

Episode 38: Chasing Caravaggio

Summary

During their trip to southern Italy and Malta, Nick and Wendy saw several paintings by their favourite painter, Caravaggio. In this episode they talk about Caravaggio's life and about why they like his paintings.

Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are coming to you again from Malta. And as we've talked about, we've travelled through southern Italy and Malta over the past couple of weeks, and in travelling from Rome to Naples to Sicily and to Malta, we've actually followed basically exactly the life and flight¹ of our favourite painter, who is Caravaggio.

Wendy: Umm-hmm.

Nick: And so it wasn't entirely an accident because we like to see Caravaggio paintings where we can. But he was an Italian painter of the late 16th and early 17th century, an incredibly famous painter. And he had an extremely interesting life as well, uhh, and it was filled with all sorts of drama including crimes committed by him, uhh, which is part of the reason that he travelled in the later part of his life to these other areas, because he was trying to escape justice. Umm, and, but the result is that he's left these paintings in these various places which we've been visiting over the past few weeks.

Wendy: Yeah, umm, because we used to live in Rome, we're quite familiar with the Caravaggio paintings that are there in Rome. Uhh, but there are others that we had never seen before and so we finally got a chance to see them. I mean, we had seen reproductions of them, we'd read about them in books and knew what they looked like, but we had never stood in front of the actual canvas before and, uhh, so on this trip we got a chance to do that on a number of occasions.

Nick: Right, and as a way of preparing for this, I decided to re-read a biography of Caravaggio that I had read before and that you had read before as well, umm, which is called *M*, and it's quite a controversial biography, because it's very non-academic and I think he makes - the author, Peter Robb - makes quite a few, uhh,

¹ flight: the act of fleeing or running away (in this example)

assumptions or he speculates based on various things and I think some people didn't like the book at all. I happened to love the book. Umm, but really, to appreciate the paintings of Caravaggio, it really helps to understand his life, to understand what he was doing, why he was painting the way that he was, and it really helps the paintings come out in a way that, uhh, you otherwise wouldn't know about. So it's not just ... for me, it's not just about looking at a painting and being able to enjoy it for what it is necessarily, but understanding the story behind it, how he painted it, why he painted it the way he did, umm, what his situation was, who were the people who were models in the painting, and all these things come together to really make a story...

Wendy: Right.

Nick: ...behind the painting.

Wendy: And it's not just the story that's being told on the canvas. Because usually they are religious themes - not always, but the majority are religious themes because they are often found in churches, or, you know, they were commissioned, uhh, by the churches or people who were part of the church. Umm, so they're telling a Bible story and it's, uhh ... some of them are more well-known than others, but, uhh, it's often a story that, you know, you've seen in paintings many times before, but that's not really the interesting part. The interesting part is, like you said, who were the models, because the faces are faces of real people who he had met in his life and sometimes we know who those are, umm, or historians have been able to figure out who they are because these same faces keep cropping up² in different paintings that he's painted in different periods of his life. Umm, so, yeah, it's ... when you know a little bit about him and what he was going through at the time, it makes it a lot more interesting.

Nick: Right, so I think probably the two most interesting things about Caravaggio's painting are firstly, that he painted from real life, which means that he had models and he painted directly while looking at the models. He didn't draw them in advance and then paint them later; he painted directly on the canvas, uhh, with the models. So this would have been very demanding on the models, firstly, because they would have had to have sat for him for a long time, umm, and the other thing is his use of light and shadow which is really the hallmark³ of his painting.

Wendy: Yep, absolutely. It's, uhh ... in Italian it's called the *chiaroscuro* effect, so, umm, *chiaro* meaning light or light-coloured and *scuro* meaning dark, so it's this play between the light and shadow, lightness and darkness. And, uhh, that's really the hallmark, the outstanding feature, of all of his work.

² cropping up (phrasal verb): appearing, often unexpectedly

³ hallmark: distinguishing feature or aspect

Nick: And so when he was living in Rome it appears that he had a room that he painted completely in black and had only one light source coming through it, which is exactly how he liked to have his paintings look. And so he would have his models in there and he would be painting from life like that, and nobody else painting at the time could really get that same kind of balance between the light and the dark.

Wendy: Yeah, and a lot of people have tried, after him, so often in museums you'll see paintings, sometimes they don't even know who the actual painter was, they don't necessarily know his name, but they'll just say, 'This painting is of the school of Caravaggio,' meaning, basically, this person was trying to imitate Caravaggio. And it's identifiable from a mile away⁴, you know, as soon as you walk in a room in a museum you can see, 'Oh, that was in the style of Caravaggio,' but they're never as good as his. No one could really do it the way that he did.

Nick: And the other thing that you touched on⁵ a little bit regarding the models is that what he also did was that he painted what he would call real scenes, and so you were mentioning that he was doing a lot of these Biblical paintings because he was commissioned to do so by churches, and ... but, typically if you think of the paintings that are in churches, there'll be bright skies, there'll be lots of angels around and it'll be very saintly or very holy in those ways and Caravaggio didn't paint like that.

Wendy: No.

Nick: He didn't like painting like that. And sometimes he would paint an altarpiece⁶, for example, for a church who had commissioned it, and then they would reject it. Once they saw it, they didn't want it. Because it wasn't what they wanted. Because what he would do is he would depict⁷ ordinary life, and extraordinary people, such as the Virgin Mary or such as some of the saints, but just in very ordinary clothing, with maybe dirty feet or something like that, and that was a little bit offensive to the people who were commissioning these works. But it was just the way that he painted, and it was what made him, uhh, so different, along with some of the other things that we've mentioned, from the other artists who were working at the time.

Wendy: Yep, and, yeah, there were definitely no cute little angels flying around, or no blue skies and fluffy clouds - nothing like that. Uhh, usually there's very little background to the paintings. It's basically all black and darkness and then you just

⁴ from a mile away (expression): from a great distance

⁵ touched on (phrasal verb): mentioned, talked about briefly

⁶ altarpiece: a painting (or other piece of art) behind the altar in a church that is usually the most visible piece of art in the church

⁷ depict: to show or represent

have these figures who are being illuminated by some source of light, umm, but, you know, the light is lighting it up just enough for you to see them and their faces and, you know, just the parts that you need to see to understand the story. And then that's it, there's no background behind it.

Nick: And he would also use well-known prostitutes in Rome as models for people like the Virgin Mary which was also quite scandalous.

Wendy: As you can imagine.

Nick: As you can imagine. And eventually he was in fact convicted of murdering somebody in Rome and he had to flee from Rome. And he made his way to Naples, and then he started doing amazing painting in Naples, and eventually he moved on, uhh, to Malta, because they offered him the chance to become a Knight of Malta, umm, because, uhh, the Knights of St John of Jerusalem had moved to Malta by that point. So he was given this knighthood in Malta, and he painted an incredible painting, which is the beheading of John the Baptist, which we saw here in Malta, it's in the capital, Valetta. And then he committed some kind of crime there and had to escape from there, and he went to Sicily. And it's interesting that as he continued to move to these different places on the run, he became more and more famous because he was leaving behind this trail of paintings wherever he went, and they were becoming darker, umm, and it's just so interesting to see how he was still able to paint these incredible paintings at a time when lots of people were trying to, uhh, catch him or even kill him.

Wendy: Yeah, yeah, he was experiencing great turmoil⁸ in his own personal life, and in some ways that is reflected in the paintings. Like you said, they're becoming darker and, umm, yeah, more, kind of, brooding⁹ and moody. Umm...

Nick: Right, well there's one in particular which is a David killing Goliath, where his own head is the head of Goliath and it's been severed¹⁰ and David is just holding up the head and it's his own head, and that was right after he fled from Rome originally.

Wendy: Right, and, uhh, he did, uhh, meet his own death, uhh, soon after this period that we're talking about. And, uhh, to this day no one really knows exactly how he died or under what circumstances. So there's still a lot of mystery surrounding him.

⁸ turmoil: upheaval, state of confusion or disturbance

⁹ brooding: depressing, dark

¹⁰ severed: separated, removed

Nick: Yeah, it appears that there were a lot of powerful people both trying to kill him and trying to protect him. And it wasn't because he was from a noble family or anything like that, it was purely related, in terms of the protection, to the painting. The powerful families that were trying to protect him were doing it because they wanted more of his paintings.

Wendy: Right.

Nick: But in the end they weren't able to protect him completely and as you said he met his death at the age of 39 in mysterious circumstances, and now all we have left is to look at the paintings.

Wendy: And fortunately we do still have those. And, uhh, they are, for the most part, well preserved, uhh, and have been for several hundred years now. And so he has left a great legacy behind.

Comprehension Questions

1. What do Nick and Wendy think helps you to appreciate Caravaggio's paintings more?
2. What did Nick say were the two most interesting things about Caravaggio's painting?
3. Why did Caravaggio travel to southern Italy and Malta late in his life?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. She had an accident with a knife while she was cooking without shoes and she _____ her pinky toe.
2. We _____ this topic earlier but I want to talk about it in more detail now.
3. His life is in _____. First he lost his job, then his grandmother died, and finally his girlfriend left him.
4. The _____ is usually the most prominent piece of art in a church, but the side chapels often contain more famous works.
5. The _____ of Ghandi's struggle for Indian independence was his commitment to non-violence.
6. More and more cafés are _____ around town. I see a new one every week or two.
7. One of the most famous scenes from the New Testament of the Bible is the _____ into Egypt of baby Jesus and his family. It is often portrayed in art, even by Caravaggio.
8. He's wearing a wig to cover his baldness. It's so obvious that you can tell it's not his real hair _____.
9. The afternoon sky was dark and _____ as the storm approached.
10. Michelangelo liked to _____ human figures as being very muscular in his painting and his sculpture.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Have you seen any Caravaggio paintings and, if so, did you like them? Why or why not?
2. What kind of art do you like the most?
3. Do you agree with Nick and Wendy that knowing about the life of an artist helps you appreciate their art more? Why or why not?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. They think that knowing the story of his life, such as the models he used and the techniques he used, helps you enjoy and appreciate the paintings more.
2. That he painted from real life and his use of light and shadow.
3. He was on the run from authorities after being convicted of murder in Rome and an unknown crime in Malta.

Exercises

1. severed
2. touched on
3. turmoil
4. altarpiece
5. hallmark
6. cropping up
7. flight
8. from a mile away
9. brooding
10. depict