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Visual Translation of the Imprint of Life: Re-exploration of Caravaggio's Paintings

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*Missing Experience;
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ABSTRACT

Caravaggio's art opened the door to European realism in the 17th century. His short and glorious life was full of suffering and disappointment. He lost his parents in a minor and experienced social suppression after adulthood. Under the dual stimulation of physiology and psychology, his heart was extremely distorted, his personality was eccentric, his temper was irritable, and he was full of rebellion towards society. He stood on the opposite of "stylism" and academicism, and fought against the times with his own unique artistic language. This article starts from the vision of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, analyzes Caravaggio's life's missing experience and deconstructs the visual presentation of this missing experience in his artistic creation.

INTRODUCTION

As the most iconic theoretical system of humanistic psychology, Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory constructs a five-level demand model from basic survival to spiritual transcendence, namely physiological needs, safety needs, social needs, respect needs and self-realization needs. The five needs are distributed in a pyramid-like manner, among which physiological needs are the lowest level needs and the motivation is the strongest (Hu, 2015). This theory has extensive application value in many fields such as education and teaching, medical care, and art research, especially in the generation of artists' creative motivation. As far as Caravaggio is concerned, his life is like his artistic creation, full of drama. He is not only an artistic genius, but also a fugitive criminal. Art is his means of survival and a window for his emotions to vent. His works are secular and violent, and the strong contrast of light and shadow makes his works extremely tense. Behind these works that are contrary to the mainstream of the times is a

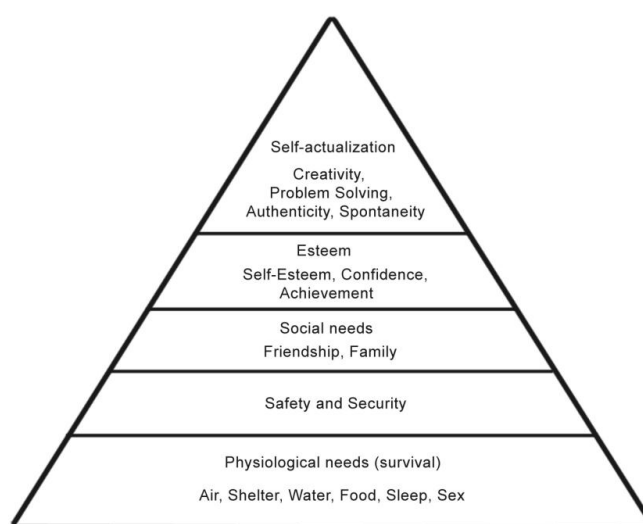


Figure 1 | Maslow's hierarchical theory diagram

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mirror projection of Caravaggio's lack of sexual experience throughout his life (**Figure 1**).

CARAVAGGIO FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF HIERARCHY THEORY

Maslow believes that in every period, one kind of demand will dominate, and other needs will be subordinate. In the process of the dominant demand being constantly satisfied, the interaction between the individual and the social environment will also deepen. When one's own cognition and thinking develop, the individual's awareness and perception of his own state will continue to deepen, thereby producing and developing a strong sense of self (Ye, 2025). Caravaggio experienced a double suppression of physiological and psychological pressure in the process of self-realization, which directly led to his self-consciousness being suppressed in the process of awakening, so his personality becomes perverse and his behavior is uncontrollable. Based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, we will further analyze the internal logic contained in Caravaggio's psychological appeals and behavioral motivations at different times.

Through the Maslow hierarchy of needs, it is not difficult to find that physiological needs, safety needs, social needs, and respect needs are located below the pyramid, so we can regard these four needs as the basis needs. Among them, physiological needs are the need to maintain individual survival and racial development, and are also the most primitive, basic and limited need among human needs. It is shared by humans and animals, including food, water, sexual intercourse, excretion and sleep (Jiang & Zhang, 2010). Caravaggio was a lack of basic needs. His father unfortunately died in the plague that broke out in 1576, and his mother also died around 1590, which brought great trauma to his growth. For the sake of life and ideals, he went to Rome alone. When he first arrived in Rome, he was poor and destitute, without any clothes, unable to feed himself, and even contracted diseases. He was in different studios. He was extremely unstable and often had conflicts with people. This underlying life experience gradually alienated his psychological structure, which in turn gave birth to his pathological psychological traits.

Generally speaking, Maslow's hierarchy of demand is an increasing trend, that is, when one layer of demand is met, the desire for another layer of demand will arise. However, this relationship is not absolute. In special environments, multiple needs will exist at the same time. Caravaggio was regarded as a madman in Rome. Some people said that he often mingled with alcoholics, gamblers and prostitutes, and was very vulgar; others said that he had a bad temper, rebellious personality, unruly, and often wore swords. He was a demon king in the world. Especially the street policemen in Rome were very disliked by him and often caused trouble for him.

Their illegal behaviors were recorded in the case and even had experiences of murder and jailbreak (Chen, 2019). These extreme behaviors often put him in danger and were on the way to escape. Therefore, during Caravaggio's life, physiological needs, safety needs, and social needs were not met accordingly. It is worth noting that he has received help and appreciation from some patrons in the field of painting, so he has received some respect. However, the inherent meaning of respect mentioned by Maslow is not only respected by the outside world, but also the pursuit of personal value. The most important thing in the process of respect and being respected is the emergence of self-confidence. In this way, Caravaggio did not develop self-confidence, he was only part of the need to achieve respect.

When the basic needs of physiological needs, safety needs, social needs and respect needs are not met, people will be unable to realize themselves and will be in a pathological self-consuming manner, which will lead to a lack of experience. In the field of artistic creation, this lack of experience will eventually be translated into a very tension language, forming the artist's unique artistic style.

VISUAL TRANSLATION OF MISSING EXPERIENCE IN PAINTING

In the second half of the 16th century, Italy's people's uprising continued, with the country's internal and external troubles, and the basic needs of the lower-class people were seriously threatened. The reactionary forces of the Catholic Church have strengthened. They refused to use realistic methods to express nature and human art. Then "styleism" and academics have gained a mainstream position in the painting world. Styleism distorts the inherent image and is full of subjective colors. The academics pursue simple and distinct compositions and magnificent forms, based on ancient myths and Bibles, and follow the inherent laws of creation and pursue idealized images (Fsevolozkaya & Zhang, 1982). Caravaggio was physically and psychologically full of rebellion against society under the premise that many needs were not met. Then he stood on the opposite of "stylistics" and academics, pulled the gods into reality, bravely chose realism, and pioneered the Baroque.

Image Translation—Decaying Fruit

The images in Caravaggio's works are not noble, great, and flawless heroes, but lower-level figures such as poor people and beggars. He portrays these characters truthfully without any embellishment, so his works are more realistic and realistic (Zhu, 2023). At the same time, his early works have a strong atmosphere of life and will boldly choose some materials that are not favored by everyone to create, among which the fruit basket is one of his faithful choices.



Figure 2 | "Still Life with a Basket of Fruit"
1601 31cm×47cm



Figure 3 | "Supper at Emmaus"
1600-1601 139cm×195cm

Caravaggio, who was in a dilemma of demand, presented the fruits in the basket with almost paranoid realistic skills when he created the "Fruit Basket" series. In "Still Life with a Basket of Fruit" (Figure 2), the fruit basket is placed in the center of a horizontal tabletop, which is particularly prominent against the dark yellow background. There are various fruits placed in the basket. Each fruit has insect eyes of different sizes on the surface. All kinds of leaves show different degrees of lesion characteristics, showing a tendency to decline after ripening. In "Supper at Emmaus" (Figure 3), the painter highlights the same fruit basket on the edge of the table from a low perspective, giving people a sense of danger of overturning at any time. Withered branches and leaves, corrupt fruits and imbalanced composition jointly created the "imperfection" of Caravaggio's early artistic creation. This "imperfection" is not his technical imperfection, but his "imperfection" in personality, a concrete projection of the survival crisis of real society, and a way to realize oneself through the reality of art, and it is also a spiritual mark of breaking through the suppression of demand.

Light and Shadow Translation—"Wine Cellar Light"

Light and shadow play an important role in the creation of Western oil paintings. The use of light and shadow is not only a technical means, but also a philosophical carrier of artistic expression. Caravaggio's almost perverted use of light and shadow had a great impact on Baroque and even today's oil painting cre-

ation. His "blackening" style of "cellar light" is closely related to his life experience.

A few years after his first arrival in Rome, he won the appreciation of Cardinal Del Monte with "The Cardsharps", so he received brief protection. During this period, his physiological needs were temporarily met. His works such as "Boy with a Basket of Fruit", "The Fortune Teller", "The Lute Player", and "The Musicians" (Figure 4) were warm tones, bright light, and lively and natural characters. But as he continued to release himself, alcoholism, fighting and wandering became the norm of his life, and his heart became restless again. So from "The Calling of Saint Matthew", his creation became increasingly "black", and the dark background, profound plot, and dramatic body language of characters all appeared in the works of this period (Wang, 2019). "The Calling of Saint Matthew" (Figure 5), "The Crowning with Thorns", "Supper at Emmaus", "The Seven Acts of Mercy" and other works all realize the unity of opposition between the picture and light and shadow. Looking at his artistic creation path, the "black" evolution of light and shadow in his works may be the visual compensation of his psychological imbalance, and the beam of light shot from the side of the picture has become a reconstruction of his own needs.

Self-Translation—Self-Portraits in Multiple Scenes

Fromm once said: "Many artists and creative writers, music conductors, and dancers are very narcissistic. Their narcissism does not affect their art, but on the



Figure 3 | "The Musicians"
1595 92.1cm×118.4cm



Figure 4 | "The Calling of Saint Matthew"
1599-1600 322cm×340cm



Figure 5 | "Narcissus"
1594-1596 110cm×92cm



Figure 6 | "David with the Head of Goliath"
1610 125cm×100cm

contrary it often helps them."(p.57) Caravaggio is such a painter with a strong sense of self-awareness and very "narcissistic". He expresses his understanding of the objective world through a very personalized artistic language, and paints the divine characters in myths and the Bible into the images of ordinary people who are real, touching and full of humanity(Chen & Tong, 2020). and even himself, in order to metaphor his desire for different needs in different periods.

Caravaggio first placed himself in the picture. "The Sick Bacchus" created in 1593. In the painting, the Baccaratus has pale skin, tired eyes, half-naked body,

and a sick look. This is closely related to his first arrival in Rome and his disease was infected. This pathological presentation is also his desire for a healthy state of survival. Compared with "The Sick Bacchus", "Boy with a Basket of Fruit", "The Kids Holding Fruit Basket" is lively and healthy, but the withered leaves and insect-eaten fruits in his hand hold the fruit basket hidden his anxiety about his living environment. His slightly forward body and confusing expression make people think deeply. "Narcissus" (Figure 5) is the extreme of his self-attention, and it is intertwined with various emotions such as obsession and indulgence in the self. In a

sense, this work can be said to have shaped Caravaggio himself. He freezes the picture at this moment. In *Nacarus* and the reflection, Caravaggio determined the existence of himself. He abandoned all other characters and even backgrounds and placed *Nacarus* in the center of the picture, so that the viewer's attention is completely focused on *Nacarus*, in order to express his desire and attention to himself (Chen & Tong, 2020).

In the later period, Caravaggio was on his way to escape, so his creations were violent and bloody. He even cut off his head and put it in his hands in "*David with the Head of Goliath*" (Figure 6) and "*Salome receives the Head of Saint John the Baptist*", which fully reflects the reverse collapse of his self-needs. He no longer beautifies his self-image, but alienates it into a decapitated sinner, trying to gain respect through self-punishment.

CONCLUSION

Caravaggio's artistic creation trajectory reflects his self-exploration of human needs. When his demand pyramid collapses, he expresses the mental cracks in his own unique way in the picture. Those suppressed emotions are translated into artistic images of decline, violence, and bloody, strong contrast of light and shadow, and tension-filled characters. The dramatic scenes subvert the perfect paradigm of the Renaissance. He is always proving that the real world is far more spiritually heavy than the ideal picture, and the people at the bottom deserve praise. Caravaggio used his short and glorious life to reconstruct the aesthetic standards of European art in the 17th century, pulling gods into reality, sending fire to the Baroque, and promoting the progress and development of world art.

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