmaus, the first one now in London, and the second one in Milan. In both paintings, Caravaggio sought direct inspiration from the Gospel credit to St. Luke 24:28-32, which tells the story that.

"As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. However, they urged him strongly, 'stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.' So, he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight" ("Luke 24:28-31—New," n.d.).

In the first painting he created in 1601, the dramatic theatrical lighting contributes to the sense of surprise appropriate to the representation of a miracle, without visible candles or torches (Bell, 1995, p. 141). Despite the strong contrast between light and darkness, the light in the first version still took over more than half of the painting, presenting a more positive mood in the whole painting.

In the second version, created in 1606, the Supper at Emmaus seems to be painted with shrouded and subdued colors. Light becomes dimmer in the second painting; Christ's face seems more serious, and the number of figures surrounding Christ increases. Also, the background in the second version is complete darkness, which provides a more dramatic contrast with the bright light shined on the figures.

What's more, the strong light created by the extreme darkness in the second version clearly reflects the age and poverty of the figures. Caravaggio's theme of the Faith of common people dominates his later style. With even stronger tenebrism, Caravaggio created a more sacred appearance of Christ, greater surprised expressions from the surrounding people, and the contrast of the somber world (Hibbard, 1983, p. 212). The complete darkness of the background of the painting, together with the monotone palette, expresses a new phase in Caravaggio's life.

Caravaggio's later works in Naples and Malta express the misery of his life after fleeing Rome he killed a man in a fight in early 1606. Caravaggio's later paintings not only presented his remorse and his loneliness. Without help from Cardinal del Monte, Caravaggio lost financial and mental support. On 18 July 1610, Caravaggio was found dead at Port'Ecrole while traveling from Naples to Rome (Hibbard, 1983, p. 255).

It is hard to comment on whether Caravaggio's life is a tragedy or not. He started his career with optimism, just as the light exaggerated in his painting within the use of tenebrism, but it ended in misery without friends, patrons, and family. Although Caravaggio never wrote of his Catholic Faith, his paintings depict Christian scenes and stories, demonstrating a revolution in art during the Counter-Reformation. In his paintings, we see the power of religious conversion and the power of the Catholic Faith to illuminate the world generated in extreme darkness with only one light present.

A few years after Caravaggio's death, Giulio Cesare Gigli described him: "The great protopainter/Marvel of art/Wonder of nature/Though later a victim of misfortune" (Langdon, 1999, p. 391). Caravaggio indeed was a pioneer in 17th-century art. His use of tenebrism opened a new stage in religious paintings. It is the extreme darkness in every painting that emphasizes the single light source, which in turn strengthens the Faith and the Catholic community.

5. Caravaggio and his unique naturalism

Despite being well known for his use of tenebrism in religious paintings, Caravaggio's use of shadow and darkness in paintings is also praised for his naturalistic coloring. One of Caravaggio's most famous biographers Giovanni Baglione assessed Caravaggio's most positive contribution to the history of art as his "good manner ... of coloring from nature" (Bell, 1993, p. 103). Carlo Cesare Malvasia also

compared Caravaggio's "real and true-to-life" and coloration (*reale e vero*) with the "weak and whitewashed" coloring of the Mannerists (Bell, 1993, p. 103). It is widely believed that Caravaggio's use of tenebrism and extreme contrast between light and dark colors could be attributed to the use of *chiaroscuro* by his Lombard predecessors, including Giulio Campi, Girolamo Savoldo, Moretto da Brescia, and Leonardo da Vinci (Gregori, 1985, pp. 49-87). Nevertheless, Caravaggio exaggerated the *chiaroscuro* in the High Renaissance and Mannerist paintings, almost eliminating all other light sources in a painting but one. Early writers pointed out this dramatic use of color and criticized Caravaggio on his coloring.

Mancini wrote in 1621 that Caravaggio's coloring was artificial and unnatural, lacking *somiglianza* and *similitudine*—that resemblance to nature and verisimilitude, which appeared much more often in works by Carracci and contemporaries of Caravaggio (Bell, 1993, p. 106). In Carracci's paintings, for instance, his *River Landscape*, he applied *chiaroscuro* and increased the element in light and bright color, leaving only nuance parts with shadows and darkness. On the contrary, Caravaggio's paintings always are believed to be "too dark, lacking the brilliance of color" (Mancini, 1956, pp. 135-36). Different from Carracci, Caravaggio chose the opposite path to achieve *chiaroscuro*, for instance, in his *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* by eliminating most brightness and exaggerating darkness in paintings, forming his own idea of tenebrism. Moreover, this system of lighting in Caravaggio's painting made his work look "unnatural" in Mancini's eyes because of excluding all reflections that normally make forms partially visible in the shadows (Bell, 1993, p. 106).

Mancini further explained Caravaggio's use of extreme darkness in paintings by calling it the lighting system of the "Caravaggesque school" and pointed out that the tenebrism used by Caravaggio was to "illuminate the scene with a single light that comes from above without reflections as if there were one window and the walls were painted black, which thus, making the lights and shadows very light and very dark, resulting in giving more relief to the picture" (Mancini, 1956, p. 108). However, as mentioned earlier in the paper, the exaggeration of darkness and brightness in Caravaggio's paintings could not be called completely unnatural. He merely chose a situation in nature that rarely occurs.

The reason behind all criticism of Caravaggio's use of tenebrism is that during the 16th and 17th century, most of the artists or art historians, for instance, Abraham Bosse, the engraver and perspective expert, upheld a scientific ideal that paintings should be clear, legible, and found upon principles derived from a study of nature and mathematics (Bell, 1993, p. 110). This idea spread widely during the Renaissance, during which paintings were painted in the majority of light to reflect the brightness of the human soul. However, entering the early Baroque, artists started to discover various paths to the ultimate human soul, and especially under the contexts of Counter-Reformation, extreme choices of reflections in light became understandable. Caravaggio, well-known for his difficulty in following disciplines in his whole life, would obviously create certain radical changes in colors in paintings.

In addition, most of Caravaggio's use of extreme tenebrism took place in his religious paintings. As explained in the previous section, the darkness and one light source were to intensify the Faith of the viewer. If we take a look at Caravaggio's early secular paintings, the tenebrism would not be apparent; rather, it would only be described as the exaggeration of *chiaroscuro*. This is because although still having a black background, the colors reflected from the objects or the figure represented verisimilitude and realism. Here, I would discuss three paintings to show how tenebrism or weak tenebrism in Caravaggio's paintings would be a representation of Naturalism. His early paintings were mostly still-life or the combination with portraits, and among all those still-life works, *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* remained one of his most famous early paintings.

Boy with a Basket of Fruit was painted in Cesari's studio during Caravaggio's apprenticeship and was still in his tock in 1607 (Langdon, 1999, p. 68). The composition in the painting was simple, and the focus of the painting was particularly famous in antiquity: Pliny the Elder, for example, described a painting by Zeuxis of a boy carrying grapes that were so realistic that the fruit fooled birds into trying to eat it (Hibbard, 1983, p. 17). In this painting, the Naturalism of the fruit Caravaggio painted matched perfectly with the story. One can see the early traces of Caravaggio's tenebrism in still life. A strong diagonal shadow cast by light entered the room from above (Hibbard, 1983, p. 19), which formed the very early style of Caravaggio, presenting direct comparison with other contemporaries. The painting

seemed simple in structure, but the colors of the fruits seemed so fresh and vivid, just as the description in the ancient story.

In real life, when various light sources are present, almost every object seemed bright, but in extreme darkness, with only one light shining on the objects, the fruit would look like he painted it. Also, the Boy's facial expressions showed immense clarity. His open lips, dark hair, and shoulders are realistic. Therefore, Caravaggio's use of tenebrism in still-life and portrait paintings portrayed a rare visual experience but demonstrated the true colors of the fruits and exaggerated the realism of figures and objects. It is not surprising that the writings of Francesco Scannell, a famous art historian in the Baroque, in 1657 extolled the surface verisimilitude and relief that Caravaggio created with his mastery of coloring and deemed Caravaggio's light and darkness to be "a unique exponent of naturalism" (Bell, 1993, p. 110).

Moreover, with only one light source, every trace of shadows in the painting is plausible. This method only exists in one particular natural situation: a windowless room, with a lamp, placed very high, shining directly onto the figure (Bellori, 2005, p. 217). Although Annibale Carracci called Caravaggio's art here was "troppo naturale" (Hibbard, 1983, p. 67), meaning too natural, Caravaggio, here, for example, depicted a perfect naturalistic situation, which only rarely occurs in real life.

With tenebrism, Caravaggio strengthened his tones and gave the figures blood and flesh (Bellori, 2005, p. 217). The colors themselves, besides in still-lives, might not seem vivid or bright as other contemporary painters, represented by Annibale Carracci. Nevertheless, Caravaggio was cited as the source of both forceful and tenebristic modes of coloring testifies to the extent to which his color was seen as innovative, and influential (Bell, 1993, p. 125). This innovation thus represented a new stage in art and the trend of Naturalism. Caravaggio's use of deep dark colors in the background might not seem natural as the real-life when we went outside, but within the situation where only one light source remaining in the painting, the artist's use of tenebrism perfectly matched Naturalism.

6. Conclusion

Caravaggio's innovative use of tenebrism set a new stage in the history of art. The issue of light and dark has aroused much speculation and became a powerful formed element in the Baroque period, which was unknown before or later (Rzepinska & Malcharek, 1986, p. 112). The artist himself might not have noticed, but the use of tenebrism became influential on artists, including Gentileschi, Velazquez, Cotan, and even Rembrandt. Nevertheless, it is hard to say that anyone of them has surpassed Caravaggio is tenebrism.

The paintings of Rembrandt reveal a dominant influence. It is clear that he admired Caravaggio's use of a dark background, but Rembrandt chose to exaggerate the vibrancy of colors and the brightness part of using chiaroscuro, which could not achieve the dramatic effects Caravaggio demonstrated in his paintings. On the contrary, Gentileschi, Velazquez, and Cotan followed Caravaggio's method of tenebrism, nevertheless, exaggerating too much of the dark areas in the painting. This created a lack of Naturalism in their artworks.

Caravaggio's life echoes with the drama in his paintings. The artist started his career with the help of Cardinal del Monte in Rome, achieving a large number of commissions in religious and still-life paintings. After escaping to Naples and Malta, most of Caravaggio's paintings possess a somber mood, for instance, his Martyrdom of St. Ursula and his later version of Supper at Emmaus. Although his early works emphasized the darkness in the background, other colors he used depicted objects vividly and enhanced the Naturalism of his paintings.

Despite the suffering and misery of the end of his life, Caravaggio's tenebrism invigorated, enhanced, and elevated the religious zeal of the Counter-Reformation. The Jesuit and the Carmelite Orders both recommended darkness as conducive to contemplation, thus a positive value in the spiritual life (Rzepinska & Malcharek, 1986, p. 112). Even in the Hebrew Bible and the Judaic myths, God "dwelled in darkness," as mentioned in Exodus (Rzepinska & Malcharek, 1986, p. 107), and darkness and lights are his attributes (Rzepinska & Malcharek, 1986, p. 112). As a result, Caravaggio's use of tenebrism accurately dramatized the sacredness in each of his religious paintings and reflected the brand-new attitudes towards Christianity during the late 16th and early 17th centuries.

As for the aspect of Caravaggio's Naturalism, although artists and art historians including Mancini, Zaccolini, Malvasia, and Carracci criticized its unnaturalness in his use of extreme dark colors together with its lack of reflections of colors in the paintings, I believe Caravaggio chose a rare and almost impossible scenario, using one light source, to enhance the Naturalism in his paintings. With this, in fact, although lacking the "natural" light and shadow, his paintings are more vivid. The colors of the objects or fruits seem more realistic, which represents another level of Naturalism.

Overall, Caravaggio is a controversial figure in the Baroque period. However, I believe Caravaggio is one of the greatest geniuses of Western Art. He is cited as the source of both forceful and tenebristic modes of coloring, which was innovative and influential (Bell, 1993, p. 125). Caravaggio's tenebrism creates miraculous imagery. Whenever one stands in front of his paintings, one is amazed by the drama. Despite receiving a large number of critiques from other artists and art historians during his lifetime, Caravaggio's sacred and naturalistic use of tenebrism sets his work apart from his brilliant contemporaries. Caravaggio is an innovator of art in the Baroque, a passionate servant of Catholicism, and an artist whose influence could even be found in the 20th century in the art of Frank Stella as he mentioned in his lecture that.

"My lectures concentrate on painting around 1600, Caravaggio and Rubens. I see them as the beginning of painting as we understand it—they mark a break with the past" (Stella, 1983).

This lasting influence of Caravaggio also, on the other hand, shows how a technique that was originally used for religious purposes can be turned into art in the modern-day. Caravaggio not only brings us questions considering light and darkness but also motivates us to ponder the natural side of religion.

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