Caravaggio: Seeing Through A Different Lens

For centuries, artists have taken advantage of the audiences' perspective in order to communicate, and show, what they believe is important. Perspective is essentially how an individual views the world. A specific point of view is shaped by their personalities, their life experiences, and even their values. So how does art relate to this? Playing with one's perspective has always been an essential part of art. Art has the ability to force you to view things as an artist intended it to be seen– from the artist's point of view. Another way to define this is with Re-mediation. Re-mediation can be described as the ability to show something that previously existed, in a whole new and different way. Almost as if you were telling the same story, but from a different perspective. By using techniques such as "naturalism" and tenebrism, 17th-century artist, Caravaggio is able to capture moments of the bible, re-mediating them in a tangible way that no other artist was able to do at the time.

Through his use of naturalism, Caravaggio was able to give his artwork a sense of life. Naturalism is the ability to represent the subject matter truthfully, without artificiality, without artistic conventions, and without implausible supernatural elements. Although the art style of naturalism had been around long before Caravaggio had his take, this technique helped his career as an artist take off. In the article, Light and Color in Caravaggio's Supper at Emmaus, Author Janis C. Bell claims that, "Caravaggio's coloring in the 17th century was frequently admired for its naturalistic appearance. Paintings such as the calling of St. Matthew catapulted Caravaggio into great success, bringing great praise for their "true-to-life" coloring and inspiring many to imitate them" (Bell 139). Caravaggio's use of color gave the illusion of a more convincing, naturalistic, scene. Through this technique, he is able to shift his audience's perspective and trick them into believing that his work of art was really, a window into reality. Another way Caravaggio was able to give his artwork a sense of life was through the use of live models. At the time, no one posed models and painted them directly onto a canvas. Caravaggio was one of, if not the first, to actually work with live models. In the article Caravaggio's Story of St. Matthew': A challenge to the conventions of painting, writer Thomas Puttfarken observes how, "[Caravaggio] claimed that he imitated his models so closely that he never made a single brushstroke that he called his own, but said rather it was nature's" (Puttfarken 165). His use of models was not only new, but Caravaggio used everyday people that he pulled in directly from the street. Through this unorthodox method, Caravaggio was able to capture the essence of nature itself, including seemingly insignificant details such as the dirt under the fingernails of a model, or even the slightest change in facial expression. Author of the article, Expressive Aspects of Caravaggio's First Inspiration of Saint Matthew, Troy Thomas suggests that "Caravaggio's naturalism made the biblical stories more vivid and tangible than ever before." (Thomas 636) This re-mediation of the bible is the reason behind what catapulted Caravaggio into fame. He didn't portray biblical scenes as very divine or elegant, as everyone else at the time, but rather very dramatically and even often staged the biblical events as if they were taking place in the present day. By capturing these slight details, Caravaggio made his paintings more relatable to the public. These representations of naturalism in his artwork is just one of the many characteristics that set Caravaggio apart from other artists when remediating the bible.

By utilizing the technique of Tenebrism, which is characterized by the use of predominantly dark tones and shadows with dramatically contrasting effects of light, Caravaggio is able to shift our

attention and control what he wants us to see. Caravaggio rose to fame as an artist during the 17th century. During this time, the predominant art style was Baroque. The Baroque art style is highly ornate and extravagant, characterized by great drama, rich and deep color, and intense light and dark shadows. Now although the baroque style is similar to tenebrism, Caravaggio's original style utilized a predominantly black background, using extreme contrasts of light and dark to emphasize details of gesture or facial expression. This drastic use of darkness was a way that Caravaggio was able to direct what the viewer perceived. In the article Caravaggio's Story of St. Matthew': A Challenge To The Conventions of Painting, writer Thomas Puttfarken describes that, "the almost illusionistic appearance of those forms and details which the light picks out from the general darkness of Caravaggio's pictures is...the result of a controlled process of selection, compelling us to attend with a heightened degree of alertness to those forms presented to us by the artist" (Puttfarken 165). Because the darkness was the dominating characteristic of the painting, by putting the important figures in the light, Caravaggio is able to take command of our perspective and force us to see a certain image. This use of a "spotlight" puts emphasis on the importance of the painting showing the viewer what was important, yet still leaving them with a sense of ambiguity. Caravaggio's use of light in his paintings also seemed to suggest a religious significance. As writer Maria Rzepinska explains in her article, Tenebrism in Baroque Painting and Its Ideological Background, "In the very few works dealing with light in the history of art, it has been observed that light plays a particularly important role in Baroque painting, some authors emphasizing its realistic and...religious interpretation" (Rzepinska 92). We know that Caravaggio wasn't the only artist to utilize the use of light in his paintings, however, Caravaggio's paintings were special in that he not only used light to show religious importance but also to show detail and significance. His use of contrasting light against the darkness also seemed to add drama to otherwise ordinary scenes. Using his technique of tenebrism, Caravaggio was able to remediate the bible and portray biblical scenes in a very dramatic, almost theatrical way.

Unlike many artists of the 17th century who portrayed the bible in a very holy and harmonious way, Caravaggio painted to show us what he felt was important. Caravaggio gives us art from the perspective of a man who portrays the bible in a very relatable and tangible way through his use of naturalism and tenebrism. His artwork almost makes you feel as if the scenes in which he portrays are taking place right before your eyes. Frozen in time, but still moving.