

The Supper at Emmaus

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610)

The National Gallery, London



What is Christianity, if not focused on the fusion of divinity and humanity through Christ? The emergence of Italian Catholic propagandistic art saw the deification of Christ and the alienation of normal people, a pattern disrupted by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio.

Shock! Awe! Christ, again, in the flesh! Luke and Cleopas are consumed by emotion, onlooked by a clueless innkeeper, as Jesus reveals his resurrected identity for only a moment after supper, before leaving once more. The painting freezes and preserves the millisecond of abreaction, so that the transcendent threshold between the ethereal realm and the corporal world is kept open.

And what a corporal world it is. With the faces and attire contemporary to the time, Caravaggio implants the viewer at the table. The wicker basket, full of bulging fruit, teeters on the edge towards us. The paint, thinned by oil to be free of impasto, and the intense

chiaroscuro depict a scene with trompe l'oeil, palpable to anyone who looked upon it. Jesus is surrounded by models found from the street, who would have been spat upon by the Christians figures of the time. Yet this boldly defines the Jesus here as the son of the carpenter and friend of the people. Therein is a reminiscence to the culture of Milan, where Caravaggio had lived, and where bishops would regularly brush shoulders with prostitutes in the street.

The realism exhibited is not solely a product of the culture, but of Caravaggio's own dichotomous lifestyle. Whilst producing masterpieces he lived profanely, preferring the tavern to the church. But with this was a break from the dogmatic art encouraged by the Church – in fact, Caravaggio had a better understanding of the people to whom Christian art was meant to appeal, and so depicted a grounded scene in a tight composition where anyone could be self-inserted.

Caravaggio's pioneered form of contrast, tenebrism, illuminates the story. With their realisation, Luke's (left) worn elbow and Cleopas' (right) lapel catch the light from the steep heavenly axis, connoting to divine enlightenment, but in the immediacy Christ vanishes. However, here they aren't left alone with their consternation, in fact their realisation is suspended in time, the moment of both clarity and the soul overwhelming the body, arms flailing out, faces in disbelief as Jesus sits, basking in light. After a supper of comic ignorance, the cathartic punchline is preserved, and Jesus' sudden ascension is halted forever.

A divine painting is lent humanity so that we, the lay men, may perceive a moment of Jesus' grace. And again, isn't that what Christianity's all about?