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Cecco del Caravaggio. L'Allievo Modello

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Dedicated to the enigmatic figure of Cecco del Caravaggio, this exhibition at the Accademia di Carrara in Bergamo, curated by Gianni Papi and M. Cristina Rodeschini, brings together twenty-five of Cecco's known paintings, promising to be as intriguing as the artist himself. Cecco has been indeed a remarkably mysterious figure, long simply known as Caravaggio's proverbial assistant, model, and alleged lover, and stuck in a biographical vacuum that, as Papi suggested, was likely caused by an intentional "damnatio memoriae."(15) Despite having dedicated decades to intense archival research on this artist, which led to an extraordinary identification of this painter as a certain Francesco Boneri, Papi, in a rich essay opening the exhibition catalogue, reminds that knowledge about Cecco's life still remains in many ways fragmentary and discontinuous. One wonders if, in this highly awaited exhibition, it will also continue to be shrouded in Caravaggio's shadow.

Solo exhibitions on the so-called "followers" of Caravaggio, indeed, generally bring some hope that a long due degree of individuality be returned to these artists. Their visual languages, since the seventeenth century, have been in fact obfuscated by the early modern criticism against, or the recent praise for, Caravaggio's naturalism, which the painters generally included in his "legacy" are deemed to have pedantically replicated. In his 1672 Lives of Modern Painters, for instance, Giovanni Bellori condemned that young artists were attracted by Caravaggio's method, which for him lacked "ingenuity, drawing, decorum and art."[1] Today's revived interest in these artists has instead engendered an increasing number of exhibitions on them, which, nonetheless, oftentimes end up being used as an oblique approach to speak about their so-called master, whose place as the original is never interrogated.

The heavy presence of Caravaggio's paintings in the catalogue, and the definition of Cecco as his "model student," do not foretell a different storytelling. Indeed, unsurprisingly, the exhibit places considerable emphasis on the traditional notion of "stylistic influence," missing, at some points, the opportunity to problematise it. This is the case of the first room, which predictably opens up the show with a set of paintings by pupils at Caravaggio's "schola," including Cecco's.(16) These works are displayed as visually gravitating around Caravaggio's St. John the Baptist, which is the only painting on the central wall facing visitors upon their entrance. The suggestion of a Caravaggesque legacy is as outspoken as it is perplexing. Baglione's Sacred and Profane Love, hanging next to the one by Caravaggio, particularly calls for a more critical reflection on the notion of Caravaggism. Notwithstanding his renown quarrels with Caravaggio over matters of copying and despite the artist's own criticism towards Caravaggio, Baglione is himself turned into a Caravag-

gista. [2] Just as the differences among the artistic idioms of these painters are flattened out by the idea of a school, the idiosyncrasy of Cecco's works gets slightly side-lined at this stage of the exhibition.

The spotlighted quote one encounters after this room does not help disenfranchising the artist from the notion of emulation of a pre-existing paradigm. Extrapolated from Richard Symonds's 1650 account of his journey to Rome, the quote refers to Boneri with his nickname, "Checco del Caravaggio," who, as Symonds states, "twas his boy." (18-19) In his catalogue essay, Papi reads this line as suggesting erotic intimacy between the artists.(18-19) Yet, this quote would be perhaps more effective if contextualised within the aforementioned early modern debates that denounce biased opinions about Caravaggio's influence on other painters, not simply intended as stylistic proximity but as a true imprint of his identity onto his followers. In fact, the nickname implies an actual form of belonging and ownership; it does not simply describe a traditional master-pupil relation, but one whose peculiarity could well derive from known biases among Cecco's and Caravaggio's contemporaries, who likely used it to mock a now-questionable phenomenon of identity transfer and appropriation.

Before continuing on a linear path along the rooms, I want to first jump to the last one, where the notion of influence comes again to the forefront. By the end of the exhibit, Cecco is presented as having reached the apogee of artistic success and as being emulated by those who, so far, have been considered as other followers of Caravaggio's style. One of these is Evaristo Baschenis, described in a catalogue essay by Enrico de Pascale as operating a revival of Caravaggio's and Cecco's works. (77-83) Valentin de Boulogne, three of whose paintings are included in this room, is another prime example of such inversion. The exhibition catalogue suggests a stylistic indebtedness of the French painter towards Cecco, motivated by a similar handling of colours, a shared approach to contouring, and the recurrent use of some common elements.(208) For instance, the figural sarcophagus in Valentin's Denial of St. Peter can be also individuated in Cecco's Cleansing of the Temple. Thus, while this room tries to emancipate Cecco from his position of mere follower of Caravaggio, it still attempts to do so by recuperating that same narrative of stylistic "influence" it itself set out to undo. Despite now reversed, with Cecco at the apogee and other painters below him, the dynamics of unilateral imitation are reinstated, making the relations among these painters once again hierarchical in ways that hamper a more particularised investigation of individual artistic identities and non-linear transformations thereof.

And yet, in the rooms between the first and the last, a transversal trajectory guides the viewers. This trajectory still intersects with the problematic one of "influence," but it also fruitfully endeavours to substitute such word with "dialogue," considering exchanges that are not unidirectional. These rooms chart an evoking map of Cecco's artistic journey. By journey, I quite literally refer to the attention paid to the artist's itinerant life and the way in which his painterly idiom assimilated, responded to, and reimagined artistic otherness. Surprisingly, this journey leads away from Caravaggio's "schola" towards unexpected artistic directions.

In the second room, Cecco's Lombard artistic roots are considered by means of a proposed relation with sixteenth-century painter Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo. The latter's work convincingly introduces elements that the viewer is equipped to discern in the upcoming works by Cecco, where they reappear as assimilated techniques reworked in a highly personal visual idiom. The most

apparent of such elements is Savoldo's exquisite treatment of fabrics and textures through a complex modulation of light. Cecco's painting of San Lawrence, for instance, astonishes for its extensive pictorial focus on the garments. An intricate amass of folds, which one can see proposed at a higher degree of complexity in the Flautist and the Musician, protrudes from an abundant red cloak that further experiments with the representation of texture. If the white undervest recalls Savoldo's sharp contrast between zones of light and shadows, the red cloak is rendered through more subtle modulations and with enhanced density of colour to create an alluring velvety surface.

The third room considers how Cecco's idiom transformed during his stay in Naples, where he followed Caravaggio on his flee from Rome. Yet, what the curators propose is an unexpected analysis of the cross-exchanges between Cecco and two artists, Louis Finson and Filippo Vitale, he encountered there. The three painters display elements of expressive intensity, which they articulate in different forms. Finson's Head of Mars and Cecco's Musician share a bold approach to portraiture, meeting the viewers with either the vigorous gaze of the first or the yielding one of the latter. With a similar ashen chromatism, Vitale's Liberation of St. Peter and Cecco's Cupid at the Fountain use androgynous features for their respective angels, which, in the case of Cupid, are brought to a daring degree of carnality through the voluptuous body and the titillating expression of the subject, which makes the act of drinking look like but a pretext for visual experimentation.

By considering the ubiquity and permeability of Cecco's artistic approach, the exhibition speaks to his widening knowledge, enlarging networks, and artistic breath, delineating a more interesting and complex artistic profile than that of his proverbial relationship with Caravaggio. The encounters proposed on this trajectory succeed in showing how some of the known experiences Cecco embarked on during his life demanded him to reinvent the subject at hand and to articulate it through his own mode of painting. This is particularly evident in the penultimate room of the exhibition, the only one that adopts a thematic angle. Almost all the paintings displayed therein represent musical instruments, which, in early modern times, were excellent pictorial exercises to demonstrate one's skill, insofar as they were used as examples in perspective manuals. In this room, paintings of musical instruments effectively invite comparisons among different visual languages. In Cecco's two versions of the Musician, the proliferation of objects orchestrated in complex arrangements and painted with astonishing levels of pictorial accuracy suggests that Cecco was continuously measuring himself against others and against himself to innovate and perfect his skills.

This exhibition, just as its catalogue, is therefore torn between two divergent trajectories that, however, still remain hand in hand at some points, raising important questions regarding the ways in which art history can interpret the directionality of artistic exchanges or the causal link between the biography of an artist and his or her changing visual language. On one hand, the exhibition falls back into the trap of "influence," which, at some points, threatens to smooth over the multiple facets and idiosyncrasies of the artist discussed. On the other hand, by tracing Cecco's mobility and his artistic encounters, the exhibit succeeds in widening visitors' interpretative horizons, demanding them to question afresh Cecco's artistic experience in relation to multi-directional artistic dialogues and cross-cultural exchanges. These are corroborated by the still partial, but highly valuable archival sources that Gianni Papi has managed to gather and reconstruct, which make the richly illustrated exhibition catalogue highly worth the purchase. Cecco del Caravaggio

ultimately comes across as not only a “model student,” as one might initially fear, but one unafraid of exploring new avenues, achieving well beyond the taught lesson.

[1] Giovanni Pietro Bellori and Alice Wohl (ed.), Giovan Pietro Bellori: The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects: A New Translation and Critical Edition (Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 181.

[2] On the relation between Baglione and Caravaggio, see: Maryvelma Smith O'Neil, Giovanni Baglione: Artistic Reputation in Baroque Rome (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

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