

Cecco del Caravaggio's

Resurrection

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Cecco del Caravaggio, now known as Francesco Buoneri, is one of several artists who painted in the style of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. Cecco was a close follower of Caravaggio who "was apparently so captivated with Caravaggio's work that he was dubbed 'del Caravaggio.'"¹ Although he was influenced by other Caravaggesque painters such as Manfredi Bartolomeo,² his greatest influence is the master Caravaggio himself.³ Like other second decade Carravaggists, Cecco shares common stylistic characteristics: the use of large, bold figures, marked contrasts between light and dark, and intricate drapery folds.⁴

It is disputed whether Cecco was of French or Spanish origin. Because his painting appears to be stylistically influenced by Maino, some believe him to be Spanish.⁵ However, he was known to be an assistant of Agostino Tassi around 1615, and all of Tassi's other assistants were Frenchmen.⁶ Because of his affinities with Finson and Duchamps, Caravaggio expert Richard Spear suggests a French or Flemish origin.⁷

It is difficult to determine Cecco's exact position in the timeline of the Seciento because so little is known about his career.⁸ Spear dates three of Cecco's most important works as circa 1610. Furthermore, none of his known works are signed or dated,⁹ typical of Caravaggesque painters. Alfred Moir agrees with Cecco's placement in the second decade of the Seciento, but suggests his work in Rome extended to

¹Spear, Richard E., Caravaggio and His Followers (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1971), p. 82.

²Moir, Alfred, The Italian Followers of Caravaggio (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), vol. II, p. 107.

³Spear, p. 82.

⁴Moir, p. 200.

⁵Nicolson, Benedict, Caravaggism in Europe (Torino: U. Allemandi, 1989), vol. I, p. 97.

⁶Moir, p. 118.

⁷Spear, p. 82.

⁸Spear, p. 82.

⁹Nicolson, vol. I, pp. 97-98.

1620.¹⁰ Benedict Nicolson shows that Cecco probably worked in Rome until the mid-1620's.¹¹ In any case, all agree that Cecco's Roman work comes after Caravaggio painted in the city.

One of Cecco's most notable works (and the topic of this essay) is his Resurrection, now a part of the Charles H. and Mary F. S. Worcester Collection in the Chicago Art Institute. The Art Institute dates the painting as 1619-1620; Spear dates it as circa 1610.¹² Like most of Cecco's (and Caravaggio's) paintings, it shows life size figures. Cecco's painted his largest known composition (339 × 199 cm)¹³ for Piero Guicciardini for the church of Santa Felicita in Florence.¹⁴ Guicciardini rejected the painting, finding it unsatisfactory — it later was acquired for the collection of Cardinal Francesco Barberini.¹⁵

Cecco's painting closely follows the book of Matthew, which describes the resurrection in chapter 28. Because Christ predicted he would arise three days after his burial, Pilate ordered guards to seal the tomb and watch over it on the third day. On this third day,

There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven, and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. (Matthew 28:2 - 28:4)¹⁶

In Cecco's powerful composition, the text of Matthew is fully realized. His use of light and dark, color, intricate detail and bold outline, movement and human expression bring the resurrection to life in a truly Caravaggesque way.

Cecco's use of color and light captivates the viewer. Spear notes the bold contrast between the angel's raiment — "white as snow" — and the soldier's colorful clothing highlights the tension produced by the soldiers' witnessing of the miracle of the resurrection.¹⁷ This tension is further

¹⁰Moir, pp. 105-106.

¹¹Nicolson, vol. I, p. 37.

¹²Spear, p. 82.

¹³Nicolson, vol. I, pp. 97-98. Of the complete list of Cecco's work Nicolson cites, the Resurrection is the largest, but Spear (p. 84) hypothesizes that Guardian Angel with St. Ursula and St. Thomas may perhaps be a fragment of a larger painting or a series of paintings.

¹⁴Art Institute of Chicago, placard next to the painting.

¹⁵Entry 796 in an inventory dated 1679: "Un Quadro senza cornice figura in tela una copia d'un pezzo d'Arazzo di Palazzo cioe quando N. S. resuscita longo palmi quattordici alto p.mi otto in circa" and entry 62: "Un quadro grande senza Cornice alto palmi otto e largo quindici incirca rappresenta la Resurrett.ne di n'ro Sig:re" Lavin, Marilyn Aronberg, Seventeenth-century Barberini documents and inventories of art (New York: New York University Press, 1975), pp. 257 and 356.

¹⁶Matthew 28:2 - 28: 4, The Holy Bible: New International Version, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1988), p. 706.

¹⁷Spear, p. 82.

emphasized by the striking contrast with the dark, shadowy background. In this way, Cecco's work follows the example Caravaggio set with his Martyrdom of St. Matthew or Conversion of St. Paul. Of Cecco's oeuvre, the Resurrection is perhaps the most conspicuous in its use of light. His portraits, notably that of St. Lawrence, use the same style of a dark background and a highlighted foreground figures.

A few more words should be said about Cecco's use of color in this composition in comparison with Caravaggio. Caravaggio's use of the contrasts of lighting often outweigh the color in the painting. Oftentimes his paintings have dramatic separation of dark and light, but a tonal feel of blacks, browns, whites and yellows.¹⁸ Cecco's Resurrection, however, finds an appropriate balance between color and the variations of light. The intense red sleeves of the startled guard on the left are offset by the bright turquoise breeches of the guard running on the right and the subtle purple hue of Christ's flag. This is not to say that Caravaggio does not use color in his paintings; rather, his Calling of St. Matthew of 1599 employs the use of red to highlight the more important figures. The Resurrection, like The Calling of St. Matthew, combines the techniques to make a more powerful and aesthetically pleasing work of art.

In addition to the use of light and color, the Resurrection is Caravaggesque in its depiction of emotion. The expressions of Cecco's guards upon seeing the resurrection manifest themselves in a "forced, theatrical form,"¹⁹ typical of his style. He develops this style directly from two of Caravaggio's paintings in the first decade: Supper at Emmaus of 1601 and Entombment of 1602. The portrayal of human passion in Emmaus "illustrates a consonant order of emotion, lucid, stilled, and strong, arresting drama in a powerfully charged instant..."²⁰ Emmaus, coupled with the posed, classical figure with the upraised hands in the Entombment motivate Cecco to develop the bold, frozen moment in the Resurrection with staged, thespian characters. Both the expressions of surprise and fear portrayed in Christ Expelling the Money Changers from the Temple and the contemplative St. Lawrence follow Cecco's characteristic theatrical style.

Also typical of Cecco style is an obsession with detail and realism. Perhaps most striking and unique with this veracity is Cecco's Mannerist-like use of the outline. Every figure and form in the Resurrection has a sharp, distinct outline. Mannerist expert Jacques Bousquet observes that "in the sleeve of the angel's robe ... not a single fragment of the cloth is left undefined ... in its surface

¹⁸Crucifixion of St. Peter, Conversion of St. Paul, St. John the Baptist with a Ram, and The Lute Player, just to name a few.

¹⁹Spear, p. 82.

²⁰Freedberg, S. J, Circa 1600 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 63.

contours.”²¹ From the complex drapery folds in Christ’s loincloth to the reflections in the soldiers’ armor, Cecco uses exact, precise detail and deliberate outlines. The style of drapery in the Guardian Angel with St. Ursula and St. Thomas is so similar to that in the Resurrection that it is cited by Spear as one of the bases for Cecco’s authorship (he also cites Cecco’s distinctive use of large, fleshy hands).²²

Although Cecco’s attention to sharp definitions in the Resurrection shows some affinity to the Mannerist style exemplified by Bronzio’s St. John the Baptist, Bousquet is incorrect in calling it a Mannerist painting. It belongs to the Caravaggesque style because Cecco’s forms are fundamentally both realistic and naturalistic; those of Bronzio and other Mannerists are plastic, idealized and sculpture-like.

Spear suggests that by focusing intensely on detail in the Resurrection, Cecco sacrifices a compositional unity.²³ I can concur with Spear, but wish to add that this flaw does not manifest itself in any of the dozen other works of Cecco’s I have seen. Christ Expelling the Money Changers from the Temple, for example, shows a tight, controlled composition. Christ enters from the right, running into the painting at a forceful diagonal. The group of figures on the left runs from him with equal determination; they echo his diagonal in parallel. This composition, unlike that of the Resurrection, is achieved without the sacrifice of detail.

Cecco’s use of brushwork in the Resurrection varies throughout the canvas. Some portions of the painting have broad, smooth strokes, such as the creamy flesh of Christ or the breeches of the armored soldiers.²⁴ Yet overall, Cecco uses his characteristically tight hand with his brushwork to achieve the intricate detail of the drapery folds and reflections in the armor. Cecco not only carefully sketches the outlines of all the figures and adds crisp, delineated shadows — he also shows his skill by realistically rendering an antique bas-relief (the slaying of the Nornids) in the lower right-hand corner of the painting.²⁵

It is impossible to know if Cecco’s Resurrection is stylistically influenced by Caravaggio’s lost version of the same topic because there are no copies or etchings of Caravaggio’s original — only written accounts remain. In a critique of the painting made by Scaramuccia in 1674, he describes Caravaggio’s Christ as standing on the ground:

²¹Bousquet, Jacques, Mannerism: The Painting and Style of the Late Renaissance (New York: Braziller, 1964), p. 89.

²²Spear, p. 84.

²³Spear, p. 82.

²⁴Bousquet, p. 89.

²⁵Spear, p. 82.

Christ is represented not as usual, agile and triumphant in the air, but is shown in Caravaggio's audacious manner of coloring, with one foot in and the other outside the sepulcher on the ground, so that one is somewhat apprehensive at such extravagances.²⁶

Whether or not Cecco actually saw Caravaggio's painting, he chose instead to paint Christ as risen in the air, the more typical manner of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.²⁷

Other Caravaggesque paintings of the Resurrection were executed by Finson in Naples in 1610, Maino in Rome in 1612-13, and Janssens in Madrid in 1640. Cecco likely influenced Janssens later painting, but it is unclear if Cecco was exposed to either of the earlier paintings before the execution of his own. While the Maino's style was likely influential on Cecco, I am not convinced that his Resurrection was a strong inspiration because Cecco chooses to portray a different moment than Maino does. Maino's Resurrection takes place immediately after Christ comes out of the grave. Maino's Christ is standing just above the grave instead of raised into the air; most of Maino's guards are asleep, whereas all but one of Cecco's guards are awake and noticeably startled by Christ's presence. This is not to say that Cecco didn't take any elements from Maino's composition. Because Cecco, like Maino, shows Christ carrying a flag with a cross on it, he probably saw Maino's work before painting his own.

Because so little is known about Cecco it is difficult to make conclusions about his career. It is easy to conclude, however, that the Resurrection is an integral part of Cecco's oeuvre. With the exception of its slightly jumbled composition, it represents and exemplifies the fundamental aspects of his style: use of light, color, movement, emotion, detail and outline.

²⁶Friedlaender, Walter F, Caravaggio studies (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), p. 224. He cites Saramuccia, 1674, pp. 75-76.

²⁷Friedlaender, p. 224.

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