

Lecture reviews 2020

CARAVAGGIO AND HIS MODELS. Dr. Marie Anne Mancio

Tuesday 14 January 2020

With detailed knowledge of, and a clear delight in her subject, Dr Mancio highlighted the originality, power and naturalism of his “new style” of painting, showing how it was very much a product of Caravaggio’s passionate engagement in life, the intensity of his vision and determined realism.

He was born in 1571 in the small town of Caravaggio near Milan, into a lowly family with good connections; and Michelangelo Marisi da Caravaggio seems to have had to deal with contrasting fortunes throughout his life. In an age of violence and bubonic plague, Marisi was an orphan by the age of eleven. He survived in Milan as a jobbing artist, before being apprenticed to Simone Peterzano, who encouraged him to go to Rome, where its many churches were vying with each other for the most magnificent interiors. He is reputed to have travelled to Rome via Venice, where he probably saw paintings by Titian, Giorgione and Tintoretto. The latter’s dramatic Crucifixion may have influenced Caravaggio as the power of the scene was partly achieved by the use of a dark rather than the traditional light background, which meant that the figures leaped out at the viewer. As the illustrated lecture unfolded we could see this technique being developed by Caravaggio throughout his life.

Arriving in Rome around 1592, unknown and impoverished, Caravaggio’s models were either friends or the poor surrounding him, often prostitutes and minor criminals. One of his first successful paintings was *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*: a beautiful boy, bursting with life, holding an exquisitely painted basket of luscious fruit, a reminder of the fleeting nature of youth. But the attention Caravaggio lavished on the contents of the basket suggests that the artist was as attracted to the actuality of the fruit not just its potential symbolism. His early paintings were much admired by the elite of Rome and one of them, Cardinal Del Monte, became his powerful patron, opening many doors for him. For one of his aristocratic admirers he produced the much praised *The Lute Player* (1596) featuring another beautiful boy, probably a castrato from the papal choir; and eventually, in 1599 he received his first public commission – three paintings for the French Franciscan Church in Rome. Caravaggio was really on his way, all the more remarkable because the popular Mannerist style – full of exaggerated, even distorted movement - was not for Caravaggio. He always focussed on the reality of life and the simple truth of powerful emotions. The drama came from this and his continuing use of chiaroscuro – painting from dark to light, with one intense light source leading the viewer to the core of the story. The lecturer illustrated this through a variety of church commissions, including the first, illustrating scenes from the life of St Matthew, and later ones, including *The Ecstasy of St Francis* (1600), where Del Monte himself seems to have modelled for the saint, also *The Conversion of Saul* and *The Sacrifice of Isaac* where his assistant Cecco may have been the model for both paintings. Though the rich and powerful were happy to sit for him, Caravaggio continued to use the poor. The beautiful boy with his basket of fruit could have been friend and fellow artist, Mario Minniti; but he would also use a prostitute, Anna Brancini, to show a Penitent Magdalen (1596/7) as well as Martha in *Martha and Mary* (1598), the Virgin in *Death of the Virgin* (1606) and *The Madonna and Child with St Anne*; while the courtesan, Fillide Melandroni, first appearing in *Portrait of a Courtesan* (1597), also modelled for the Madonna, St. Catherine, *The Martyrdom of St Catherine* and *Judith*, *Judith and Holofernes*. At a time when hierarchy was so important, any association of the Madonna and Saints with prostitutes was an outrage and would lead to trouble.

So his paintings were sometimes rejected and one in particular led to a great scandal. A commission from Vincenzo Giustiniani in 1602 *Amor Vincit Omnia* caused uproar, for the cheeky, naked, young Cupid was clearly flaunting his sexuality and rejecting the gentler Arts. An indignant cardinal commissioned a rival painter, Giovanni Baglioni, to paint a pendant to Caravaggio’s image: *Sacred Love and Profane Love* in which a more mature and powerful angel representing Sacred Love prevents the serpent from mating with Cupid. When Caravaggio mocked him for this, Baglioni created a second version in which the serpent is replaced by the devil, whose monstrously grinning face was remarkably like Caravaggio’s. There were already rumours about the artist’s possible homosexuality, so this painting added to the scandal. To make things worse, Caravaggio and Horatio Gentileschi posted scurrilous verses about Baglioni risking mortal punishment if found guilty of libel, just as the artist would have been condemned if sodomy had been proven. Del Monte was able to save Caravaggio this time, but a duel in 1606 with Ranuccio Tomasini, leading to Tomasini’s death, was a step too far for the Cardinal who abandoned his erstwhile favourite. So he fled to Naples, a very different place from the international sophistication of Rome and under Spanish rule. The fierce devotion of the latter led to many commissions, such as *The Head of John the Baptist* (1607), in which the artist appears to have used his own head to model that of the decapitated saint. Later he used himself as model again in *David with the Head of Goliath* but he is not the triumphant David, but again decapitated as the vanquished Goliath.

Although he constantly moved around to avoid the authorities he was relentlessly pursued and finally fled to Malta in July 1607, where he was given sanctuary by the Knights of Malta. Much admired there he was soon painting a portrait of the Grand Master, Olof de Wignacourt, who was clearly delighted, for Caravaggio received a host of commissions, both private portraits and religious subjects. His success led to his being welcomed into the Order, which would have given him an automatic pardon, but he assaulted a fellow knight, was expelled from the Order and imprisoned. He must have had some friends left for he escaped an impregnable prison and sailed for Sicily, where he adorned many churches with his vivid storytelling. He was pardoned but was again involved in a serious brawl, in which his face was disfigured. The scar is clearly visible in the face of Samson, where again he used himself as model. After a further time in Naples he decided to appeal to the Pope directly in Rome. Unfortunately he was arrested en route and imprisoned again. Though he was soon released, his poor health and the energy needed to continue his journey to Rome was too much for him and he died at Port'Ercole on 18 July 1610, aged 38.

His comparatively short life was as conflicted as his paintings were dramatic. In spite of the violence there was a fierce honesty and vivid engagement in life; and perhaps a profound sense of sin. Referring back to some of Caravaggio's tormented paintings, such as *The Beheading of John the Baptist* where the artist had signed the work in his own blood and *The Martyrdom of St. Ursula* (1610) where he places himself behind the martyred saint. Dr Mancio suggested the possibility that the artist was recognising his guilt for his sins and begging for forgiveness. The lecture revealed an enthralling if enigmatic figure who created unforgettable images in which the viewer is just as powerfully engaged today as they were in Renaissance Italy; and his intense naturalism and use of chiaroscuro would inspire many later artists. An enthralling morning.

Written by Kate Siebert

THE NORMANS IN ENGLAND. Rupert Willoughby

Tuesday 18 February 2020

Rupert's theme addressed the long lasting impact of the Normans on England. He pointed out that while this is visible in the castles and cathedrals, less obviously it is shown by the number of families who can trace their ancestry straight back to the Conquest. The knights who joined William on his massive gamble to invade England were brutal, pitiless and greedy. The Bayeux Tapestry depicts a knight bearing down with his sword ready to cut the throat of an Englishman who has already thrown down his. They came to plunder a peaceful land.

On arriving on Pevensey Beach, William leapt out falling heavily. However he picked himself up slowly with fistfuls of shingle in his hand, turning round what could have seemed a bad omen. He then announced, "What's mine is yours." He proved true to his word rewarding the band of 11 faithful friends with half the acreage of England; a land bonanza indeed. To Bishop Odo of Bayeux, his younger brother who commissioned the Tapestry, he gave the Earldom of Kent together with 500 manors. Robert Bigot was also amply rewarded and today his descendant is the Duke of Norfolk. Many knights passed on this generosity to their feudal followers. For example William Patrick was granted a single manor by Odo, and his name lives on in the village of Patrick Bourne which is also graced by a highly attractive Norman church.

The Norman knights hurried to erect 84 simple wooden motte and bailey castles on locations chosen in order to dominate the landscape. In time many of these would be rebuilt in stone. William himself immediately began work on building the White Tower of London. This could be seen for miles providing a potent symbol of his power and authority. Such buildings were a complete innovation in peaceful Anglo-Saxon England.

When William died in Normandy in 1087, the body was brought to his Abbey at Caen. However the funeral was a litany of disasters. It ended in farce as his huge and now bloated body would not fit into the dug grave. Finally it burst and the disgusting odour brought the service to a swift close. While William had exuded strength, piety and authority; his sons did not. William Rufus (1087-1100) scandalised the clergy by his immorality as William of Malmesbury records. From drawings we note the fashions of the court; squirrel lined cloaks, shoes with curled up toes, tunics with side slits and long hair parted in the middle – quite unlike the style of the knights shown in the Tapestry. The shoes and long sleeves, which completely covered the hands, indicate a life of soft indulgence and today it is widely assumed William was homosexual. Following the First Crusade of 1099, piety itself became a fashion and the knights hurried to outdo each other in the establishment of monasteries and churches. The majority

of our parish churches show strong evidence of the Romanesque Norman style. Winchester cathedral was rebuilt as was Canterbury with the stone being brought from Caen.

Hugh the Fat – nephew of the Conqueror and Earl of Chester - was one of the most depraved knights, but he was lavish with his gifts. This included the vast Westminster Hall which he contemptuously dismissed as being “too small!” As Rupert was brought up on the Isle of Wight we were treated to slides of Carisbrooke Castle and a reminder that the descendants of Baldwin de Redvers remain residents there to this day. There can be no doubt the Norman legacy lives on.

Written by Jennifer Thorpe

The Scheduled lectures for March, April, May and June were cancelled or postponed because of the Covid 19 pandemic. The 2020 season resumed in September online

**FASHION, FURY and FEMINISM: Woman’s Fight for Change (online). Tessa Boase
Tuesday 15 September 2020**

Fashion has always been a powerful influencer and in the Victorian and Edwardian eras it led to a trend that was to be devastating to exotic birds worldwide. The plumage trade where women wore hats decorated with feathers was a massive industry, worth at its peak the equivalent of £200 million annually with 5 million birds killed each year. The extraordinary decorative creations ranged from whole birds to delicate and rare feathers, remarkably the price of an ounce of egret feathers rose to twice that of gold. Hummingbirds, grebe, terns, and birds of paradise were amongst those sold in the markets by the thousand. Whilst the desire to have a bird hat crossed the social divide with the servant class clubbing together to buy an exotic feather to be shared around, not every woman fell under the spell. Tessa’s interesting and entertaining lecture looked at how the campaign, instigated by some remarkable women against the trade led to the founding of the RSPB. Etta Lemon, Emily Williamson and Eliza Philips, unheralded for decades, set about ruffling a few feathers. It wasn’t easy, the industry provided hundreds of jobs and even the leading suffragettes almost prided themselves on wearing this “murderous millinery”.

The campaigners resorted to sandwich board parades round the sales, showing photos of what happened to the birds in the hope of awakening the consciousness of women.

World War One changed society in many respects, fashion moved on and with the help of Nancy Astor, a bill was eventually passed to ban the imports. However perhaps in some dusty family album we all have a picture of a great aunt with her feathered hat and wondered about its origins and now we know. .

Written by Joanne Watson

**THE TREASURES OF THE FAN MUSEUM (online). Jacob Moss (Curator of the Museum)
Tuesday 20 October 2020**

Founded by Helene Alexander in 1991, it was the world’s first museum of fans and fan making. Nearly 30 years on, the museum in Greenwich now exhibits over 7000 fans and related articles dating from the 12th century to present day from all over the world. Along with a permanent display and numerous temporary exhibits, the museum offers lectures, workshops and specialises in conservation.

Jacob spoke about the history, culture and craft of fans from the 16th century to the modern day, however he began by showing an ancient Egyptian fan bearer carrying a tall processional fan from about 5000 years ago, demonstrating a fixed or rigid fan with no moving parts. Another common type is the folding or pleated fan, with sticks from a central pivot and an arc shaped leaf attached to the sticks. Sticks were commonly made from ivory, bone or tortoise shell with a leaf of calf or goat skin, lace, silver or paper.

Fans transitioned in the 16th century from exotic novelties to costume accessories. Bought into Europe by Portuguese or Venetian merchants from the Far East, they were predominantly small ornate fixed or flag fans, but by the latter part of the century, these were superseded by more utilitarian folding fans.

Throughout the 17th century, the French lead the way with increasingly lavish fans, incorporating hand painted scenes from theatre or classical history. They were an essential part of courtly attire, communicating the message of intellect and refinement for the carrier

The 1700s saw a more playful, seductive use of fans, decorated with classical influences or scenes from commerce around the world. Joseph Addison, 1711, the Spectator, wrote; 'Women are armed with fans as men with swords but sometimes do more execution with them!' Printed fans gave even the less well paid the opportunity to carry a fan.

The popularity that fans achieved in the 18th century diminished considerably at the end of the century after the French Revolution until a spectacular revival in the mid-1800s. As prosperity in Europe rose, fans became more luxurious – double-sided pastiches signed by the artist, mother of pearl, gold and gemstones.

Then came the era of fantasy and folly, from 1890- 1910, La Belle Epoch with renowned fan maker Duvelleroy and artists such as Tomasse specialising in animal subjects.

To enhance interest in the 21st century, the Street Fans project was launched by the museum in 2017 to encourage street artists to decorate their fans in new and exciting ways. It also highlighted world renowned fan maker Sylvain Le Guen and resulted in an exhibition of 54 vibrant and innovative fans.

TURNER VERSUS CONSTABLE. The Great British Paint Off (online). Nicola Moorby

Tuesday 17 November 2020

These two giants of British Art, were as unlike in temperament as their paintings were in style. They transformed the art of landscape. We examine their differences, similarities, battles and their shared triumphs. Who will be crowned star painter.

Continuing its programme via its own YouTube channel, The Arts Society Farnham hosted Nicola Moorby, who gave an enthralling, perceptive and lively lecture, "pitting" two Romantic British Landscape Artists "against each other." This approach cleverly revealed the talents of both; and we were left with a sense that both were giants who had enriched landscape painting and left a remarkable legacy.

Born within 14 months of each other their early lives were very different. Turner (1775- 1851) was the only surviving child of a wigmaker, raised in cosmopolitan Covent Garden. Ambitious like his father, hardworking, intelligent and restless, his prodigious talents saw him enrolled in the RA Schools at 14 and an Associate Royal Academician at 24. Constable (1776-1837) was a country boy, son of a wealthy Suffolk mill owner with a large and happy family and no financial pressures, who only left home at 23 when he had finally persuaded his father to let him study painting at the RA Schools. By this time Turner had already made a name for himself with his dramatic watercolour landscapes that always included a story, aware that the RA considered Historical painting as the highest art form. Dramatic scenes leapt from canvases, whether, "Hannibal Crossing the Alps", or "The Fighting Temeraire"; and guided more closely by the lecturer Nicola Moorby we saw the techniques which produced such energy, the glorious light effects he achieved with watercolour, and the ambition that elevated Landscape as the "sublime" backdrop to significant human lives. He exploded on the art world, even though his medium was not the usual one for "high art" and never lost his popularity as a painter. Constable on the other hand took much longer to make a name for himself. Glorifying in the "poetry and beauty" of the quiet Suffolk countryside and the mundane, and assuming to work with oil paint was novel and brave at the time. Using oils gave depth to the earthy colours, and allowed him to make changes during the composition; and his increasing use of white splashes of paint as his final layer brought clarity and vitality to the lovingly observed scenes. The intensity of his vision came to be much admired as well as influential, with images such as "The Hay Wain" as iconic as Turner's "The White Horse." Constable was finally elected to the RA when he was 52. Recognition!

We were shown many paintings during the course of the lecture, illustrating the rivalry between the two; but it seems to have been a competitiveness that stretched the players and increased their range. Turner was the more prolific, for not only did he start earlier and outlive Constable by 14 years he never allowed domestic "responsibilities" to encumber him. Constable, grief stricken at the loss of his beloved wife Maria was left to care for seven children: he had far less time to devote to his art. By the conclusion Nicola had given us a vivid sense of how these two very different artists had raised Landscape painting to "high art" through their innovative vision and ever-evolving techniques. They gave pleasure and inspiration when alive and still do. A life-enhancing hour indeed.

Written by Kate Siebert

JOSEPH of NAZARETH: Best Supporting Actor (online). Amina Wright

Tuesday 15 December 2020

It took many centuries for artists to make the humble carpenter a visible image, Mary's husband who never spoke a word in the bible. This lecture explores the many legends and faces of Joseph through the ages.

Joseph of Nazareth has often been depicted as a rather shadowy figure, however many of the stories and associated images are suppositions by theologians. Indeed, Joseph's story is only told in two of the Gospels: Matthew and Luke.

The genealogy is outlined in the Gospel of Matthew. It tells that Joseph was descended from King David. 'Abraham begot Isaac, Isaac begot Jacob...' Jacob had twelve sons, one of whom was Joseph – of technicolour dream coat fame – and another was Judah. Judah was an ancestor of King David who was an ancestor of Joseph, thus establishing his royal descent.

Whilst the main story, beginning with the Annunciation to Mary, is told in the Gospel of Luke, artworks over time reflect changing interpretations of the story.

In an icon from 1315, Joseph is shown travelling to Bethlehem with a younger man, supposed to be his son. According to a legend, he was actually a widower and very old by the time he married Mary.

The 1327-35 Holkam Picture Book, an English school of bible stories, was almost a comic. It made Joseph look like a ridiculous character, who didn't really understand what is going on.

In the 1494 Adoration of the Magi triptych, by Hieronymus Bosch, Joseph appears as an extra on the edge of the composition. It seems as if he is just doing menial tasks, but he is looking round at the stable as if keeping guard. So here, Joseph is the guardian and defender.

By the 16th century, Joseph is seen as more of a protector. Theologians begin to discuss why Joseph had appeared so old. He was about 36 at the time of the marriage, old enough to be sensible and secure in business, young enough to be a good husband. Michelangelo painted Doni Tondo 1507, showing Joseph supporting Mary and the baby, a tower of strength. In Guido Reni's Adoration of the Shepherds (1575), an ass is shown above Joseph's head suggesting he is carrying a heavy burden.

The Dream of St. Joseph (1642-3) by Philippe de Champaigne shows the Angel of the Lord appearing to Joseph in a dream, saying, 'the Child is from the Holy Ghost and thou shall call him Jesus'. Joseph is depicted as kind, almost sacred, and has bare feet, a parallel with Moses at the Burning Bush in the Old Testament.

In the 16th and 17th century, people began to take interest in Joseph as a craftsman; guilds were started in honour of Saint Joseph as protector and maybe even as the teacher of Jesus.

Henry Ossawa Tanner's painting The Flight into Egypt (1899) shows the couple travelling under cover of darkness, rather like holy refugees. Today Joseph has a modern resonance, as in Kelly Latimore's Refugees: La Sagrada Familia (2016) depicting an escaping couple, with halos, carrying a child.

Pope Francis has just announced that from 8 December 2020 will be the Year of Saint Joseph.