

Caravaggio's *Suppers at Emmaus*

Born 'Michelangelo Merisi' in 1571, the Italian artist is best known by the name of the township where he grew up, "Caravaggio." After a lackluster apprenticeship in Milan, Caravaggio ventured to Rome, and by the age of twenty he was causing scandal, not only because of his volatile character and temper, but also because of his controversial painting methods. It was his express aim to make paintings that depicted what he called the "truth," and he was critically condemned for painting religious subjects in a way that looked natural and common.

In spite of these hostile reactions, Caravaggio was commissioned to produce a number of large-scale paintings. And even though many of his works were rejected by patrons on the grounds of indecorum or theological error, some people were beginning to see his style as a welcome antidote to 'Mannerism,' the limp style of creating dreamy-eyed, highly stylized, religious images. Caravaggio's biblical characters looked like ordinary people, their faces not looking as if drugged, but rather animated by fear or anger or compassion. This is to say, he brought the otherworldly realm of the Bible right into the streets and houses of 17th-century Rome.

Nowhere is this more powerfully seen than in his two paintings, both titled "Supper at Emmaus" (1601 and 1606). Based on the event recorded in Luke 24, both are examples of Caravaggio's virtuoso talent. They depict the meeting of two disciples with the resurrected Christ. After traveling with him for some time to Emmaus, the two come to recognize the risen Christ only during a meal in the way he blesses and breaks the bread. The interesting thing about these two paintings is that they are composed in almost exactly the same way, with Jesus seated at the center, blessing the food, flanked by the surprised disciples. It's the slight differences that are most interesting.



Caravaggio (1571-1610), *Supper at Emmaus*, 1601

In the first picture, the disciples look like ordinary laborers, one about to spring vigorously from his chair, the other waving his arms wildly, both of them amazed at the presence of the resurrected Christ. Over Jesus' right shoulder, the innkeeper watches passively, observing the dramatic moment of recognition. On the table is an impeccably detailed still-life of bread, poultry, fruit and wine. (The fruit basket in front, however, appears to teeter on the edge of the table.) The picture is given great emotion with *chiaroscuro* (strong contrasts between light and dark) and powerful *foreshortening* (making objects appear as projecting towards the viewer). The light that falls sharply from the top illuminates the scene with all the suddenness of the moment of recognition. It captures the climax of the story, the moment at which seeing transforms into recognizing. So, typical of Caravaggio, the lighting in the painting is not merely illumination, but also an allegory: the light makes the objects visible to the eye, and at the same time is itself a spiritual portrayal of the revelation, the vision, which will be gone in an instant.



Caravaggio (1571-1610), *Supper at Emmaus*, 1606

Five years later, during a particularly turbulent time of his life and after his rejection by many church patrons, Caravaggio returned to the same subject and virtually repainted it, this time creating an entirely different impression. A different theology is at work behind it. This painting is more restrained in color and action. The disciples, though still appearing to be surprised, are more reserved and natural in their reactions—the one on the right does not flail his arms out, but instead grabs the table to ground himself. The overall impression of the picture is more reverential, less symbolic and melodramatic than the first version. Instead of a delectable still-life, the table is set simply, with only bread, a bowl, a tin plate, and a jug. The innkeeper, though repositioned over Jesus' left shoulder now, looks very similar to the earlier painting.

Beyond the difference in tone and color, the major difference in the second picture is that it includes a new, fifth character. Behind the disciples and the innkeeper, positioned in the shadows, is an elderly maid, her face heavily wrinkled and downcast. She holds an empty bowl and seems too preoccupied with her own thoughts to be paying any mind to the dinner party. Her inclusion is strange. She doesn't appear in the first version, and her presence in the upper right corner seems to unbalance the composition. Whereas the 1601 version is perfectly composed, balancing one of the disciple's waving arms with the innkeeper's passive stance, the 1606 version seems awkwardly composed. The maid's upper torso floats at the edge of the action. She could be removed with no effect on the overall composition.

Who is she, and why did Caravaggio include her in this second painting? Her identity has been the source of much speculation by art historians throughout the years, so allow me to add to the conjecture. Rather than identify her as a historical person, perhaps she is cypher, or stand-in, for other persons in the Gospels—the prostitute from Simon's table, or the tax collector Zacchaeus, or the shepherds from Bethlehem, or the woman who suffered from bleeding, or the Samaritan woman at the well. Or maybe she represents the unremembered, everyday people who seemed to find their way into Jesus' orbit.

Look carefully at the elderly maid. She seems burdened with a lifetime of woes. She is a poor, elderly woman, a maid, perhaps with no family to care for at home. The inclusion of such a maid would have offended some of the church leaders for whom Caravaggio worked. Whereas artists like Giovanni Bellini had surrounded the infant Christ with saints and scholars, Caravaggio surrounds the resurrected Christ with the poor, the uneducated, the forgotten.

Some scholars have suggested that perhaps the maid represents Caravaggio himself. Just as she is an outcast—a poor woman in a rich man's world—so too was Caravaggio feeling increasingly alienated from the church in 1606. A radical in a time of conformity, passionate and innovative, Caravaggio represented everything that the church stood against. Of questionable sexual morals, and with a violent temper and a predilection for fighting duels, whose work was continually questioned, Caravaggio knew what it was like to be held with suspicion by the church. The realism with which he treated even religious subjects disturbed his patrons greatly, and here in "Supper at Emmaus" (1606), the outsider is included at the table of the resurrected one, as with a tranquil gesture he blesses the bread.

I find myself pondering this work, drawn repeatedly to the worried waitress. Whoever she was to Caravaggio, the woman represents the field of mission to which all of us are called. If Jesus' presence is the background of the field of mission, the maid represents its subject. She represents the millions who do not know Christ, the ostracized, the marginalized, the hopeless. She represents your neighbor and mine.