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Archaism and the Critique of Caravaggio in the Religious Paintings of Hendrick ter Brugghen

NATASHA SEAMAN

During his twelve-year career, the Utrecht painter Hendrick ter Brugghen (1588-1629) embedded northern archaic content into works otherwise remarkable for their aspirations to contemporaneity and cosmopolitanism. Although ter Brugghen's archaism has been long noted, its study has been arrested at its diagnosis. My dissertation considers these elements as having an interpretive as well as a formal impact. Ter Brugghen's secular oeuvre is sizable, but archaism occurs uniquely in his religious works. This specificity of application not only connects these major works to the complex religious climate of Utrecht, well known for its confessional diversity after 1581, but also sheds light on broad questions of the function and form of devotional images in art after the Reformation.

The 1620s in Utrecht, the decade after Brugghen's principal activity, were notable for a widespread interest in the style of Caravaggio (1571 - 1610), particularly his use of tenebrism, three-quarters-length compositions, and dramatic narratives. This style was brought back to the Netherlands by artists who had recently returned from Rome and was taken up even by those who had not made the journey. Ter Brugghen had returned from Italy in 1614, but he turned afresh to the works of Caravaggio in the 1620s. Unlike other artists, however, in the works in which he most directly approaches Caravaggio-such as *Calling of Matthew* (1621; Central Museum, Utrecht) and *Doubting Thomas* (c. 1621; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam)-ter Brugghen inserts archaic details. I argue that, along with other paintings that display archaic elements and varying degrees of Caravaggist qualities- such as *The Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saint John* (c. 1625; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) and *Crowning with Thorns* (1620; Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen)-archaism in ter Brugghen's work amounts to a critique of Caravaggio and Caravaggism in Utrecht.

This critique, I also argue, expresses a theory of religious art that emphasizes the physical presence of the painting rather than the more purely visual appeal of Caravaggio's work. Caravaggio's paintings, such as *Conversion of Saul* (1600-1601; Santa Maria de! Popolo, Rome), create a strong illusion of reality. The picture plane dissolves as the subjects of the paintings seem to enter into our space, an effect enhanced by strong chiaroscuro and suppressed brush marks. To the extent that the figures are present, the painting disappears. These characteristics were adopted by the Utrecht Caravaggisti, who contributed paintings to the interiors of Utrecht's hidden Catholic churches. Although ter Brugghen's paintings resemble superficially those of his peers, no such provenance is known for his works.

Ter Brugghen's manipulations of the objecthood of his paintings clarify the importance of that element in the image debates of the Reformation. The Calvinist rejection of devotional images centered on worshipers' supposed confusion of the signifier with the signified, in which the spiritual power of the figure depicted was conflated with its depiction. In opposition, Calvinists insisted on the base materiality and thus ineffectiveness of the religious images. Counter Reformation art theorists, in defending religious art, emphasized its ability to teach and to incite

emotion, insisting on the transcendence of the image over its materiality. In Counter-Reformation painters' works, visual persuasion took precedence over material presence.

Ter Brugghen's archaizing paintings reject this solution by reinjecting a sense of objecthood into visually persuasive paintings. For instance, in ter Brugghen's *Crucifixion*, Christ is depicted as bleeding copiously from his wounds, which alone is not unusual; but the blood, rather than streaming along his arms and obliging the laws of physics (and contemporaneous artistic practice), drips straight down in pendulous blobs. At first sight it seems caught in a free fall before dousing Mary and John, who are standing below Christ, but then the viewer realizes that the blood is rather to be understood as dripping on the surface of the picture plane. The drops are simultaneously paint and blood. Ter Brugghen's picture plane refuses to dissolve; both the real presence of the bleeding Christ and the physical presence of the painting are accentuated.

My research this year has focused broadly on other ways in which the objecthood of works of art, in both Italy and the Netherlands, is suppressed or enhanced, and on the ways in which this quality interacts with the religious environment in which a work is displayed, from an Italian chapel dedicated to a Marian icon to a hidden church in Utrecht. More narrowly, I have isolated some of the other manners in which ter Brugghen creates and manipulates these effects by centering iconic elements of devotion on the picture plane or embedding them within compositional "niches." These qualities bespeak a painter who sought to explore the possibilities of devotional art after the Reformation in Utrecht.

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Natasha Seama11 will defend her dissertation at Boston University in fall 2005.