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«Un gran soggetto ma non ideale»: Caravaggio and Bellori's legacy

The recent exhibition, *L'idea del bello*, organized around the ideas and critical importance of the seventeenth-century Roman biographer and art theorist Giovan Pietro Bellori, is uniquely innovative. Its two sections create a dialogue between paintings and criticism that makes concrete Bellori's views on the Antique and Raphael as the basis of Ideal art, as well as the reasons for his canonization of Annibale Carracci as the ideal artist. However, in the introduction to the catalogue, its organizers mention three artists, forming a quarter of Bellori's biographies, that they felt would raise questions within the show: Federico Barocci, Peter Paul Rubens and Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. Of these artists, each of whom represents a different aspect of non-Ideal art, it is the latter that in our century has become essential to any discussion of seventeenth-century painting. Yet, especially in relation to Bellori, he remains problematic.

In the words of the catalogue introduction's essayist, Evelina Borea,

«If in his walks Bellori came to Santa Maria del Popolo, he could not avoid posing himself the intriguing question of the comparison between the traditional Assumption of Annibale Carracci in the Cerasi Chapel and Caravaggio's two revolutionary canvases flanking it. Bellori did not like Caravaggio, he was disturbed by his direct, unedited shots of nature, but somehow Bellori was fascinated by his bold manner [...].»¹

The chapel has long served as a standard contrast between the artists. However, it is my contention that these paintings, created well before Bellori's birth and well before his critical activity, are not in themselves disharmonious, or were not seen as such at the moment of their creation. I would like to propose that, rather than the «revolutionary» canvases themselves, it is this traditional comparison, a polarity inherited from Bellori's late work, that should be the focus of our attention. Codified in Bellori's *Lives* and his *Idea*, the critical and moral terms used to describe Caravaggio approach those used for the Northern Bamboccianti of the mid-1600s, who represent the antithesis of the writer's ideal. This very gradual process of assimilation was not fully in

place until the final, published version of 1672. By tracing Caravaggio's critical fortunes, which turn on the basic relationship between prudence and nature, among seventeenth-century art theorists, as well as possible market factors affecting perceptions of the artist, I propose to highlight the great difference between Bellori's late opinions of Annibale and Caravaggio, which color our own, and the historical situation at the moment of the chapel's commission. This contextual approach, with its attention to the history of criticism, will, I hope, shed new light on what has become a central tenet of seventeenth-century art history.

The inclusion of both Annibale and Caravaggio in the campaign of decoration for the Cerasi chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo (fig. 1) indicates that, at the moment of the commission, the artists were seen as equals and collaborators. Among recent critics who have addressed the issue of collaboration we find differing opinions of their interaction. But these critics uniformly conceive of this interaction in terms of competition. In his monograph on Annibale Carracci, Donald Posner wrote:

«The new styles introduced by Annibale and Caravaggio together proved fatal to the tradition of Roman Mannerism. However, the stylistic terms in which Caravaggio's opposition to Mannerism was formulated were almost equally inimical to Annibale's art.»²

Posner believes that the artists did not collaborate closely, and that the experience of competition contributed to the idealism of Annibale's *Assumption*.³ Elizabeth Cropper and Charles Dempsey write that «Posner thinks the painters could not have influenced each other.⁴ Creighton Gilbert, again reading Posner, says that «Carracci was led by his stressful competition with Caravaggio in the Cerasi chapel to react with a still more intense adherence to an even drier classicism».⁵ A more concrete picture than any we can obtain from these psychological readings emerges from the reports we have of the artists' opinions of each other: Annibale's disapproval of Caravaggio's «troppo naturale» and use of light and the latter's reaction to his *Saint Margaret*, «quella che il Carravaggio ci moriva sopra in riguardarla».⁶

These comments, in combination with the evidence of the Cerasi chapel itself, point to a more complex interaction between the artists.

The Cerasi chapel was acquired in July 1600 by Tiberio Cerasi, treasurer to Clement VIII. The contract with Caravaggio dates from 24 September 1600,⁷ and it is presumed that the contract with Annibale would have dated from near that time. Two *avvisi* published shortly after Cerasi's death on May 3, 1601 give clues to the chronology of the decoration.⁸ That of May 5 mentions Caravaggio as a decorator but not Annibale,⁹ while the *avviso* of June 2, in addition to announcing that the Fathers of the Madonna del Popolo were now responsible for the chapel's completion, tells us that Annibale's altarpiece is complete by this date:

«One awaits now the completion of the room in the Campidoglio by the Cavaliere Giuseppe, [and] the two paintings that Caravaggio is doing for the chapel of the deceased Monsignore Cerasi, Treasurer. The principal painting in the chapel is by the said Carracci, those three paintings being, on the whole, of great excellence and beauty.»¹⁰

Caravaggio is paid for the final versions of his contributions only on 10 November 1601.¹¹

The program of the chapel reflects contemporary conventions regarding thematics and iconography examined by Clare Robertson among others.¹² The altarpiece, Annibale's *Assumption* (fig. 2), is flanked by Caravaggio's *Crucifixion of Saint Peter* (fig. 3) on the left and *Conversion of Saint Paul* (fig. 4) on the right. The ceiling frescoes, by Innocenzio Tacconi after Annibale's design, are, respectively, the *Coronation of the Virgin* (fig. 5), the *Domine quo vadis* (fig. 6), and *Paul's Transportation to the Third Heaven* (fig. 7). Each earthly episode finds a corresponding supernatural one in the vault above. Leo Steinberg observed in 1959 that the chapel's «continuity of real space with aesthetic illusion» is enhanced by the unified light source for all three paintings, the dove in the vault, and the attention to the viewer's oblique viewpoint in the flanking paintings.¹³ These spatial concerns indicate that the artists, not immune one to the other, worked within a relatively standard framework conceived by the patron. The artists were allowed a certain freedom of iconography in the commission, given that the first versions of Caravaggio's paintings were replaced by his own quite different compositions.¹⁴ This replacement seems related to the spatial problem of



Fig. 1: Annibale Carracci, Innocenzo Tacconi and Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Cerasi chapel*, 1600-01, fresco, stucco and oil on canvas, Rome, Santa Maria del Popolo (courtesy of Foto Vasari, Rome).

the narrow chapel's focus on Annibale's previously completed altarpiece.¹⁵

Although the subject of much debate in recent years, Caravaggio's well-known antisocial behavior is not the only focus criticism by his seventeenth-century biographers. Rather, it is another manifestation of the artist's painterly shortcomings. In the seventeenth century, the parts of painting, whose definitions were refined within the framework of rhetoric, are morally charged. The representational choices of the artist thus become moral choices, so that, read within the proper framework, the canvas hints at the artist's character. As Robert Williams points out, Giorgio Vasari's earlier definitions of *disegno*, scattered throughout the *Lives*, are all related to prudence or judgment: a universal judgment comprehending the unity of nature, judgment in selection of the most beautiful things for imitation, and judgment in subordination of particulars to the whole in painting. This sense of prudence informs the use of color, the habit of painting based on imitation of others, *maniera*, and the fitting of the physical aspect of painting to its subject and setting, decorum.¹⁶ Nature within this system of thought provides the subject for imitation, and is thus morally neutral. In general terms, Annibale's paint-

ing is based on the refinement of nature and Caravaggio's is based on its expression. The shifting relationship between nature and prudence in the critical terms used by the seventeenth-century biographers provides the scale by which to measure their assessments of the two artists.

For Vincenzo Giustiniani, writing in the 1620s, nature and *maniera* are part of a continuum:

«The twelfth mode is the most perfect of all; because it is more difficult, uniting the tenth with the eleventh mode mentioned above, that is painting from style, with the example of nature in front of one, since the most renowned, excellent painters of the first class painted that way; and in our times Caravaggio, the Carracci, and Guido Reni, and others, among which some went more into nature than style, and others more in style than nature, without however leaving behind one or the other ways of painting, going into good disegno and true color, and giving proper and true lighting.»¹⁷

Giustiniani elevates *maniera* above the other parts of painting, placing it on the same level as nature. He thus equates the expression of prudence that is dependent upon art with the *materia* that is art's foundation. In his view, Annibale and Caravaggio are involved in a similar process of pictorial choice. Giustiniani's contemporary Giulio Mancini, on the other hand, begins to contrast the artists' goals through contrasting their working methods:

«Annibale was a universal painter, sacred, profane, fun-loving and serious, and a true painter because he worked from his imagination without having the exemplar from nature in front of him; he expressed emotions within very good compositions, and adhered well to the rules of decorum.»¹⁸

«This school [of Caravaggio] in this way of execution is very observant of real objects, which [the artists] always keep in front of them while they work; they do separate figures well, but in narrative compositions and expressing emotions, since these depend from imagination and not from observation of things, since they portray the real objects that they always have in front of them, I don't think they are very worthy, since it is impossible to put a multitude of men in one room with light from a single window to act out the narrative, and have one laughing or crying or pretending to walk while staying still to be copied, and thus their figures, even though they are



Fig. 2: Annibale Carracci, *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1600–01, oil on canvas, 245 x 155 cm, Rome, Santa Maria del Popolo, Cerasi Chapel (courtesy Scala/Art Resource).

forceful, lack motion and emotion, and grace, which is because of that way of working.»¹⁹

The use of the terms «universal» and «true» to describe Annibale in contrast to the «real objects» portrayed by Caravaggio indicates that truth and reality are not congruent for Mancini. Annibale exercises pictorial judgment without recourse to the model, meaning not that his art is divorced from nature but that it is informed by it to such an extent that a specific model is insufficient. Caravaggio's adherence to nature, even though it imparts persuasiveness to his figures, is for Mancini a symptom of his lack of imagination, the ability to reason on the basis of nature. This implies a lack of prudence, first expressed by Giovanni Battista Agucchi and fully brought out by Bellori.

Agucchi and Bellori formulate the theory that dominates our reading of the Carracci and Caravaggio. The function of art for both is the visual expression of a higher truth based on the refinement of nature. Their

theories codify the polarity between Annibale and Caravaggio which reaches its fullest expression in Bellori's *Lives*. Agucchi's *Idea della bellezza* and Bellori's *Idea* bring together ideas that were not original to their authors, but which had not been synthesized into a coherent whole.²⁰ Although both are based on ancient sources, Bellori casts his net much wider than does Agucchi.

The *Idea della bellezza*, written between 1607 and 1615, comes to us in fragmentary form, published as the introduction of Simon Guillain's etchings after drawings by Annibale Carracci in 1646.²¹ It is essentially a combination of ideas found in Aristotle and Alberti. The novelty of Agucchi's theory is this fusion of ancient and modern. Basing himself on Aristotle's *Poetics*, Agucchi concludes that just as in poetry, vulgarity and the highest art are incompatible in painting. Aristotle divides the poets between the serious-minded, who deal with noble themes, and the trivial-minded, who deal with vulgar themes. He also addresses the question of whether tragic poetry is a higher form than epic. His criterion for judgment, which is taken up by Agucchi, is imitation. The highest form of art is idealized imitation, in which the author or artist treats the subject as it ought to be. Aristotle's example is itself drawn from painting:

«Since tragedy is an imitation of persons above the common level, the example of good portrait painters should be followed. They, while reproducing the distinctive features of the original, make a likeness true to life and yet more beautiful. So too the poet, in representing men hot tempered or indolent or with other defects of character, should preserve the type and yet ennoble it.»²²

Agucchi combines this ennobling purpose of art with the concept of judicious imitation exemplified in Alberti by the episode of Zeuxis and the Crotoniat maids:

«In order to make a painting which the citizens placed in the temple of Lucina near Croton, Zeuxis [...] chose the five most beautiful young girls from the youth of that land in order to draw from them whatever beauty is praised in a woman.»²³

The *Idea della bellezza* has been seen as the middle course between naturalism and mannerism.

Agucchi was supposedly responsible for the programme of Annibale's Galleria, and this would have begun his interest in art.²⁴ According to Denis Mahon, the writing of the treatise itself took place during the period in which Annibale's pupil Domenichino lodged



Fig. 3: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Crucifixion of Saint Peter*, 1600-01, oil on canvas, 230 x 175 cm, Rome, Santa Maria del Popolo, Cerasi Chapel (courtesy of Scala/Art Resource).

with the theorist, and is the product of their collaboration. If this is the case, the extremely close relationship between the two Bolognese points to a possible circular argument: the Carracci's process of judicious selection of artistic models, applied and current among the artists of the Accademia degli Incamminati, was waiting for a theorist on the Roman stage. Agucchi's contribution would have been the integration of such a process with ancient tradition.

Agucchi's description of the Carracci's experience of ancient and modern artists seems Neoplatonic when he uses the term *Idea*, but is based firmly in his interpretation of Aristotle's idealized imitation:

«As soon as they saw the statues of Rome, and the paintings of Raphael and Michelangelo, and as they especially reflected upon those of Raphael, they confessed that they found themselves in the presence of higher understanding and greater delicacy of disegno than in the works of Lombardy; and they decided that to establish a manner of sovereign perfection, it would be fitting to unite the beauty of Lombard colorito with the extremely subtle Roman disegno. And since they soon perceived the kind of study Raphael had made of antique things, from which he had found out how to con-

ceive the Idea of that beauty which is not found in nature, if not in the manner that we were speaking about before; the Carracci put themselves to studying the most celebrated and famous statues of Rome; and given that they were already great masters, in a short time they showed that they had taken great profit from it.»²⁵

In addition to imitating nature, the Carracci imitate other artists, creating a second level of selection. Vasari's moral concept of *diseño* and the other parts of painting remains in force, characterized here by greater or lesser understanding. Agucchi's mention of Caravaggio is short but resonant:

«Bassano was a Peiraikos in his manner of representing the worse models, and a great part of the modern painters showed their equals, and among these Caravaggio, who was excellent in color, has to be compared to Demetrius, because he left the Idea of beauty behind, being disposed to pursue the appearance of everything.»²⁶

Agucchi echoes a passage in Alberti's third book:

«Demetrius, an antique painter, failed to obtain the ultimate praise because he was much more careful to make things similar to the natural than to the lovely.»²⁷

Caravaggio is compared to an ancient artist but is criticized by a modern criterion, the *Idea della bellezza*. Thus, Agucchi's only mention of the artist in the surviving fragment emphasizes his unworthiness and adherence to nature while at the same time legitimizing the theory itself. This passing reference in the early treatise is the seed from which Bellori's condemnation of Caravaggio eventually grows.

Bellori's *Idea*, though based on Agucchi, is more comprehensive. Included in publication of the *Lives* at the last minute, it was originally given as a lecture to the Accademia di San Luca in 1664. Much of the *Idea* comes from the second chapter of *De pictura veterum* by Francis Junius, the Dutch librarian to the Earl of Arundel. This attempt to characterize the ancient tradition of painting through references in Greek and Latin literature is the foundation upon which Bellori then builds a canon of new painting. The greater array of ancient sources at the author's disposal, in addition to legitimizing Bellori's theory through appeal to tradition, is deployed in an argument through *copia*. Many of these sources, especially Plato and Pliny, are freely interpreted to create a canon of art.

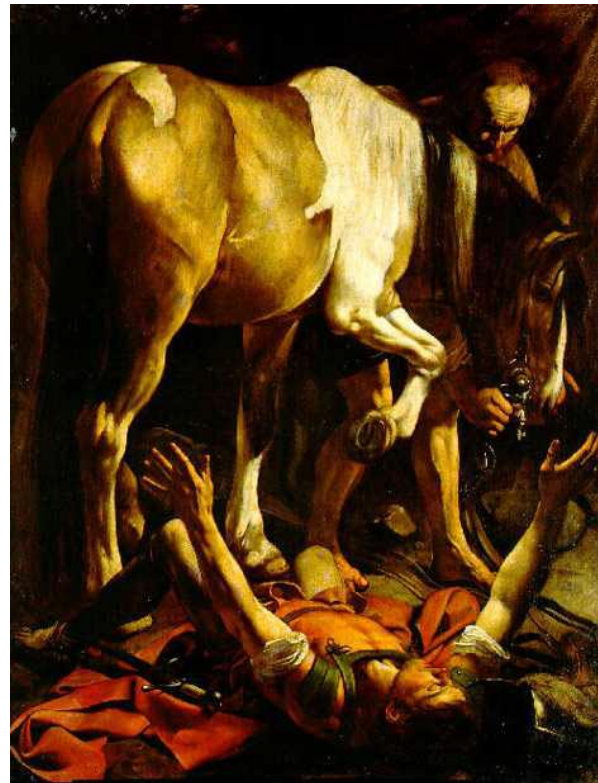


Fig. 4: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Conversion of Saint Paul*, 1600-01, oil on canvas, 230 x 175cm, Rome, Santa Maria del Popolo, Cerasi Chapel (courtesy of Scala / Art Resource).

Like so many ancient works of literature, among them Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the lecture begins with a creation story: The creator, identified with an intellect, conceived of the first ideas, so that his creatures came to be through the first idea. The celestial bodies, stars and planets, are not subject to change, but the earthly ones are subject to both change and imperfection. These imperfections come from the material. In the *Idea*, the function of the artist is to correct the imperfections of nature. The *Idea* thus gives birth to art, from an intellectual quality becomes practical, and because it is founded in imagination gives life to the image. It consists of the perfect mental model that each creature in part resembles, combining the truth and verisimilitude, becoming superior to nature. Here Bellori, following Agucchi, brings in Zeuxis and the Crotoniat maids. Nature is therefore inferior to art, and in fact the ancients and moderns who followed nature are criticized. Caravaggio, the first modern artist to appear in the *Idea*, illustrates this point. The common principle uniting poetry and painting is that of making men appear as they should be, and again the source is the fifteenth chapter of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Imagination makes the painter wiser than does imitation, because he then examines

the relationship between what he does and does not see. Bellori's illustrations here include Leon Battista Alberti, Leonardo da Vinci, and Raphael, clarifying his valuation of the moderns. The superiority of art to nature is such that, according to Bellori, the Trojan war was waged not for Helen but for a statue with her image.²⁸ His examples of praise for statues and paintings surpassing nature are both ancient and modern: Ovid, Philostratus, Ludovico Ariosto (in his turn imitating Ovid), and Giambattista Marino. Bellori differs from Agucchi in that he gives practical advice about the artist's procedures. He places great emphasis on the representation of «azzione» or «moto», the emotions. The concept of each emotion must be present in the mind of the painter, who must fit the motions of the body to those of the mind. Copying the work of other artists and of nature are not recommended, since the defects of the masters on the one hand and of nature on the other are magnified. Bellori sees the naturalists as parallel to the writer Christolus, who appealed to art without artifice (*atechnia*) and therefore to the common taste.²⁹

The *Lives* are based on the principles outlined in the *Idea* but are written before and during the development of the theory. The twelve biographies are divided into three equal parts by the lives of Annibale, Caravaggio and Domenichino, each followed by three artists who follow them thematically rather than strictly chronologically. Annibale is followed by Agostino Carracci, Domenico Fontana, and Barocci; Caravaggio by Rubens, Anthony van Dyck, and François Duquesnoy; and Domenichino by Lanfranco, Alessandro Algardi, and Nicolas Poussin. Bellori casts Agucchi's concept of selective imitation in terms of one artist in his view of Annibale's process:

«One cannot say enough about how much Annibale internalized the best parts of Correggio and made them his own, as much in the positions and motions of the figures, as drawing and coloring them with the master's sweet idea, and particularly in the gloria [at the top part of the picture] which seems to be colored by his brush.»³⁰

Bellori then tells of Annibale's trip to Venice to study the masters, «intento solamente all'opere di quei grandi artefici, come si riconobbe dal suo profitto».³¹ This process echoes that of Raphael in Vasari's biography in which the master takes Fra Bartolommeo as his main source of artistic inspiration:



Fig. 5: Innocenzo Tacconi on a design of Annibale Carracci, *Ceiling of the Cerasi Chapel, with the central Coronation of the Virgin*, 1600-01, fresco, Rome, Santa Maria del Popolo, Cerasi Chapel (courtesy of Foto Vasari, Rome).

«Raphael, then, having made this resolve, and knowing that Fra Bartolomeo of San Marco had a very good way of painting, solid draughtsmanship and a pleasant manner of coloring, although he sometimes used too many darks in order to give greater relief, took from him what his need and fancy demanded, namely, a middle style as regards both drawing and coloring; and by mixing this style with certain others chosen from the best things by other masters, made of many styles a single one, which was thereafter his own and which was and will always be infinitely admired by artists.»³²

Bellori thus assimilates Annibale's working method to that of the great moderns in the same way that he assimilates his own theory to the ancient authors. He contrasts this method to the extremes among the Roman painters of Annibale's time:

«The authors in Rome were Michelangelo da Caravaggio and Giuseppe d'Arpino; the first purely copied bodies as they appear to the eyes, without selection, the second did not look at nature, following the whim of instinct.»³³

Bellori uses seventeenth-century artists to characterize the extremes of mannerism and naturalism that Agucchi had defined in general terms. Annibale's art thus becomes normative in relation to that of his contemporaries. Bellori's concrete example elevates Annibale's reputation at Caravaggio's expense.

The formulation of the *Idea*, its emphasis on the ancients, the Roman moderns, and the selection of beauties, informs Bellori's biography of Caravaggio from its opening words. Agucchi's analogy between Demetrius and Caravaggio becomes Bellori's thesis for the entire biography:

«It is said that the ancient sculptor Demetrios studied resemblances so much that he was more pleased with imitation than beauty; we have seen the same thing in Michelangelo Merigi, who recognized no other master than the model, and it appears that, without selection of the best natural forms, he emulated art without artifice, a stunning thing.»³⁴

The concept of *atechnia* used in the *Idea* reappears to signal Bellori's position regarding Caravaggio: just as Christolaus, his example in the *Idea*, wrote against Quintillian's rhetoric based in the intellect,³⁵ Caravaggio's adherence to nature becomes an anti-intellectual, anti-rhetorical, and ultimately anti-Carracci device. Caravaggio is criticized for his lack of selection, which, like his use of the parts of painting, points to a lack of prudence:

«Caravaggio valued no-one but himself, calling himself the only faithful imitator of nature; even so, he lacked many and the best parts [of painting], because he had no invention or decorum or disegno or any systematic knowledge of painting, while if the model was taken away from his eyes, his hand and his creative mind were empty.»³⁶

Disegno and decorum, first theorized in relation to prudence by Vasari, are thus of more value than color in Bellori's eyes. Bellori links adherence to nature, lack of prudence, and color in the *Idea* as anti-intellectual qualities:

«Since the people understand everything through sight, they praise things painted from nature, because they are used to seeing similar things, they value the beautiful colors, and not the beautiful forms that they do not understand; they tire of elegance, and approve novelty; they spurn reason, and move away from the truth of art, which is the basis of the most noble simulacrum of the *Idea*.»³⁷

The physical characteristics of Caravaggio's painting thus implicate the artist in the danger of imprudence, the appeal to the common taste while excluding intellectual content. Bellori's view of Annibale and Caravaggio opposes the intellectual content of the former's art to Caravaggio's presumed anti-rhetorical stance.

But Caravaggio did have a rhetoric, one that functioned to persuade audiences of the highest level if we take into account his patrons. The moral dialogue based on prudence, though hinted at by Vasari, is a product of complete systems of thought that are not current at the



Fig. 6: Innocenzo Tacconi on a design of Annibale Carracci, *Domine quo vadis*, 1600-01, fresco, Rome, Santa Maria del Popolo, Cerasi Chapel (courtesy of Foto Vasari, Rome).

time of the painting of the Cerasi chapel. New emphasis should perhaps be given to Giustiniani's reading of the artists, since he recognizes that the artists belong to different, but not opposed, modes of picturing. The roles of nature and prudence in art at that time are not yet fully theorized, and are surely not seen in terms of conflict. The pictorial language of Annibale's altarpiece differs from Caravaggio's canvases of the saints, but both fit into the rhetorical framework conceived by the patron. Caravaggio's episodes of the saints' lives exist to persuade us about an earthly event; Annibale's *Assumption* is *a priori* a supernatural episode. Other seventeenth-century commissions were fitted to the capabilities of the artists. According to Anthony Colantuono:

«In the letter of July 7, Spada [...] tells Barberini of a new plan, in which he would encourage the queen mother to bring the Centese painter Guercino to France instead of Guido. [...] [quoting Virgilio Spada's letter of July 23] [H]e could not only stand up to the large scale of the work desired by Your Majesty, but could also be done with it much more promptly; and because he has vigorous disegno and a colorito of the greatest power and liveliness, he is judged by everyone, and by Guido himself, as having the greatest aptitude for representations of battles and great and majestic actions [...]»³⁸

The patron likely had in mind the strengths of Annibale and Caravaggio and the appropriateness of these strengths to the subjects when the commission was given, rather than, as in Leonardo's and Michelangelo's fresco commission for the Palazzo Vecchio, a *concours de pinceau*.

Bellori's opposition between Annibale and Caravaggio in the *Lives* appears even more ahistorical when

we look at the consequences of the latter's art through his eyes: the degeneration of painting, its concern with life rather than thought, and the eventual appeal to the masses. These criticisms of Caravaggio are in fact based on the influence of Northerners in Rome at the time of Bellori's writing. Maurizio Marini pointed to the hypothesis if not the process of this contamination:

«The crystallization of Caravaggio readings and the grouping of the naturalists under his leadership we owe to Bellori. It is in other words the beginning of the historical forgery in which Caravaggio's essentially autonomous art ends up being considered part of the 'outcasts', the genre painters and Bamboccianti and, in the best of cases, the realistic academic art of Manfredi.»³⁹

When we look at the chronology of Bellori's writings, we find that in the earlier part of the century he had been more open to Caravaggio. Jean-François Lhote has examined the development in relation to Bellori's poem prefacing Giovanni Baglione's *Lives* in the early 1640s.⁴⁰ The poem seems rather independent of Baglione's content, and from the survival of a copy of Baglione annotated by Bellori, we know that the latter was rather critical of Baglione's methods and some of his opinions, especially as regards Caravaggio.⁴¹ In his postille, he says:

«Caravaggio is worthy of great praise, being the only one who devoted himself to the imitation of nature in opposition to all the others who were imitating other artists.»⁴²

The association of adherence to nature and imprudence must therefore postdate the composition of the poem. According to Lhote, Bellori associates the three 'governors' he will later use in the *Lives*, Annibale, Caravaggio, and Domenichino, each to one of the three Graces.⁴³

«Of [all] the Carracci's lofty merits, admire Annibale, that sublime emulator of nature who expresses in his works eternal appearances, celestial Ideas: who, while he unveils sovereign art unique to the world, steals all of the honors, glories, charms, and ornaments of the Graces: and his great name now flies (now that Carthage has been made humble and Bologna immortal) from Hades to Thule.»

«Perceive the great Michelangelo da Caravaggio give life and shelter to colors in his works, and with truthful deception let truth behind his masks. That thing in linen which he shows to other eyes [pun: also 'lights'] is not a painting, since he did not paint vulgar canvases: but



Fig. 7: Innocenzo Tacconi on a design of Annibale Carracci, *Transportation of Paul to the Third Heaven*, 1600-01, Rome, Santa Maria del Popolo, Cerasi Chapel (courtesy of Foto Vasari, Rome).

Nature granted it living pigments, gave it her spirits, and impressed herself upon it.»⁴⁴

It is important to note that in addition to his praise for Annibale's expression of «celestial Ideas», Bellori emphasizes his imitation of nature. Caravaggio's subjects are «not vulgar», and his adherence to nature is seen in a positive light. In the process of writing the *Lives* during the 1650s and early 60s, Bellori's attitude towards the adherence to nature changes.

Baglione himself had early associated the Northerners to Caravaggio:

«[S]ome people think that he has ruined painting, because many young artists following his example devote themselves to imitating a head from nature, and since they do not study the foundations of disegno, and the profound quality of art, they are satisfied only with the coloring; which means that they do not know how to put together two figures, or weave any narrative at all, because they do not understand the benefit of such a noble art.»⁴⁵

Baglione's use of the present tense, the only such use in his account of Caravaggio, indicates that the followers to which he refers are not the earlier ones, like Manfredi or even Honthorst, but the Bamboccianti active at the time of his writing. The famous exchange of letters between Andrea Sacchi and Francesco Albani in 1651, while criticizing the Northerners in some detail, divides this rabble from the Ideal painters:

«I would swear, that only the Northerners have spread such detriments to painting among these schools. [...] Meanwhile let the good painters follow the true path, let them aspire to perfection, let them never abandon nobility: if the plebeians will not admire them, the best will observe them, they will not be dazzled by applause, but

will be celebrated with praise, their name will not be shouted by great crowds, but will flow from the mouths of the wise.»⁴⁶

Since both Sacchi and Albani were both students of the Carracci, it is likely that they and their sentiments, if not this letter, would have been known to Bellori. By 1664, the date of the *Idea*, he associates Caravaggio with his supposed followers:

«Pauson and Pyrrheicus were more thoroughly condemned, for having imitated the worst and most base, just as in our times Michelangelo da Caravaggio was too natural, painting his equals, and Bamboccio painting those worse than himself.»⁴⁷

In the *Lives*, the consequences of Caravaggio's adherence to nature approach artistic chaos:

«In this way the painters in Rome at that time were taken with the novelty [of Caravaggio's painting], and particularly the young ones competed with him and celebrated him as the only imitator of nature, and regarding his works as miracles they outdid each other to follow him, undressing models and raising their light sources, and without paying any more attention to study and teachings, each one easily found in the squares and streets their masters and exemplars to copy after nature.»⁴⁸

«Thus since the majesty of art was brought down by Caravaggio, everyone took liberties with it, and there followed contempt for beautiful things, since all authority had been taken away from the ancients and Raphael [...]. Then they began imitating base things, seeking out filthiness and deformity, as some eagerly and habitually do: if they have to paint armor, they pick the rustiest, if a vase, they do not make it whole, but broken at the neck. They wear britches and berets, and in imitating bodies they stop to study only the wrinkles and defects of the skin and its surroundings, they make the hands knotted, and the members altered by disease.»⁴⁹

Between the date of Bellori's poem and the date of the publication of the *Lives*, the biographer does an about-face in his assessment of Caravaggio: in 1642, the artist does «not paint vulgar canvases»; by 1672, Caravaggio «often degenerates into humble and vulgar forms».⁵⁰ In those thirty years, the Bamboccianti gained such a following as to threaten the Ideal painters in the

marketplace.⁵¹ In a recent article, Volker Reinhardt has shown the unique appeal of the Bamboccianti to aristocratic patrons, an appeal that threatened the Ideal artists through economics. The only group of artists whose works were both sold on the open market and included in the great Roman collections, the Bamboccianti painted a helpless, droll poverty that, in Reinhardt's words, «confirmed the position of the elite, and allowed them to transform their fear [of the lower classes] into laughter».⁵² The wide purchase of their works by the highest patrons occurred outside prevailing systems of patronage though, as Reinhardt rightly points out, the artists still had to cater to aristocratic taste.⁵³ One is hard-pressed to find more than superficial resemblance between their paintings and Caravaggio's: though both deal with nature, the themes, and the origins of each naturalism differ widely. However, Bellori's view, following Sacchi and Albani, goes as far as essentially to remove Caravaggio from Italy and transport him to the North. In the *Lives*, the Italian artist heads the group of Northerners, artists as different from him as Rubens, van Dyck, and Duquesnoy. Bellori's false connection between these artists and Caravaggio greatly strengthens his case. He creates a much better foil to Annibale than Caravaggio alone would have formed, especially in the context of the visual evidence of the Cerasi chapel.

Bellori's conclusion represents the result of his canonization of Ideal art, which ends up necessitating the marginalization of Caravaggio. Through the discourse of prudence which informs the theories of the *Idea della bellezza* and the *Idea*, Caravaggio is placed more and more outside the mainstream position provided for Annibale over the course of the seventeenth century. Caravaggio's final assimilation to the Northern artists, while an effective method of rationalizing the qualities of his art that differ from Annibale's, is an ahistorical device whose power is still felt. This theoretical subtext which, as we have seen, belongs not to the time of the Cerasi chapel, nor even the lifetime of the artists, but rather to later critics, must be separated carefully from any reading of these two artists.

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Notes

- 1 Borea 2000, *Introduzione*, p. xx. Translation of this and other passages from the Italian my own.
- 2 Posner 1971, *Carracci*, p. 137.
- 3 Posner 1971, *Carracci*, p. 138.
- 4 Cropper / Dempsey 1987, *State*, p. 497 n. 21.
- 5 Gilbert 1995, *Caravaggio*, p. 85.
- 6 Posner 1971, *Carracci*, p. 175 n. 20; Mahon 1951, *Caravaggio*, p. 230 n. 72.
- 7 Cinotti 1991, *Vita*, p. 70.
- 8 Witcombe 1993, *Avvisi*, p. 22-29.
- 9 Witcombe 1993, *Avvisi*, p. 26.
- 10 Witcombe 1993, *Avvisi*, p. 24.
- 11 Cinotti 1991, *Vita*, p. 70.
- 12 Roberston 1982, *Caro*, p. 160-181.
- 13 Steinberg 1959, *Cerasi*, p. 189; p. 185.
- 14 The original version of the *Conversion of Saint Paul's* gesture of raising Paul from his blindness, while Paul covers his eyes to shield himself from the light. A later seventeenth-century version of the *Crucifixion of Saint Peter* now in the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg is perhaps a copy of the original version for the chapel, presenting similar complexities of composition, which were simplified for the final version as was the *Conversion*. For a detailed discussion see Cinotti 1983, *Opere*, p. 535-561.
- 15 It seems that the *Conversion of Saint Paul* in the Odeschalchi collection might not have worked because it is conceived with a frontal viewpoint in mind. It would not have contributed to the sense of depth in the chapel, as the figures, like those of the Doria *Rest on the Flight*, adhere to the surface in much the same way as Annibale's altarpiece. In addition, Howard Hibbard's criticism of the final version's decorum: «A hostile viewer — and surely there were many — would chiefly see the rear end of a horse [...] (Hibbard 1983, *Caravaggio*, p. 123)» is less true of the final than the Odeschalchi version because of the placement of the picture within the chapel.
- 16 For a complete discussion of the relationship between prudence and *disegno*, see Williams 1997, *ART*, p. 33-50.
- 17 Letter from Giustiniani to the artist Dirk Amayden, in Dell'Acqua 1971, *Caravaggio*, appendix by Mia Cinotti, p. 166.
- 18 Mancini 1956-1957, *Considerazioni*, vol. I, p. 219.
- 19 Mancini 1956-1957, *Considerazioni*, vol. I, p. 108.
- 20 Anthony Colantuono (1997) points out the dependence of Agucchi's *Idea della bellezza's Idea del bello*, the poetics of epic prefiguring those of painting. For a brief discussion see p. 174-175.
- 21 Mahon 1947, *Studies*, p. 113.
- 22 Aristotle 1943, *Man*, p. 436.
- 23 Alberti 1966, *Painting*, p. 93.
- 24 Mahon 1947, *Studies*, p. 115-116.
- 25 Mahon 1947, *Studies*, p. 252.
- 26 Mahon 1947, *Studies*, p. 256.
- 27 Alberti 1966, *Painting*, p. 92, also in Mahon 1947, *Studies*, p. 132.
- 28 Bellori gives no ancient source, but according to Victor Stoichita draws on the non-Homeric tradition of Stesichoros, Euripides, and Herodotus. See Stoichita 1989, *Bellori*, p. 61-63.
- 29 The *Idea* is not a completely original formulation; elements of it appear in other biographers of Caravaggio from van Mander to Scannelli.
- 30 Bellori 1976, *Vite*, p. 35.
- 31 Bellori 1976, *Vite*, p. 36.
- 32 Quoted in Williams 1997, *Art*, p. 83.
- 33 Bellori 1976, *Vite*, p. 32.
- 34 Bellori 1976, *Vite*, p. 211.
- 35 “[C]ome Critolao voleva che l'eloquenza fosse una usanza di dire ed una perizia di piacere, trisi e kakotechnia, o più tosto atechnia, abito, senz'arte e senza ragione, togliendo l'ufficio alla mente e donando ogni cosa al senso». Bellori 1976, *Vite*, p. 22.
- 36 Bellori 1976, *Vite*, p. 230.
- 37 Bellori 1976, *Vite*, p. 22. This is an amplification of Agucchi's passage about nature and the people. See Mahon 1947, *Studies*, p. 146.
- 38 Colantuono 1997, *Reni*, p. 29-30.
- 39 Marini 1981, *Esordi*, p. 69.
- 40 Lhote 1987, *Bellori*, p. 75-89.
- 41 Reprinted in facsimile edition with introduction by Valerio Mariani, Rome, 1935.
- 42 Baglione 1935, *Vite*, p. 137.
- 43 Annibale is ruled by Euphrosyne, or Joy, Caravaggio by Thalia, representing the life force, and Domenichino, Aglaia, representing Splendor. Lhote deduces this from the mention of Aglaia in the strophe dealing with Domenichino and the thematics of the other two.
- 44 Baglione 1995, *Vite*, n. p.
- 45 Baglione 1995, *Vite*, p. 138.
- 46 Malvasia 1841, *Vite*, p. 181.
- 47 Bellori 1976, *Vite*, p. 16. Pauson is the painter used by Aristotle to illustrate the three types of drama.
- 48 Bellori 1976, *Vite*, p. 217.
- 49 Bellori 1976, *Vite*, p. 230.
- 50 Bellori 1976, *Vite*, p. 223.
- 51 Haskell 1963, *Patrons*, p. 131-158, expands on the impact of the Bamboccianti on the art market in this period.
- 52 Reinhardt 1998, *Market*, p. 81-92, p. 90-91.
- 53 Reinhardt 1998, *Market*, p. 91.

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Abstract

For modern art history, the Cerasi Chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo has long epitomized the opposition of Annibale Carracci and Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. However, it is not the paintings themselves but rather the later moral criticism of the art theorist Giovan Pietro Bellori that made Caravaggio into the anti-Annibale that we see today. The Northern Bamboccianti, obnoxiously present in mid-century Rome and successful in its art market, turned the tide against Caravaggio in Bellori's mind: likewise painters of nature, their perceived moral degeneracy tainted the Italian's painterly virtues by association.

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