

2.2 Anatomy of a masterpiece: emotional tensions in Caravaggio

Objective

The purpose of the exercise is to learn how to explore an image through the identification of tensions among different elements.

Background

Our eyes see not only the visible, but also the plot of invisible relationships that bind things and events together.

Visual artists are particularly sensitive to the silent dialogue that takes place between the parts of an image. As can be seen from the observation of Caravaggio's painting, *The Conversion of St Paul* (fig. 2.2a), the elements in the image are connected via a web of relationships by means of lines, surfaces, and colours. For instance, the mass of the horse, emerging from the dark bottom in the top part of the picture adds physical as well as visual and emotional weight on the body of St Paul lying on the ground. The Saint's arms form an arc that seem to welcome that pressure, to embrace the joy of the conversion, but also to surrender to that burden by asking for divine help.

The visual analysis enhances the emotional reading of the scene in accordance with the official religious narrative approved by the Catholic Church.



Fig. 2.2a – The Conversion of St Paul (Caravaggio, 1600-1601)

Instructions

1. Observe and describe Caravaggio's painting *The Vocation of St Matthew* (Fig. 2.2b). Focus on the emotions that you experience when observing the painting.
2. Paste the picture in a graphic software tool, e.g. powerpoint or canva, then use the tool basic shapes to locate lines and masses that emerge from the background, starting with the beam of light and the position of hands and heads.
3. Look at the image repeatedly and notice how these imaginary or real lines guide the visual exploration of the painting, while the light-coloured masses interrupt the flow of the gaze, inviting you to a short stop that demands your attention. Observe how

the whole painting is a dance where the fluidity of the gaze is punctuated by short interruptions. For instance, ask yourself: why does Caravaggio draw the window? What role does the window play in the visual exploration of the painting?

4. Compare the analysis of characters' gaze lines, shapes, and colours with the feelings you experienced when you initially observed the painting and note whether and how the composition of the image reinforces or explains those feelings.



Fig. 2.2b – The Vocation of St Matthew (Caravaggio, 1599-1600)