

DESCRIVEDENDO

The Supper at Emmaus by Caravaggio

Pinacoteca di Brera, Room 28

Formal Description

The episode on which the picture is based is recounted in the Gospel of St. Luke. A few days after Jesus was crucified, two of his disciples were walking towards Emmaus, a village just outside Jerusalem, when they met a man who joined in their conversation about the recent event. In the evening the three men stopped at an inn and there, as they were dining, the unknown traveller blessed and broke the bread. In his traditional, extremely realistic style, Caravaggio captures on his canvas the precise moment in which Christ blesses the bread and the two astonished disciples recognise him, before he disappears.

The picture we are about to examine is a rectangular oil painting on canvas, its horizontal side somewhat longer than the vertical. It is 175 cm wide and 141 cm high, and the figures depicted are almost life-size.

In the painting, we see Jesus and his two disciples seated at a table with an innkeeper and a servant standing just behind them. The scene is set in an inn, although we cannot see the inn because the background from which the figures emerge is shrouded in darkness. Only the figures and the table are illuminated, and they occupy the lower right-hand part of the painting. Caravaggio has chosen a frontal viewpoint. We observe the scene from close up and see both the sitting and the standing figures from the waist up. To glean further details from the painting, we should now try to imagine it split into 9 equal sections obtained by crossing three

columns with three lines, like a noughts and crosses grid. We can number the sections using a telephone keypad layout from left to right: 1, 2, 3 above; 4, 5, 6 in the middle; and 7, 8, 9 below.

Let us begin our examination with sections 7, 8 and 9, in which we see a rectangular table running parallel to the lower edge of the picture. The table has a carpet draped over it and the carpet is covered, in its turn by a white tablecloth on which we see the shadows cast by the handful of items on it: from left to right, a loaf of bread and a ceramic plate containing leaf vegetables. Behind the plate we see a second loaf of bread which has already been broken. Further to the right, an empty pewter plate and a ceramic jug partly conceal of glass of red wine.

Now let us consider the human figures, starting with those closest to our us and moving backwards.

In sections 4 and 7, on this side of the table, a seated disciple turns his back to us. He wears a brown tunic under a light-coloured cloak. His hair is curly and his open arms are very slightly outstretched towards Jesus in a gesture of sudden understanding and surprise

In sections 6 and 9, another disciple shown in profile is seated at the short side of the table. He wears a brown tunic beneath a cream mantle. He has short hair, a beard and moustache, and a swarthy complexion. His forehead is creased in astonishment as he leans towards Jesus, while his arms grip the edge of the table as though he were about to rise.

In section 5, Jesus, the main figure in the scene, is seated at the long side of the table opposite us and slightly to the left. He, too, wears a tunic but his mantle is dark green. The light only hits one side of his pale face, which stands out against the dark background. He wears a short beard and his dark, wavy hair falls to his shoulders. He is looking down, his right hand raised and his fingers suggesting that he is about to bless the bread in front of him, while his left hand rests on the table.

In sections 2 and 5, the innkeeper stands behind Jesus and immediately to his right. He wears a small white cloth cap, an open-collared white shirt and a darker overshirt unbuttoned to halfway down his chest. He is no longer young, and his rubicund face is surmounted by a broad, lined

forehead. He observes Jesus blessing, his head lowered, his chin touching his neck and his left fist clenched with his thumb hooked in his belt.

In sections 3 and 6, beside the innkeeper, we see an ageing servant in modest working attire sporting a white cap over her dark hair, which is tied back in a bun. Her face is as lined as the innkeeper's.

She is the only figure not looking at Jesus: her gaze is lowered, as though she were daydreaming, and she holds a platter of meat in her hands.

The whole scene is lit by warm light from an invisible source situated at 10 o'clock.

The figures around the table appear to be emerging from a murky, unfathomable background that sets off their silhouettes, breathing life into the figures and making them almost tangible. The painter's palette is played out in a myriad different shades of brown and earthen colours.



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Art Historical Description

The moment that Caravaggio has chosen to depict in his *Supper at Emmaus* is the key moment in an episode from the Gospel of St. Luke in which two disciples realise, when he blesses the bread, that the pilgrim who has travelled with them to Emmaus and whom they have invited to dine with them is in fact the risen Christ.

In 1602 Caravaggio produced another version of the *Supper at Emmaus* which is now in the National Gallery in London. Despite the subject matter and the overall approach evinced in the two paintings being extremely similar, they also display profound differences. The London painting's luminous composition is rich in descriptive elements, while the second version's intimate, more meditative tone is the result of its dark setting and of the mere handful of items depicted in it: the broken bread, a jug and two simple plates replace the sumptuous still life in the youthful version. The Brera Christ also has a thin, weary face, bearing very little resemblance to the beardless youth in the earlier version.

In both cases, the presence of poor, shabby figures not only echoes the Lombard artistic tradition in which Caravaggio trained but it also reveals the artist's interest in the lower social classes. He chose his models from those classes as well as the settings for his works, in which God's presence is made manifest by his unique handling of light. In the Brera *Supper*, the light comes from the left, causing the figures in the foreground to emerge from the darkness, it dwells on certain details such as the folds in the tablecloth or the reflections on the jug and it highlights the figures' gestures and faces, thus imbuing the scene with greater emotional and psychological intensity.

The two pictures were painted only a few years apart, yet a major change occurred in Caravaggio's style in the intervening years. It became starker both in terms of his palette which tended almost towards a monochrome effect, and of his compositions with fewer figures and fewer items yet with a greater focus on expressive content. His technique, typical of his

mature work, is made up of rapid brushstrokes that allow the primer layer to show through in certain areas, while the marks incised on the fresh primer point to his use of models from life.

The dramatic tone of the second version may be the result of a troubled moment in Caravaggio's life that began with a tragic episode. One of the painter's adversaries was slain in a fight on 29 May 1606. Caravaggio was charged with murder and so, to escape the death penalty, he fled Rome and sought refuge in Zagarolo, a guest on the estate of the princely Colonna family. This was where he painted the second *Supper at Emmaus*, which he immediately offered for sale so that he could pursue his journey to Naples. The picture was later sent to Rome, where it was bought by the aristocratic Patrizi family who hung it in their family palazzo in the heart of the city, and there it remained until 1939 when Director Ettore Modigliani proposed that the government purchase it for the Pinacoteca di Brera.

Biography

Michelangelo Merisi, known as Caravaggio after the name of the village his family came from, was born in Milan in 1571. He moved to Rome in c. 1592 to paint with the Cavalier d'Arpino, who was struck by his ability "to paint flowers and fruit." Caravaggio's youthful paintings tend to focus on poetic and elegiac themes, with the allegorical and religious compositions of such paintings as the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, the *Penitent Magdalen*, *Bacchus*, *a Boy with a Basket of Fruit* and the *Basket of Fruit* (the other Caravaggio painting now in Milan). Under the protection of Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte and of Marquis Vincenzo Giustiniani, Caravaggio was commissioned in 1599 to decorate the Contarelli Chapel in the church of San Luigi dei Francesi with *Stories from the Life of St. Matthew*, his first public work, which was to set him on the path to fame despite a controversy and a scandal blowing up around it.

Caravaggio went on to produce a series of very important works including the *Crucifixion of Saint Peter* and the *Conversion of St. Paul* for the Cerasi Chapel in the church of Santa Maria del popolo, and the first version of the *Supper at Emmaus*.

Forced to flee Rome after killing his sparring partner in a duel in 1606, he spent a short time in Zagarolo, on the countryside on the outskirts of the city, before moving down to Naples. From there he travelled to Malta and to Sicily before returning again to Naples. Setting out from that city, he attempted to return to Rome with a view to being granted a papal pardon and landed at Porto Ercole, where died, alone and unwell, in 1610.