

History of Art for Conservation

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

The first few lectures tackled

What art is

Why we value it

Why we are concerned about it to the extent that we feel we need to conserve it.

These were followed by sessions on the art historian and his/her interaction within the conservation team.



Introduction

The remaining set of lectures will handle case studies in conservation in which the role of the art historian is significant or in which art history benefits from the new evidence arising out of the conservation project.



Topics

Today's lecture will take a case study that relates to one of the areas of study offered at B.Cons.(Hons) level

Area A – Paintings and Polychrome Sculpture.

It will discuss the conservation and restoration project of

Caravaggio's canvas painting

The Beheading of the Baptist

housed in the oratory of St John's Co-Cathedral,

Valletta, Malta

from an art historical perspective.



The Beheading of the Baptist

In former sessions we have referred to Panofsky's definition of the art historian as *“a humanist whose “primary material” consists of those records which have come down to us in the form of works of art.”*

From *Meaning in the Visual Arts* by Erwin Panofsky published in *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage* ed by N. Stanley Price, M. Kirby Talley Jr, and A. Melucco Vaccaro, The J. Paul Getty Trust 1996 p.60.



The Beheading of the Baptist

Dominic Cutajar,
*History and Works of Art of
St John's Church Valletta,*
MJ Publications Malta 1989
p. 94.

It is therefore important for us to take a close look at the painting to see what information this primary source contains.



The Beheading of the Baptist

Dominic Cutajar,
*History and Works of Art of
St John's Church Valletta,*
MJ Publications Malta 1989
p. 94.

The painting depicts biblical episode relating to the martyrdom of St John the Baptist.

It represents the dramatic moment of the decapitation performed by the centrally placed muscular executioner on the prostrate martyr.



The Beheading of the Baptist

Dominic Cutajar,
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St John's Church Valletta,*
MJ Publications Malta 1989
p. 94.

Behind the central figures stand the prison warden who points to the salver carried by the girl on the left hand side of the composition on which St John's head was to be placed while an old lady witnesses the gruesome scene with an expression of shock.



The Beheading of the Baptist

Dominic Cutajar,
*History and Works of Art of
St John's Church Valletta*,
MJ Publications Malta 1989
p. 94.

The scene appears to take place in a prison courtyard with prisoners observing the event behind bars on the right hand side of the composition.

The austere architectural backdrop to the scene with the heavy rusticated quoins of the arch strengthens this assumption.



The Beheading of the Baptist

Dominic Cutajar,
*History and Works of Art of
St John's Church Valletta,*
MJ Publications Malta 1989
p. 94.

This work is characterised by the dramatic use of the *chiaroscuro* technique, a technique in which forms are modeled using light and dark tones.

The technique is linked to oil painting and reached a climax during the seventeenth century particularly with Caravaggio's work.



The Beheading of the Baptist

Dominic Cutajar,
*History and Works of Art of
St John's Church Valletta,*
MJ Publications Malta 1989
p. 94.

This *chiaroscuro* is achieved through a device often used in Caravaggio's paintings. He creates a *luce di cantina* effect by placing the light source outside the top left side of the composition.



The Beheading of the Baptist

Dominic Cutajar,
*History and Works of Art of
St John's Church Valletta*,
MJ Publications Malta 1989
p. 94.

The style it presents features such compositional devices as repetition of forms that are characteristic of Caravaggio's work.

Notice the arched composition in the foreground figural group that echoes the architectural arch behind it.



The Beheading of the Baptist

Dominic Cutajar,
History and Works of Art of St John's Church Valletta,
MJ Publications Malta 1989 p. 94.

Theresa M. Vella ed.,
*The Return of Caravaggio's 'The Beheading of
the Baptist' to Malta*,
National Museum of Fine Arts Malta 1999 p.11.

Also characteristic of Caravaggio's style is his reference to nature. Naturalism is one of the noticeable elements in this painting. Apart from the naturalistic expression of shock on the old lady, observe the treatment of the muscular body of the executioner and the drapery.



The Beheading of the Baptist

Dominic Cutajar,
History and Works of Art of St John's Church Valletta,
MJ Publications Malta 1989 p. 94.

Theresa M. Vella ed.,
The Return of Caravaggio's 'The Beheading of the Baptist'
to Malta,
National Museum of Fine Arts Malta 1999 p.11.

The painting is signed “f.Michael A_” at the centre of the bottom part of the painting.



The Beheading of the Baptist

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History and Works of Art of St John's Church Valletta,
MJ Publications Malta 1989 p. 94.

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National Museum of Fine Arts Malta 1999 p.11.

Caravaggio's name was Michelangelo Merisi.
The observation of the painting itself shows that the
technique, style and signature point to Caravaggio's
authorship.

This is the only known signed work by the painter.



The Beheading of the Baptist

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The signature “f.Michael A_” has intrigued art historians over the years. The “f.” preceding the name has been interpreted in various ways.



The Beheading of the Baptist

Some have simply interpreted it as an abbreviation of
“*fecit*” Latin for “made”
while others have argued that the abbreviation stands
for
“*fra*” meaning “brother”.

Both interpretations are interesting to study in the light of
biographical information on Caravaggio and in the
context within which the painting was made.



Caravaggio

After having trained in Milan, Caravaggio (1571-1610) went to Rome where he worked for other painters. There he gradually established himself as an artist of repute and won several prestigious commissions. However, during this successful period he committed murder (May 1606) and had to flee from Rome. He traveled to Naples, Malta and Sicily where each time involvement in brawls led to his flight.



Caravaggio

During his fourteen-month stay in Malta after landing here in July 1607, Caravaggio completed a number of commissions from members of the Order of St John, including the Grand Master himself – Alof de Wignacourt.

Notwithstanding Caravaggio's criminal record Wignacourt wrote to the pope in order to be able to knight Caravaggio on the basis of his artistic achievements. Caravaggio was conferred knight of the Order in July 1608.



The Beheading of the Baptist

This biographical information has led some scholars to conclude that the “f.” of the artist’s signature scrolled in the blood of the beheaded St John not only refers to the fact that Caravaggio executed the work but it may also suggest association with the murder.



The Beheading of the Baptist

The interpretation of the “f.” as meaning “fra” is based on the knowledge of Caravaggio’s knighthood while in Malta. This interpretation would lead to the attribution of the execution of the painting to 1608 after Caravaggio’s new appointment in July of that year.



The Conservation and Restoration Project

The conservation and restoration project undertaken by the Opificio delle Pietre Dure in Florence, Italy and completed in 1999 has provided significant information, particularly in relation to the manufacturing techniques used by Caravaggio.



The Conservation and Restoration Project

Theresa M. Vella ed.,
*The Return of Caravaggio's
'The Beheading of the
Baptist' to Malta,*
National Museum of Fine
Arts Malta 1999 p.6.

X-rays taken during the process of investigation have revealed that there are only minor *pentimenti*. This is an indication that the artist had already sketched out the composition of the painting prior to its execution.



The Conservation and Restoration Project

Examination of the painting has also revealed that for the *Beheading of the Baptist* Caravaggio chose to depart from his usual technique of incising the important elements of the composition.

Instead, here he painted in a sketch of the work prior to executing the design.



The Conservation and Restoration Project

Theresa M. Vella ed.,
*The Return of Caravaggio's
'The Beheading of the
Baptist' to Malta,*
National Museum of Fine
Arts Malta 1999 p.12.

The conservation and restoration treatment has defined Caravaggio's rendition of space further. The project has highlighted the relationship between the architectural backdrop and the space occupied by the figural composition of the martyrdom.



The Conservation and Restoration Project

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*The Return of Caravaggio's
'The Beheading of the
Baptist' to Malta,*
National Museum of Fine
Arts Malta 1999 p.12.

The conservation and restoration treatment has also brought out the dramatic manipulation of light and Caravaggio's use of a richer palette than was formerly thought.



The Conservation and Restoration Project

Theresa M. Vella ed.,
*The Return of Caravaggio's
'The Beheading of the
Baptist' to Malta,*
National Museum of Fine
Arts Malta 1999 p.12.

Thus, the conservation and restoration project has provided further information on Caravaggio's methods and has therefore enriched evidence relating to Caravaggio's only signed painting that can be dated to 1608.



The Conservation and Restoration Project

Theresa M. Vella ed.,
*The Return of Caravaggio's
'The Beheading of the
Baptist' to Malta,*
National Museum of Fine
Arts Malta 1999 p.12.

Through the project, art history has therefore gained from the additional information obtained.



Bibliography

Dominic Cutajar, *History and Works of Art of St John's Church Valletta*,
MJ Publications Malta 1989.

John Gash, *Caravaggio*, Bloomsbury Books London 1988.

Theresa M. Vella ed.,

The Return of Caravaggio's 'The Beheading of the Baptist' to Malta,
National Museum of Fine Arts Malta 1999.

Recommended Reading

Theresa M. Vella ed.,

The Return of Caravaggio's 'The Beheading of the Baptist' to Malta,
National Museum of Fine Arts Malta 1999.

Questions

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