

Deconstructing Caravaggio and Velázquez

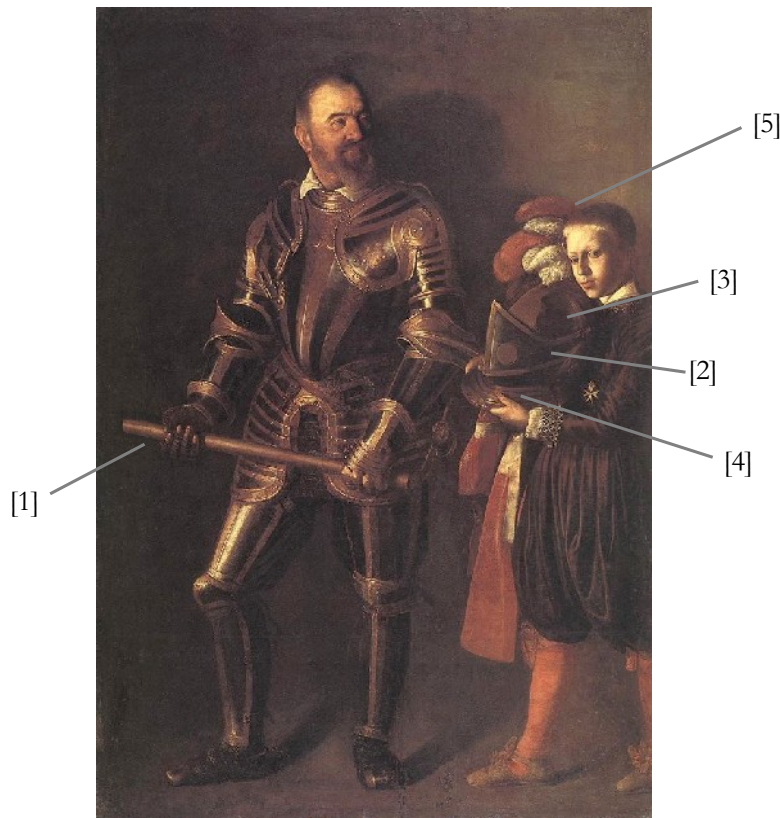
Paulo Martins Oliveira

Caravaggio (1571-1610)

The use of superimposed layers of meaning had been evolving significantly since the 15th century, and one of the major contributors would be Michelangelo da Caravaggio, who employed different methods to create particularly elaborate paintings.

One of those solutions was the deconstruction of elements, which can be exemplified by one of his simplest but always ingenious works, titled *The portrait of Alof of Wignacourt* (Louvre).

Supposedly, Caravaggio depicted a great military commander, but on a deeper level he portrayed an executioner.



Caravaggio
The portrait of Alof of Wignacourt

So, Alof holds the staff of command as if it was an axe [1], and its (deconstructed) blade [2] is in the helmet [3], which in turn symbolizes a decapitated head on a plate [4].

Even the feathers [5] of the helmet are “tongues” insultingly directed at the armoured man, expressing Caravaggio's true opinion about him.

This kind of device was used by the same painter to design more complex works, such as *The sacrifice of Isaac* (Uffizi), which actually conceals a completely different narrative.



Caravaggio
The sacrifice of Isaac



(det.)

Indeed, this image functions as a frame of a sequence, containing deconstructed elements that allow to decode the antecedents and the conclusion of the superimposed story¹.

Thus, deepening an already protean concept of art, Caravaggio became a reference for a new generation of painters.

¹ Besides the deconstruction, Caravaggio also used other devices, such as the deformation. For instance, a closer look reveals that the arm of the supposed Isaac was artificially bent, in order to also hold the knife (sharing the hand of the older character. The connection is strategically hidden by the hand of the supposed angel). This acts as a frame inside another frame, and allows to read the underlying narrative.

Diego Velázquez (1599-1660)

Profoundly influenced by the works of Caravaggio (as well as of Botticelli and others), the Spanish painter Diego Velázquez also created elaborate works, such as *The portrait of Prince Balthasar with a dwarf* (Museum of Fine Arts of Boston).



Velázquez
The portrait of Prince Balthasar with a dwarf

In this painting Balthasar symbolizes his own father, King Philip IV of Spain, while the “dwarf” represents the Count-Duke of Olivares, who actually was running the country, reason why he holds the “sceptre” and the imperial “orb”.



The Count-Duke of Olivares
“crowned” with a concealed vulture,
also by Velázquez

Particularly interesting is the pillow with the supposed hat on the right. Here Velázquez shows how he deconstructed some elements across different works, for in reality he depicted the axe of a halberd, as seen in *The surrender of Breda* (Prado).



Velázquez
The surrender of Breda

The feathers of the hat form the suggestion of a head of a dog (caricature), which was a traditional sarcastic symbol of the Habsburg/Spanish domination in the Netherlands, and in fact, throughout several of his paintings, Diego Velázquez consistently presented his opinion about the ongoing war in the Dutch territories.

In conclusion these few examples demonstrate the great versatility of this kind of multi-layered art, whose analysis requires different types of approach.

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