

Historiography as a Marker of Current Paradigms

Lennart Pettersson
University of Gothenburg
lennart.pettersson@gu.se

The Italian artist Caravaggio (1571–1610) is one of the most well-known artists of the Italian baroque, but has that always been the case? In this paper I will argue that the reception and the historiography of for instance Caravaggio can be seen as a marker of both the scientific discourse and of much wider questions in society in general.

Caravaggio is a good example of this. In the 19th century his fame was not as great as it is today, instead it were other artists of his era that occupied the interest of scholars and public. Today, on the other hand, Caravaggio is recognized as an important artist and there are numerous publications, exhibitions and films about his art and life. One important feature in these publications is that he is seen as modern. This leads to what might be called an institutionalized forgetfulness on the same time as it gives the present time a possibility to reanalyze the past. In the presented paper I will argue that scholars have to be aware of these circumstances and that historiography must be a part of the studies of art of past times.

HISTORIOGRAPHY AS A MARKER OF CURRENT PARADIGM

It has been clear; at least since post-structuralism that the act of interpretation is made of an art historian or another person interested in that particular work of art is made on the basis of the ideology or other circumstances current to the interpreter. For instance was Jacob Burckhardt's works on the Italian renaissance highly influenced by the cultural debate in the German speaking countries in the mid 19th century and Heinrich Wölfflin's strive for rules of art had a basis in the emerging natural sciences and the positivism that was an important part of the scientific map of his time. It has also been noted that history writes back in such a manner that for instance the art historians mentioned above were highly influenced by the moments in history they were writing about (Holly, 1996). These two paradigms are now incorporated into the bulk of modern art history and every researcher is, or at least should be, aware of them.

In her often quoted book on Caravaggio Mieke Bal states that as art historians it is more or less impossible to strive for intentionalistic interpretations of works of art and furthermore, she is criticizing for instance psychoanalytical interpretations, common among art historians, in which the artist's relation to his or her mother stands in focus (Bal, 1999). I agree with Bal in that criticism but I would like to challenge some of the ways that the artist in question, the Italian baroque painter Michelangelo Merisi, known as Caravaggio (1517-1610), has been used by art-historians and others. My main point is that by applying purely esthetical values in the interpretation of art, and to work with the art in question from a perspective of today, we tend to miss certain important parts and, more alarming; we canonize various artists of the past.

My questions to this material can be grouped in various segments. Firstly, what ideologies can be seen in the interpretations of Caravaggio done today and in the past? And how do the interpretations reflect the different interests in the art world? Secondly, what has caused the enormous interest in Caravaggio that can be seen today, and has it always been such a great interest in his art and thirdly, what does an interpretation based on today miss out and what consequences will that have on the understanding of art from earlier periods.

There are numerous publications on Caravaggio and there has been a formal explosion in the latter years. Caravaggio has also been subject of popularizations in form of films and television series. There have also been a large number of exhibitions of his art works. It is not too much to say that the interest in Caravaggio globally is larger today than it was when he was living 400 years ago. An interesting feature in all of these different forms of publications on Caravaggio is that he is seen as a very modern painter and he is also turned into a very modern person or at least an artist living up to the romantic and later on modernistic view on the artist. It seems that every period in history and every group can find its own Caravaggio.

One fascinating example on the "usage" of Caravaggio in an unhistorical context is the exhibition held at Galleria Borghese in Rome 2009-10. The exhibition had the title "Caravaggio chiama Bacon: La bellezza del dolore" [Caravaggio calls out to Bacon: The beauty of pain]. In the preface the curator Anna Coliva writes that it is not sure that Francis Bacon had been influenced by Caravaggio at all but that there were similarities between the two artists that made this juxtaposition interesting (Coliva 2009). Caravaggio is thereby used in another context than the historical one.

Among the features in Caravaggio's personal life that is used in both popularizations and publications is his homo- or bisexuality and the fact that he was a convicted murderer. One can of course explain this with that sex and violence are selling arguments but there is another important part using these stories from his life in scientific as well as popular work, it is coherent with the romantic and modernistic view on the artist as a person outside or at the border of the normal society (Dahlström). Looking at how art history has been written there are many cases where such criteria of an artist has been highlighted. One can suspect that art-

ist that were living a more normal life does not get the same attention because they are not living up to the profile an artist should have, and they are by that both a bit dull and cannot be defined as genius.

Has the interest in Caravaggio always been such as it is today, and has his art been seen so genius as it is today? A short answer to that question is no. In 1708 the French art critic Rogier de Piles published his *Cours de peinture par principes avec un balance de peintres*. In that publication he lists famous artists in an attempt to compare them, using the four criteria composition, drawing color and expression. Every artist could get a maximum of 18 points in every category but Caravaggio only got 6 point for composition, 6 for drawing, 16 for color and not one single point in the category of expression (Holt, 1957-66)). That should be compared with for instance Rafael with 17, 18, 12 and 18. Today such a positivistic way of analyzing art seems to be very dated, although it gives us perspective on how Caravaggio was seen upon a century after his death and it gives us information on some of the values that were connected to art in the beginning of the 18th century. In almost every publication on Caravaggio written after the modernistic breakthrough the expression in Caravaggio's work is an important feature. For Rogier de Piles there were not any expression in the art of Caravaggio or at least the expression was not of the kind that was appreciated by the author and, can one assume, the artistic preferences of the early 18th century. If we turn the problem the other way around there is not much written about the expression in the art of Rafael today but that was seen as the most perfect expression by Rogier de Piles. Of course the word expression must be put into context as it probably does not have exactly the same meaning today as 300 years ago. My view is that it changed meaning during the early days of modernism. In modernism expression stands for something positive that is closely linked to the personality of the artist whereas it earlier stood for over exaggerated personal style. This could be compared with mannerism where the Italian word *maniera* meant personal style, something positive but mannerism had negative connotations.

It is clear that it has been a huge swing in the view on Caravaggio during the past 300 years, but can this swing be traced backwards and possibly be explained. Looking at statements of today there a number of features that different art historian and others pinpoints at Caravaggio. Mieke Bal writes extensively on the narrative and the exploration of the visibility. Other word used by her is time, beauty and desire. To explore these parts of for instance "The fortuneteller"(1596–97) she uses contemporary art such as Ken Apteke's "I'm six years old and hiding behind my hands" (1996). Her argument is that by using contemporary art to work with art of earlier periods we can get a deeper understanding of the esthetical process of analyzing art. One cannot say that Bal's study really is a study on Caravaggio, instead I argue that it should be seen as study of certain features in modern art that also can be seen in the art of Caravaggio and that the way to understand them is by letting them collide so that the art historian can use the modern art to understand art from earlier periods. By using this method she can highlight parts of the esthetical process and gets beyond some of the problems in art-history dealing with historical art works, especially the fact that many of those studies are limited to a kind mapping where the questions asked to the material is by who, what is the motive, when is it made and can put the focus on esthetical matters. This could be compared with the long standing division in the subject of art history where it is possible to talk about an esthetical art history and an antiquarian art history (chapter 8).

There are a lot of popular publications on Caravaggio. They are aimed at no scientifically readers with a large interest in art or at visitors to museums and other art historical sights where it is possible to see works of Caravaggio. In this presentation I use *Caravaggio* by Gilles Lambert published by the printing house Taschen in 2007 (Lambert, 2007). Apart from the fact that there is no scientific documentation and there is no problemization of different parts of the artists life and work, it seems to be reliable in the most cases. In this paper the interest-

ing part is that it makes Caravaggio into a “modern” artist and a genius. The subtitle of the publication is *A genius beyond his time* and the titles of the different chapters are for instance *The artist as Outlaw*, *A revolutionary on the Highroad* or *The Master of Darkness*. The subtitle itself makes the publication a-historical and takes a stand in the view on Caravaggio today whereas the titles of the different chapters underline the romantic and modernistic view on the artist as a genius outside society. The real problem, in terms of what comes the public in hand is that this view on Caravaggio is not put into a historical context. The view on him and his artistic work is just being seen from a standpoint of today. It is mentioned that his fame during his lifetime was not it is today but this is overshadowed by the overwhelming statements of his genius.

One of the most widespread publications on Caravaggio is the one written by Helen Langdon and published in 1998. There are some important distinctions between this and latter publication and the most important of them is that the possible homosexuality of Caravaggio is not an issue for Langdon. Instead she states that the evidence in that matter are very weak and she bases her arguments on the research by for instance Gilbert (1995). Langdon focuses on the social and religious situation in Italy and especially Rome at the end of the 16th and beginning of the 17th centuries. There could be traced a great admiration for the artist in the study of Langdon and she is, even though the study contextualizes Caravaggio he is portrayed as a genius and a somewhat “modern” hero of the arts.

Prior to the studies of Langdon and Gilbert, during the 1960s, 70s and 1980s there is an important line in the research on Caravaggio and that is his possible homosexuality. In for instance, what has become the standard publication on Caravaggio written by Howard Hibbard and published in 1983 the sexual status of the artist is one of the questions that are dealt with. Hibbard bases his study on first hand material from archives in especially Rome and of the results of Herwarth Röttgen (1974). It is possible to contextualize this line in the research on Caravaggio as it is made in an era where the strive for gay rights were very strong. One can state that we have a clear example of a shift in paradigm that makes its marks on the research of the time. During the same periods Caravaggio is the focus in films and literature. In his 1986 movie *Caravaggio* Derek Jarman lets the main character played by Nigel Terry be involved with the outcasts of society and it is played in both our time and the time of Caravaggio. One of the key points in the film is the love life of Caravaggio. The possible homosexuality of Caravaggio is also the theme of the poem “*In Santa Maria del Popolo*” (1961). The poet Thom Gunn tries to establish a theme of homosexual seduction in the painting “*The conversion of St. Paul*”, in the Cerasi chapel in the church of Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome.

Prior to the interest in Caravaggio's sexuality Caravaggio was re-established as one of the important painters of the baroque era after having been, not forgotten but artistically neglected in a period stretching over several hundred years. In 1955 Walter Friedlaender published his *Caravaggio studies* where the narrative of Caravaggio's art is in focus. This study is important as it makes the interest in Caravaggio international. Prior to the study of Friedlaender it had mainly been an Italian interest in Caravaggio. In 1951 there was an exhibition in Milan curated by Roberto Longhi. In the exhibition Caravaggio was put forward as an artist of the people that broke free from the rules of the academic art of the late 16th century. The same line is drawn in the film “*Caravaggio: Il pittore maledetto*” from 1941. In this film, made during the second world war in the fascistic Italy, Caravaggio is portrayed as an artist with strong roles in the Italian society. It is possible to interpret this film as an attempt to unite Italy and to create a national hero in the hard times during a war.

To summarize this part of the paper one can state that Caravaggio's fame during the 20th century starts in his motherlands strive for a national hero during the war, continuous with his fame being internationally acknowledged and later on becoming a symbol for the modernistic

and romantic view on the artist. He has also functioned as a canvas where different views can be painted, such as for instance the view on homosexuality. Today one of the main interests in Caravaggio and his art is how it is possible to see him as in comparison with contemporary art and what we can learn about his art by approaching it with the help of art of our time.

As researchers we must ask our self what this, in my point of view unhistorical approach to a historical material, has for consequences. To be able to, too some extinct, answer that question I will compare the reception of Caravaggio with that of some of his contemporaries, namely Guido Reni (1575-1642) and Domenico Zampieri (1581-1641), known as Domenichino.

In for instance Richard Spear's work on Domenichino (1982) it is pointed to the fact that both Guido Reni and Domenichino was considered as important artists until the mid 19th century. But as there was an esthetical change with its start in the romanticism the interest in these two Bolognese artists decreased to the point when John Ruskin explained that Domenichino and Guido Reni did not have anything to offer the modern spectator. This approach to them has been valid up until today, in for instance Kenneth Clarks work on landscape painting his notion of Domenichino and Guido Reni is that they are only of interest for historians and that they have no esthetic value (Clark, 1950).

What we can see in Clark's statement is that he judges the Bolognese painters with an esthetic approach based in his own time were their influence, importance and connection with the art of the mid 20th century had diminished. But has it always been like that? In a work of the Swedish researcher Bengt Lewan he examines letters from Swedish artists in Rome to the Royal Academy in Stockholm (Lewan, 1966). He shows that during the first part of the 19th century Domenichino and Guido Reni were among those who attracted most interest by the Swedish artists, only Rafael's name was mentioned more in the letters. The change in the interest of them that took place during the 19th century has been commented on by Spear and he means that as long as ideal beauty were the highest criteria for art Domenichino and Guido Reni were of interest for both artists and historians but as other esthetic values became more important both the artists and the historians tended to forget the Bolognese art (Spear, 1982). As it is possible to characterize them as in some sense classicists it is not farfetched to compare this with the research of Frederik Antal where he states that classicism as a style is connected with a harmonic society whereas romanticism as style is connected with a society in turmoil (Antal, . But it is not so easy as to say that Domenichino and Guido Reni had no influence after the romantic change. As late as 1901 the impressionist painter Mary Cassatt stated that here main purpose with a study trip to Italy was to see all of Domenichinos work (Spear, 1982).

That the interest in different artists varies over time is nothing new. But this must not be confused with the historical importance of the artists in question. In his earlier quoted book on Caravaggio Howard Hibbard states that Caravaggio was the most influential artist of the 17th century and an artist that speaks directly to us (Hibbard, 1993). In this Hibbard confuses the two aspects historical importance and artistic interest of today, and the question is if Caravaggio, from a historical point of view can be said to have the importance that we give him today. According to Stephen Pepper the influence of Caravaggio diminished rather rapidly during the 17th century (Pepper, 1984).

At the beginning of this paper I asked, among other questions, what interpretations based on the esthetics of today miss out in an historical perspective and what consequences this has on the understanding of art from earlier periods?

My main argument is that we need to be careful in these kinds of interpretations and be aware of the fact that we make the interpretation on a platform form of the esthetic values of today. I am certain that most art historians will agree with me on that point. But, as I have shown there is a confusion of historical importance and esthetic values. If we let the esthetic values of today guide our research we tend to forget those artists, for example Guido Reni and Domenichino, which is not comprehended in the esthetics of today. And they will not get the attention of research as they should have from their historical importance.

This will, in the long run lead to a canonization process that will exclude artists and artistic movements and the understanding of the historical processes will be weakened. Artists that were important will be forgotten and the richness of the artistic life in earlier periods will not be understood.

REFERENCES

- Antal, Frederik (1966). "Reflections on classicism and romanticism", *Classicism and romanticism with other studies in art history*, London : Routledge & K. Paul.
- Bal, Mieke (1999). *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary art, preposterous history*, Chicago, Ill. : University of Chicago Press.
- Clark, Kenneth (1950). *Landscape painting*, New York.
- Coliva, Anna (2009). "Caravaggio chiama Bacon: La bellezza del dolore", *Caravaggio – Bacon*, Roma, Galleria Borghese, 2 oktober 2009 – 24 januari 2010, Roma, 17-24.
- Friedlaender, Walter (1955). *Caravaggio studies*, Princeton, N.J. : Princeton Univ. Press.
- Gilbert, Creighton E. (1955). *Caravaggio and his two cardinals*, University Park, Pa. : Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Gunn, Thom (1961). *My sad captains and other poems*, London: Faber.
- Hibbard, Howard (1993). *Caravaggio*, (1983) London: Thames and Hudson.
- Holly, Michael Ann (1996). *Past looking: The rhetoric of the image and the historical imagination*, Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press.
- Holt, Elizabeth Gilmore, *A documentary history of art*, Garden City, N.Y. : Doubleday, 1957-1966
- Lambert, Gilles (2007). *Caravaggio: A Genius beyond his time*, Köln: Taschen.
- Lewan, Bengt (1966). *Drömmen om Italien: Italien i svenska resenärers skildringar från Atterbom till Snoilsky*, diss., Lund.
- Pepper, D. Stephen (1994). *Guido Reni: A complete catalogue of his works with an introductory text*, Oxford: Phaidon.
- Röttgen, Herwath (1974). *Il Caravaggi, Ricerche e interpretazioni*. Rom.
- Spear, Richard E. (1982). *Domenichino*, New Haven: Yale University Press.