



Chiaroscuro in Art

By Hideko Ono

Candidate No. 2026

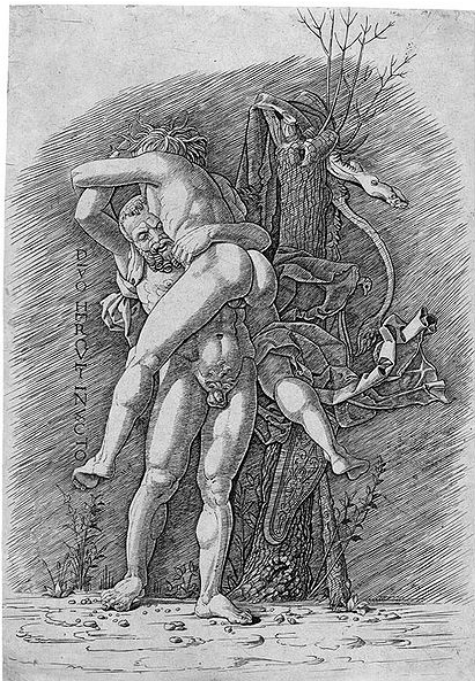
The Alice Smith School

Centre Number: 94622

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The use of Chiaroscuro in art forms has greatly impacted the way both artists and viewers perceive objects and the human form. The term in itself is diametrically opposed and not only visually stimulates the images of light and dark but also poses and raises questions on the theme thus aiding in creating a symbolic and religious emphasis in paintings particularly those of Baroque painters. Although the meaning of the term is simple, the connotations of light and dark though cultural and social influences aid in having this simple contrast impact their viewer's perception and emotions profoundly. It is perhaps this simple yet complex description which sparked this paper's interest in this particular subject and term. Its implementations in art forms such as its beginnings in Greek art to its more recent implementations in areas of photography all reflect the popular and sophisticated effect in which chiaroscuro lends to art.

The development of chiaroscuro originated from the Ancient Greek art forms of both woodcutting and engraving. Ancient Greek artists such as Apollodorus experimented and explored with ways of producing shadow to create form and depth within an image. This skiagraphia technique pioneered by Apollodorus influenced and later gave birth to the technique of chiaroscuro during the renaissance. His technique of skiagraphia greatly influenced and allowed later artists to develop and portray perspective on shape and form. Giuseppe Vicentino Niccolo's 'Saturn' is an example of the use of layering different shades of colours to create the tone and depth by using contrasting values of shadow and light.



*Andrea Mantegna (1497)
Hercules and Antaeus', engraving, Collection
Albert Blum*



Giuseppe Vicentino Niccolo 'Saturn'

Another example reflecting Apollodorus' influence would be Andrea Mantegna's engraving 'Hercules and Antaeus'. Again the varying layers of differing values and tones of light and dark help to create the illusion of depth within the image by separating both the background and foreground as well as, defining and forming the figure of the subjects. This technique can be reflected in artworks of both Michelangelo and in the anatomical studies of Leonardo Da Vinci. The development of the technique of skiagraphia to chiaroscuro enabled artists to explore and develop the understanding of the human shape and form.



'Angel for the Madonna of the Rocks' ca. 1483-85 Leonardo Da Vinci. Metal point heightened with white. Birmingham Museum of Art

Da Vinci's sketches reflect this use of light and dark to create form and shape, such as those from the artist Apollodorus. The use of shadowing and different techniques such as crosshatching and the use of varying tones of dark and light on a drawing all aid in depicting form and creating different perspectives on flat drawing surfaces. This technique is mirrored in Leonardo Da Vinci's sketches such as 'Angel for the Madonna of the Rocks (1483-1485) where he uses a metal heightened with white to vividly bring to life the face and form of the figure. His anatomical studies of human figures, such as 'Shoulder and Arm/Bones of the Foot' drawn in pen, ink and chalk, show how the implementation of dark and light tones in sketches using techniques such as shadowing help to mold and form objects and figures, allowing the artist to portray what they view in a more accurate and almost 3 Dimensional manner.

Developing from the use of tone in Greek art Caravaggio's paintings used chiaroscuro to highlight the actions depicted in his paintings such as 'Judith Beheading Holofernes' (1598-1599). In contrast to the earlier renaissance artworks, Caravaggio used chiaroscuro in painting in a more realistic portrayal, choosing rather to paint the event rather than painting the scene before it.

His strong contrast between light and dark creates emotive and tense depictions of the scenes as well as a sense of immediacy such as that seen in the expressive piece 'The Taking of Christ' (1602) where his use of chiaroscuro accentuates and captures the expressions of each of the subject's faces. **(see appendix 1)** The sorrowful face of Christ is heightened by the shadow cast on his eyelids and effectively portrays the struggle through the movements of the fabric, such as the deep red flayed robe of St. John against the dark backdrop. What strikes the viewer the most from this painting is how the effect of chiaroscuro amplifies the intensity and realism of the image. Caravaggio casts himself as one of the characters in the scene holding the lantern, illuminating the scene. Not only is the artist shown to be giving light to the event but Caravaggio is also depicting perhaps the purpose of artists as being the observers of life and its events. The inquisitive facial expression of Caravaggio contrasts to those of the highly emotive faces of the other figures. Whilst the faces of Judas, St. John and of Christ portray emotions of desperation, fear or sadness, Caravaggio's self portrait portrays that of an



*Judith Beheading Holofernes' - Caravaggio (1598-1599) Oil on canvas
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome*

individual purely observing the scene. The body language of the temple guards in the painting is heightened by the reflection of light from the armor. The depictions of the dynamic and violent grasps of the figures of Judas and St. John contrast to the intertwined clasp of which Christ has placed his hands reflect Christ's compliancy to being taken is positioned in such a way which would evoke a plea from Jesus for the sins of the people. Another intriguing aspect was that all of the figures, excluding Christ, all face towards the left whilst Christ's eyes are downcast. This contrast helps to emphasize and help bring focus on the main figure in the painting, the viewers eyes are guided fall on Christ. From here we follow Christ's gaze to his clasped hands which are clearly positioned in the image making Christ the key figure of the image and leaving the view to consider the significance of man in contrast to that of God and religion.

Rembrandt's 'The Resurrection of Christ' (1635-39) shows the artist's use of chiaroscuro to portray the fiery and almost violent resurrection and ascension of Christ. The stark contrast between the dark background and the ethereal light emitted from Christ is heightened by the composition of the light in the painting. This use of compositional chiaroscuro effectively captures the turbulent re-appearance of Christ as well as the symbolic meaning in the painting as the men are positioned at the lower third area of the painting shrouded in the darkness of sin whilst in contrast Christ is positioned on the upper second third emanating light from his centre. Although the picture does portray a sense of turmoil as seen by the actions of the male figures in the bottom of the page, the painting also portrays not only a sense of chaos but also a sense of balance between disturbance and calm. The yellow, muted and shadowy colors of the light emitted from Christ is somewhat dimmed in appearance and although the position of Christ is



Rembrandt's 'The Resurrection of Christ'
Oil on Canvas
1635-1639

above that of the men below, His serene and composed stature contrasts to the surprise and shock of that of the men.

Similarly the 'Feast of Balshazzar' also depicts another biblical event and also portrays the artist's use of chiaroscuro to heighten the effect and meaning of the supernatural or heavenly event, effectively capturing the shock and



Rembrandt 'Belshazzar's Feast' (1635) Oil on canvas National Gallery London

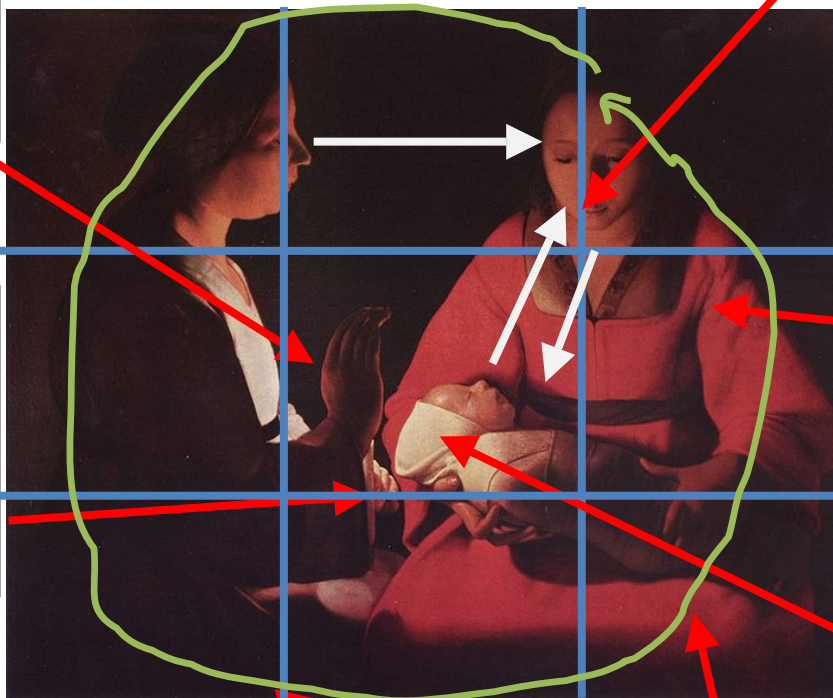
dramatic reaction of the witnesses.

Rembrandt's painting 'The Night Watch' (**see appendix 2**) is one that effectively uses the technique of chiaroscuro to vividly portray and depict the militia and the contextual as well as symbolic illustrations in the painting. Not only is the painting impressive by its size, but also the painter's technique in using shadow and light to evoke a sense of movement effectively portrays the dynamic activity in the scene. All of the figures in the painting are depicted to be in an event of movement, for example, the red sash of one of the main figures is ruffled and the added movements of the men in his company add a feeling of anticipation and eagerness such as seen through the drummer on the far right hand side, his actions almost allow the viewer to hear the steady drum beat of the company. In addition to this the raising of the flag on the left side of the picture is not at its full height but midway, this also aiding in portraying movement in the painting as the actions of the figures are captured during the event just as it has begun, allowing the viewer to anticipate the figures and the following actions in the scene. The focus of light guides the viewers eye to the three main figures in the painting, the captain and his lieutenant and more so on the figure of a girl. The illuminated depiction of the girl helps to emphasize her symbolism in the picture as an effective way in which Rembrandt depicts and symbolizes various forms of Dutch pride. For example the chicken's claws on the young girl's belt symbolize the arquebusiers who were the men who handled the long barreled guns depicted in the painting by the figure in red. Similarly to the works of Caravaggio, what I found most interesting with Rembrandt's use of chiaroscuro in his artwork such as 'The Night Watch' was how both artists used the technique to portray the event as it happened rather than before or after. In comparing both Rembrandt's 'The Night Watch' and Caravaggio's 'Supper at Emmaus' (**see appendix 3**) the use of chiaroscuro aid in bringing about a powerful effect to their images, by guiding the viewers eye through the painting and by also making their audiences ponder the artist's intention and the meaning or symbolism behind the painting through portraying a pivotal moment in history such as Rembrandt's 'The Night Watch'.



'The Night Watch' 1642 Rembrandt Oil on Canvas, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Georges De La Tour also carried on from the influences of Caravaggio in his work, but in contrast to those previously discussed De La Tour's paintings were less provoking in their depictions but more focused on simplicity and composition however they also retained the atmospheric tension found in the earlier works. His artwork such as 'The Nativity' also portrays his use of chiaroscuro where unlike the depiction of Christ as being the source of the light, the subject on the left holds a candle placing the faces of the figures in light and revealing their placid and unexpressive faces. The soft bulb like glow of the light is focused on Christ as a child as the figure's hands cup the light so as to direct its glow to the main figure and in doing so the area of light is focused only on the three figures placed in the painting. The softness of the lighting in this image depicts a peaceful and serene scene by the portrayal of the calm and serene facial expressions of Mary and the mid-wife to the left which contrast to both Rembrandt's and Caravaggio's gritty depiction of realism in pictorials of facial and body expressions. In comparison to Caravaggio's implementation of the technique, De la Tour's paintings depict a more simple style through his use of chiaroscuro, the portrayal of figures after the event in comparison to Caravaggio's use of chiaroscuro to portray the event as it happens.



- Cupped hand directs the direction of light
 -The light source is natural, not emanating from Christ the child.

-Calm face expressions
 -Serene scene irony towards Christ's challenges later on
 -Serenity- symbolize innocence
 - Mary is Key Character use of eyes, direct attention back to Mary. Emphasis on Virgin birth

- Composition- Mary and Christ positioned on the dominant right hand, creating focus.
 -Position of Christ is placed near center – key figure

-Red colour of cloth symbolic to the blood that Christ sheds- colour of sacrifice and love
 -Emphasis on mother and child bond as attention is between Mary and Christ

'The Nativity' Georges De La Tour 1645-1648 Oil on canvas
 Musee des Beaux Arts Dijon

-Direction of light guided by the mid-wife's hand helps guide the viewer's eye, encircling the three figures and centering on Christ the child, as well as reflecting a halo like shape above Christ.

-Use of chiaroscuro in the image concentrates viewers attention into the center of the image by darkening the outer edges of the image also creating a circular area of light, symbolic of safety, wholeness and of a mother's womb/safety.

-Christ the child is key focus in the image
 -Focus of light directed on child
 -Again raise questions of innocence and sin

Not only is chiaroscuro used in depictions of religious scenes, it is also used in the portrayal of normal every day activities such as in Johannes Vermeer's paintings. Unlike Caravaggio heavy treatment of dark in their paintings, Vermeer concentrated on the use of light in his paintings. His painting such as "Milkmaid" (1658-1660) shows Vermeer's use of light to create a delicate depiction of domestic activity. The source of the light originates from the window; it highlights and illuminates the rich colors of the figures clothes as well as the earthy tones of the objects and surroundings. The intricate use of light in his pieces such as in 'The Astronomer' and 'The Girl with the Pearl Earring' highlighted by their darkened background. The artist's use of light from a particular direction concentrates the viewer on the effect of light on the object of its form and the simple purity of youth.



*Johannes Vermeer 'The Milkmaid' (1657 -1658)
Oil on canvas
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Netherlands*



*Johannes Vermeer 'The Astronomer' (1668) Oil on
canvas Musee du Louvre, Paris*

-Composition - direction of light from left hand to right- guiding the eye to the main focus of the face then to the gleam of the 'Pearl Earring'

-Use of complimentary colours of blue and yellow help to lift up the objects such as the scarf from the dark background.

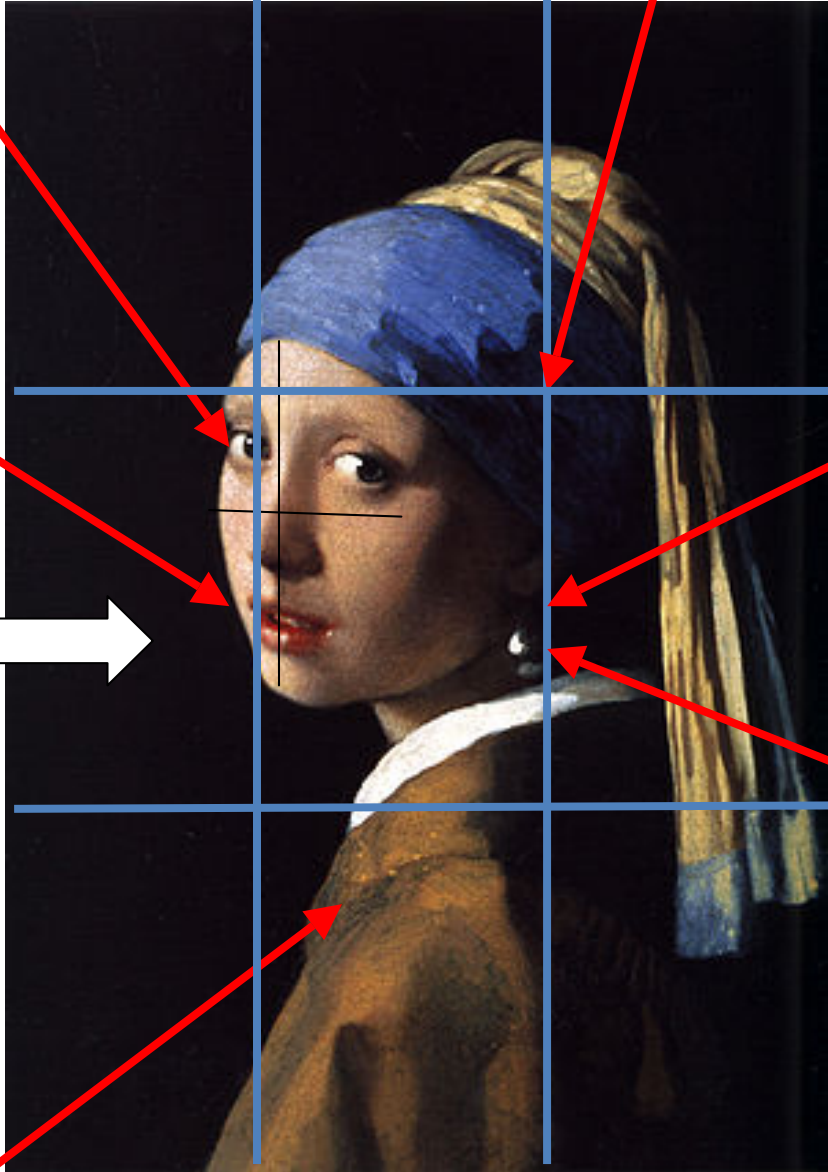
-Facial proportions, golden ratio, suggest perfection and beauty

-use of soft colours, strong blue against the subjects pale skin emphasizes the soft features
-blue also brings out and highlights the rouge lips

-emphasis on the 'Pearl Earring' symbolic of her youthful purity and beauty

-direction of light highlights and concentrates viewer's focus on the face.
- shadow helps to contour the face and add an added softness to her features.

-Main focus of the image - 'Pearl Earring' highlighted through the reflection of light
-Reflection guides the eye to the object that identifies the subject



Johannes Vermeer 'Girl with a Pearl Earring' (1665) Oil on canvas
Mauritshuis, The Hague

-Brush strokes of the clothing much less refined as that of the face- helps draw focus of the viewer to the face.

Similar to the highly emotive paintings of Rembrandt and Caravaggio, Francisco De Goya's 'The second of May 1808' and 'The third of May 1808' also depict images which both reflect historical events, such as the Madrid uprising and the execution of Maximilian. In his painting 'The third of May 1808' (1814) Goya also uses light and shadow to guide the viewer's eye. The depiction of the execution is heightened as the victims faces are flooded by the lantern on the floor, illuminating their chaotic and disorganized state

as well as the already shot victims on the floor. Guided by direction of the light it largely focuses on the figures on the left, portraying the emotions of the condemned, yet the central figure in the white is highlighted by his apparel, the color connoting purity, and his arms flayed above his head somehow suggest a gesture and situation similar to that of the crucifixion of Christ.



Francisco Goya 'The Second of May 1808 (The Charge of the Mamelukes) (1814) Oil on canvas, Museo del Prado, Madrid



Francisco Goya 'The Third of May 1808' (1814) Oil on canvas, Museo del Prado, Madrid

In comparison to its sister piece "The Second of May 1808" the use of chiaroscuro in the latter piece creates a more dramatic and raw result than that of the first piece. The second seems less refined than the first, creating the dynamic and expressive representation of the event in which chiaroscuro lends the second piece more so than in the first as the lack of refinement creates a much more dramatic and dynamic effect, reflecting the emotion of the event though the rough brushstrokes.

Goya's portrayals of chaos are also seen in his series of etchings 'The Disasters of War'. the series depicts the horrors and results of war and by using the technique of etching the effect of light and dark tones in his series emphasizes the dark tone and turmoil of the scene he chose to depict. For example his etching 'The Disasters of War: 85' effectively uses intense light and dark to depict the plight of the victims as well as the gruesome atmosphere. For example the two main victims are placed in front of the image mostly illuminated whilst behind the dead portray more victims being gunned down by the executioners. The scene similar to that of the artist's painting 'The Third of May 1808' again focuses on the plight of those killed and emphasizes the loss of which war creates.



*Francisco De Goya
 'The Disasters of War: 85' aquatint etchings by Francisco De Goya'*

The technique of chiaroscuro has also greatly influenced photographers. For example W. Eugene Smith and Ralph Gibson all use chiaroscuro in their photography, effectively creating the same dramatic effect as seen in Caravaggio and Rembrandt's art work. For example W. Eugene Smith's use of chiaroscuro is heavily evident in his photograph 'The Wake, Spanish Village', where the contrasts between Light and



*W. Eugene Smith 'The Wake, Spanish Village' (1951)
 Etherton Gallery*

Dark are more so emphasized through the use of black and white photography. This strong use of contrasts reflect the art works of Rembrandt and De La Tour and similarities can be found in both Smith's photograph and De La Tour's painting 'Nativity' (1644). Such as in both artworks there are similar uses of chiaroscuro that is echoed in Smith's photograph however both photos oppose each other in what they portray as one portrays birth whilst the other contrasts in its portrayal of

death. However, Smith's photography is heavily influenced by the use of chiaroscuro, as Caravaggio used the contrast of light and dark to contrast and create a passionate, emotive and humanistic scenes, Smith uses chiaroscuro to also depict and capture events on a humanistic level through the use of photography and by using the contrasts from the technique of chiaroscuro to add onto and emphasize the mood, tone and emotions that is captured. This is seen in his photograph 'Tomoko Uemura in Her

Bath' (1971) where Smith uses the strong blend and differences of intense light and dark in his black and white photography to create the powerful image through the simple contrasts of Dark and Light.

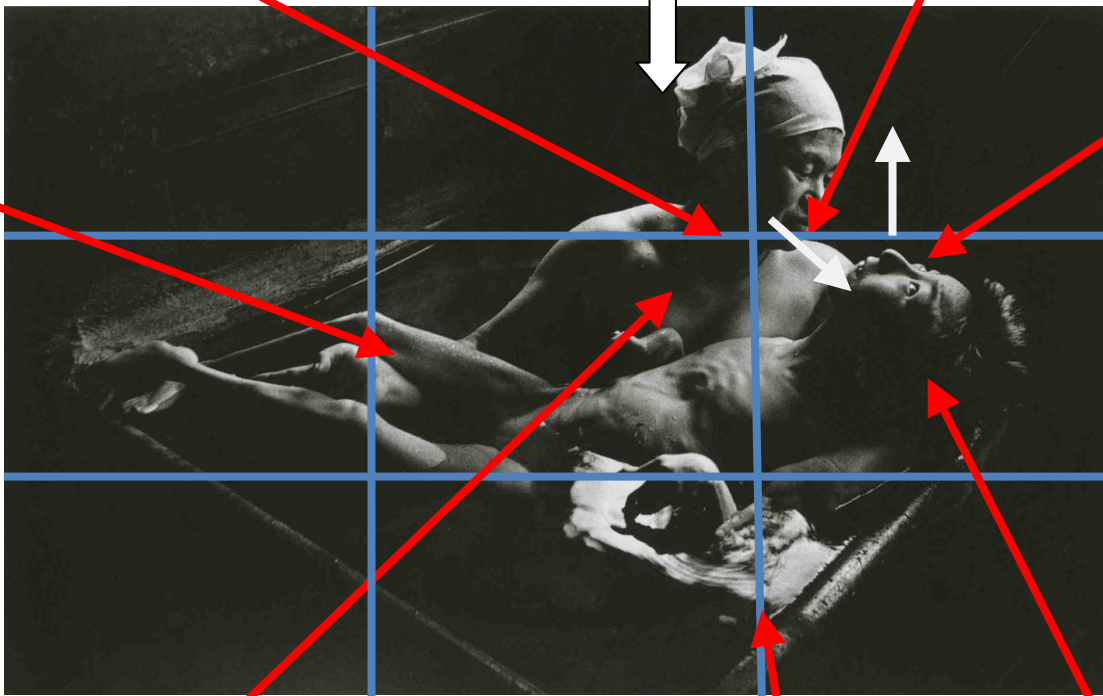
-composition reminiscent of De la Tour's 'The Nativity' also emphasizing mother and child bond through direction of eyes, mother being both the central figure as to Tomoko.

-Direction of light from above
- Symbolic light from heaven, linking to spirituality etc.
-use of facial direction of Tomoko concentrates viewers focus to the light.

-emotive imagery, creating an intimate atmosphere-, highlighting gentle actions and nurture of a mother

- The innocence of which the child retains through her physical condition emphasized in the image

-the direction of her eyes face upward, in contrast to her mother, emphasizing the bond of mother and child



W. Eugene Smith 'Tomoko Uemura in her Bath' (1971)

-Composition- upper body of mother and child placed in dominant right hand side – also reminiscent of De la Tour's painting of 'The Nativity'.

-Reflection of light in the bath, metaphorical – Tomoko bathing in light
-Shadow punctuates and emphasizes her frailty in comparison to Mother's fullness of body
-Presence of water – symbolic to cleansing of sins

-facial directions of mother and child
-Tomoko looking upwards symbolic of hope whilst her mother reflects the strength of a mother's love

Similar to W. Eugene Smith being a documentary photographer, the work of Sebastiao Salgado's images of the mines of Brazil's Serra Pelada also utilize black and white photography to create a more dynamic and also surrealist imagery in its presentation. In the image depicting the conditions in the mines of Serra Pelada, Salgado manages to capture the harsh reality in which workers were made to endure. The use of black and white photography enables him to portray the essence of which is presented. What makes the image even more thought provoking is the unbelievable reality of the working conditions of the individuals. The Monotonous and faceless figures of the masses raises the question of human value and the importance of human rights and of identity, similar to Smith's photograph, as their identity and importance is portrayed to be taken away through the unforgiving work and inhuman working conditions. The use of black and white photography also accentuates and conveys the structured and constrained work which they are subject reflecting the hellish conditions of their work through the harsh realism in which Salgado effectively captures.



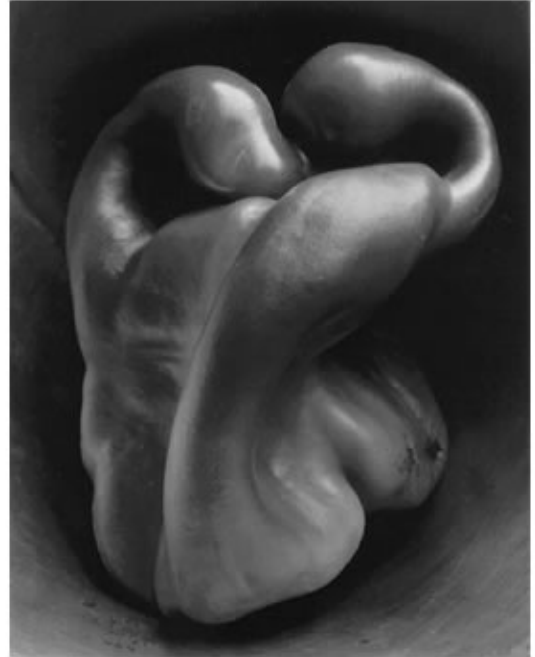
'The Serra Pelada gold mine' Brazil, 1986 Sebastiao Salgado



Ansel Adams 'The Tetons and the Snake River' (1942)

The use of chiaroscuro is also echoed in notable landscape works of Ansel Adams. His black and white photograph 'The Tetons and The Snake River' (1942) also portrays how the artist, in contrast to W. Eugene Smith, Adams photographs chronicled not the lives of people but focused more so on the life of nature. 'The Tetons and The Snake River' for example shows both nature's beauty and harshness, for example the light of the sun emerging behind the crags of the mountain reflect off the sky onto the river, like the light in the works of Caravaggio and Rembrandt, the light guides the viewers down the river until arriving at the heights of the rocky mountain with the backdrop of the sun. The rays of light emerging from behind the mountains also suggests a sense of fragility as the dark clouds partially obscure the light, yet the lighting also highlights the natural shape of the mountain accentuating the majestic form of the landscape.

Edward Weston's use of black and white photography also uses the technique of chiaroscuro to create and emphasize the shape and form of the object. For example photographs of the misshapen peppers were taken in such a way to highlight and emphasize the shapes and curves of the object, using the compositional use of light against dark to create soft shadows which accentuate the form and shape of the pepper creating the resemblance of the pepper to the human figure. Having emphasizing the curves of the pepper, the softness of which the black and white technique lends helps to connect and create the sensuous and graceful shapes between the misshapen form of the pepper to that of the human body suggesting a link between the contours of the human body and the perfect/imperfect object. Weston manipulates the viewer's perception of the image through his comparison to the contours and sculptural form of the pepper and the human figure.



Edward Weston 'Pepper'1930

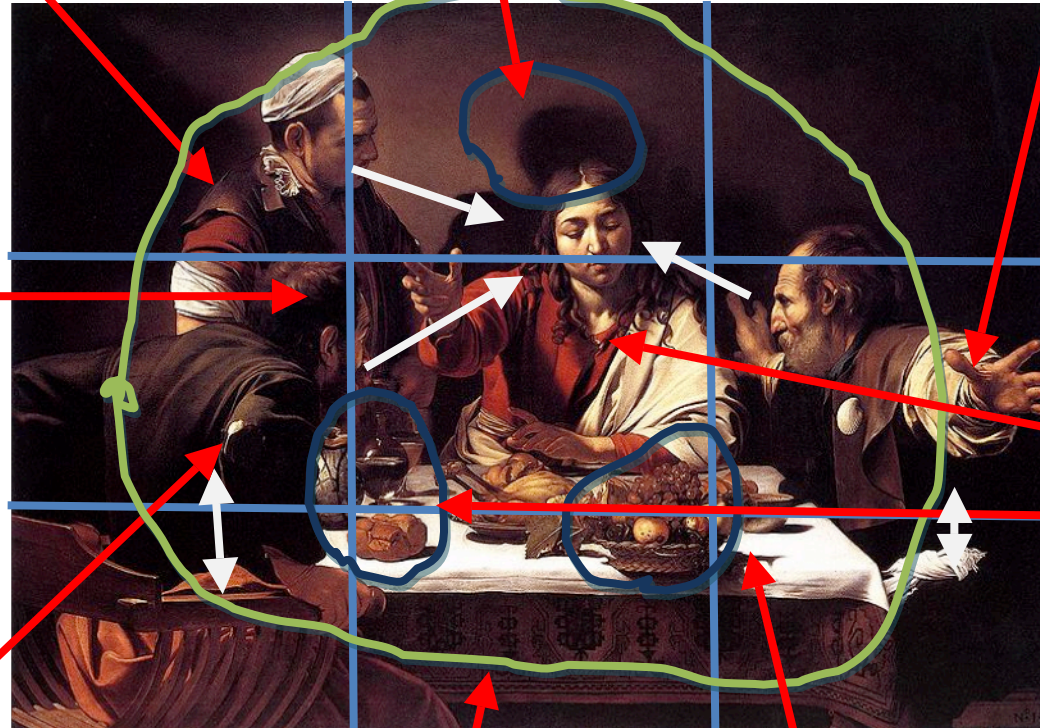
In conclusion, the technique of chiaroscuro has had an unmistakably important effect on artist's paintings. Whether it be used in the paintings of Rembrandt, Caravaggio and Vermeer to highlight specific areas or key figures in the artist's depictions, the use of chiaroscuro is echoed equally in a more contemporary age. With different techniques and materials from the more traditional use of Oil and Canvas the artist has been able to evolve with developments in both society's ideological changes and that of technological advances and along with it the use of chiaroscuro in their work. Chiaroscuro guides the viewers not only through the artist's painting but also provides a visual guideline in which the technique has evolved along with artists from the early uses of tone in Greek works through to the use of the technique in a contemporary art form such as photography allowing the perspectives of the artist's work and intention to be effectively portrayed. Chiaroscuro has enabled artists to successfully communicate their observations of life through to their audiences by creating highly emotive and dramatic artwork through which viewers can absorb and better comprehend the intentions of the artist and of the image more so through manipulating and concentrating viewer's focus by the intense contrast of light against dark.

- Inclusion of the fourth figure, represents those who have not been 'saved' by Christ
- Only figure in the image that does not have any reaction, again does not know or understand the significance of the event

- Caravaggio's manipulation of light in image to create a halo like shadow, representative of Christ's holiness and identity in scene.
- Heightens the event of the disciples identifying Christ as well as the viewers

- Use of foreshortening, similarly to 'Night Watch', demonstrates artist's skill heightens the event through the gestures of hands and emphasizes movement and the moment of the event as the disciples are caught mid-way through rising, emphasize their realization and significance of event.

- Composition of piece centers Christ in the image as all figures are turned towards him
- Light encircles the figures at the table, such as that in the 'Night Watch', guiding the viewer's eye to the main subject, also highlighting important symbols/objects within the sphere.



- Christ wearing red, symbolize blood that he has shed, sacrifice and love.

- Inclusion of water/wine and bread reflect biblical references (Last Supper)

- Detail in painting such as the torn clothes and dirty fingers help identify the disciples, such as the symbolism of the shell would act as an identifier to viewers at the time to associate figure as a disciple of Christ.

'Supper at Emmaus' 1601, Caravaggio Oil on Canvas National Gallery London

- The encirclement of light in the image around the figures guides the viewer's focus to remain within the sphere of light and highlight the symbolism and importance in the scene.

- Rotten basket of fruit on the edge of table, symbolize the deterioration of man and sin
- Presents the choice to the viewer to choose salvation,
- Rotten fruit as a metaphor suggesting man can fall off the table into sin or rise above to salvation also associating salvation with Christ as it is positioned beneath Him.

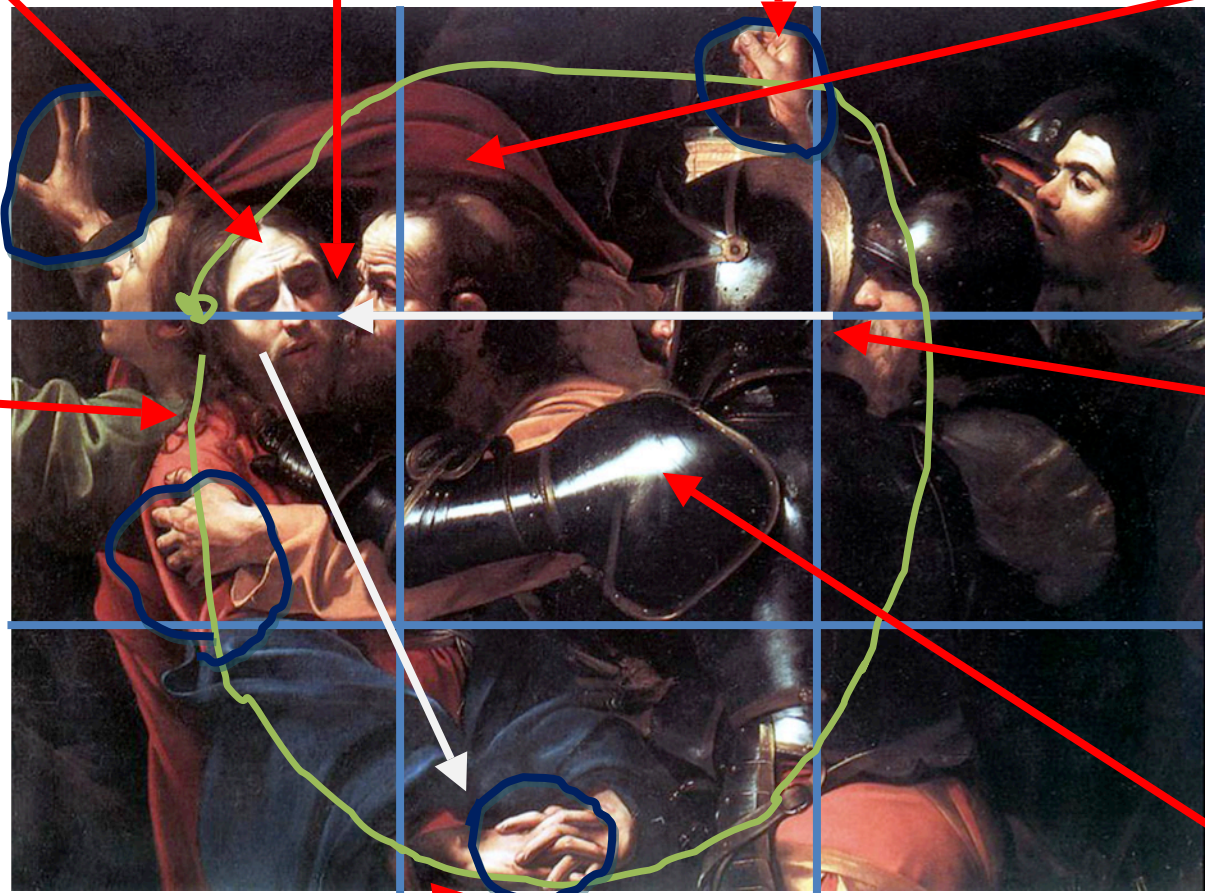
- Composition, Christ is pushed to the left hand side of the painting away from the dominant right hand, symbolic of the pushing of Christ's importance.

- Depiction of Christ and Judas, the kiss of betrayal in the garden of Gethsemane
- Judas clothed in yellow- symbolic of betrayal

- Hand in comparison to Judas' is holding a lanterns delicately- artist as observer

- Red robe, above Jesus symbol of blood to be shed, pain and suffering which are to follow, also symbolic of sacrifice and love
- Red robe also accentuates movement and struggle of the scene

-Body positions keeps viewer's eyes within the image almost creating a circular direction in which the positions of the soldiers face Christ and Christ's position slightly faced inwards keeps the viewer within this sphere of action.



- Body positions and eyes of the figures direct viewer's eye on Christ the main focus of attention within the scene

- Gleam of light on armor of soldier directs viewer's eyes towards the face of Christ.

- Hand held out to the viewer, offering salvation to audience
- Representative of Christ, compliant in nature, no resistance, accepting of fate

'The Taking of Christ' 1602, Caravaggio Oil on Canvas, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin

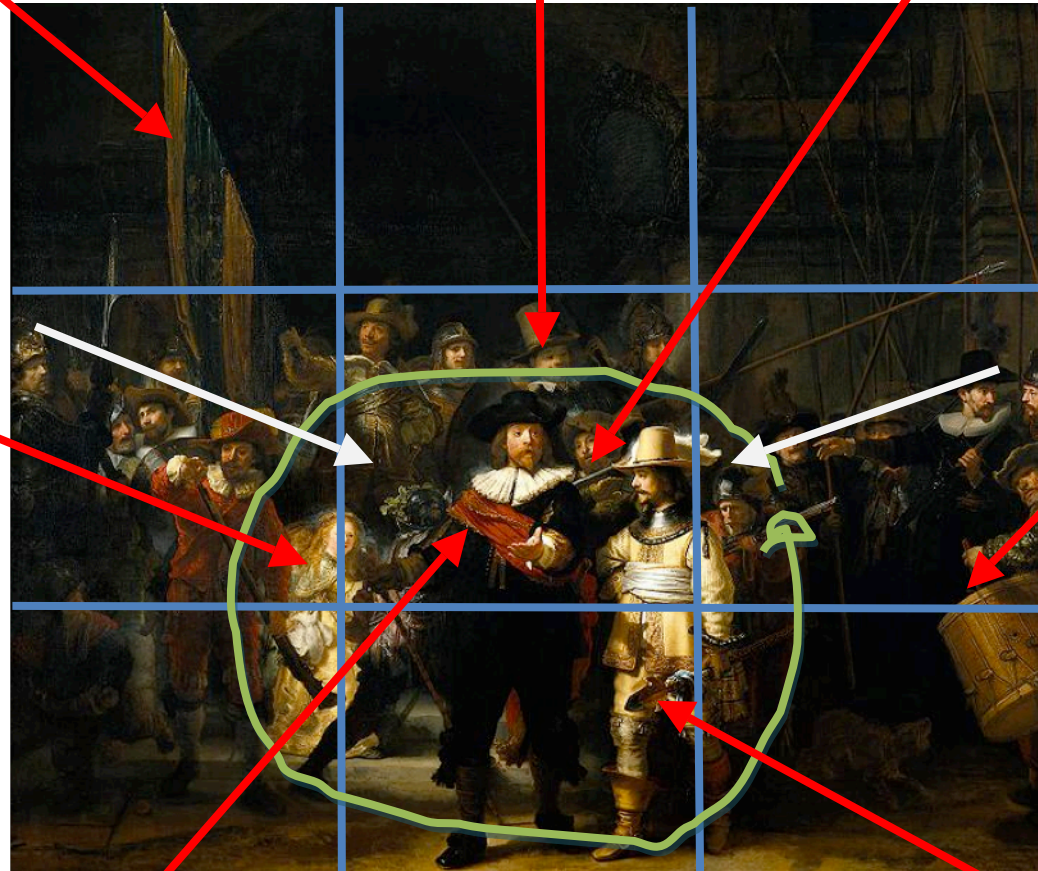
- Use of objects/symbols such as flags, drums and ordinary clothes help to identify the subjects behind the main figures similar to the use of symbols to help identify the disciples in Caravaggio's 'Supper at Emmaus'.

- Composition of piece, main figure, leader of militia is placed in centre emphasizing their importance (concentrating viewer's focus)
- placement of figures on either sides of the centre also pulls the viewer towards the middle.

- Direction of light heightened on the main figures, guiding viewer's eye, similar to Caravaggio's use of light, draws viewers to the centre of the image emphasizing the symbolism and the importance of the figures.

- Yellow clothing of young girl symbolize victory, light casted on the girl is intentional, stands out within the image as she is almost singularly lighted focusing the viewer's eye on the girl- similar to the manipulation of light casting a halo like shadow behind Christ in 'Supper at Emmaus'

- Movement in image captured to emphasize the event taking place, Similar to 'Supper at Emmaus', such as the dog barking, the drummer in mid-beat, etc.



'The Night Watch' 1642 Rembrandt Oil on Canvas, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

- Color of red cloth over the main figure, also evident in 'Supper at Emmaus', symbolize blood/sacrifice/nobility, aid in identifying the central figure.

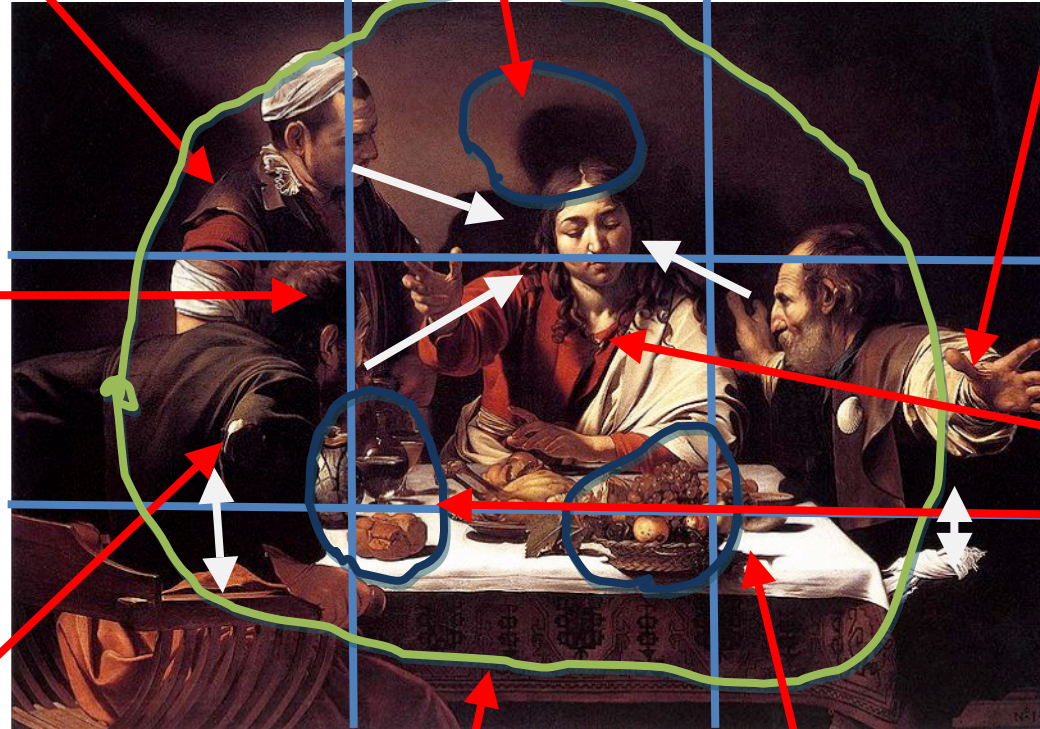
- Use of foreshortening also evident in Caravaggio's artwork, demonstrate artist's skills and create movement by pushing the scene forward in action.

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'Supper at Emmaus' 1601, Caravaggio Oil on Canvas National Gallery London

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Georges De La Tour

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