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23 November 2014

### The Bite

Michelangelo Merisi Da Caravaggio , an Italian painter of late 16th century early 17th century specifically (1571-1610) , painted *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* still as a young man. There are two pieces of this work, one held in the Fondazione Roberto Longhi in Florence and the other in the National Gallery of London. Both are claimed as original creations of Caravaggio, not copies. The exact date or place where Caravaggio painted this piece is unknown, but it is believed to have been painted in Rome after 1595 and before the end of the century.<sup>1</sup> Around that same time he stayed in the home of Cardinal Francesco Maria Del Monte, a collector and patron. He likely created the *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* during his time with the cardinal based on other works by Caravaggio known to be affiliated with this Cardinal.<sup>2</sup> However according to Andrew Graham Dixon, “It’s painted for sale early on when he’s struggling, and according to his biographers pictures like this he struggled to sell; he was living in rags and not living very well.”<sup>3</sup> The biography of Caravaggio on The National Gallery also corroborates Dixon’s claim that the painting was actually done just prior to his discovery by the cardinal and his rise to fame.<sup>4</sup> The subject of the painting, not unlike his other works, features an androgynous young boy alone, however this piece has an unusual twist to it.

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<sup>1</sup>Keith, Larry. "Three Paintings by Caravaggio." Ed. Diana Davies and Jan Green. *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* 19 (n.d.): 37-51. Rpt. in *National Gallery*. Ed. Ashok Roy. 1st ed. Vol. 19. London: National Gallery Publications, 1998. Print. 37.

<sup>2</sup>Keith, 37.

<sup>3</sup>Andrew G. Dixon. "Personal Response: Andrew Graham Dixon." Interview by Miranda Hinkley. *The National Gallery*. National Gallery Podcast: Episode 45, July 2010. Web. 23 Nov. 2014.

<sup>4</sup>"Michelangelo Merisi Da Caravaggio." *The National Gallery, London*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Nov. 2014.

The bizarreness of *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* creates mystery. At first sight of this painting, the viewer is immediately drawn to the enigma of the boy's facial expression and oddly positioned shoulder. Why is the boy in such terror? He is seemingly in a safe, comforting place inside with fresh flowers and fruits at his fingertips. What could possibly be disturbing this boy? Then at second glance, after discovering the title, the viewer experiences an "Aha moment" revealing the mystery. His reaction is explained so properly by the title of the painting. Without the title, the boy's reaction would be more puzzling; the viewer might be totally "in the dark." The green lizard nearly completely blends in with the leaves and fruit, which makes it realistically plausible that the boy did not see the lizard himself. Fried isolates these two different "moments" in the viewer's gaze as the chief meaning of this piece.<sup>5</sup> The tension between the viewer's initial response to the piece, "immersion", and the second moment of understanding the "specularity."

Many of Caravaggio's works were thoughtfully staged by supposedly common boyish figures not particularly notable for their good looks. This method of using a common boy as the model creates a very realistic scene of an unidealized figure. It was also very unorthodox to use a model with imperfect features and was met with some distaste by some critics. Yet the boy is dressed and styled with makeup and framed with flowers and fruits. This is the same case with Caravaggio's *Bacchus*. The piece is even more sensual and sexually suggestive. It features a similar ordinary androgynous boyish figure with more fruit and wine. In *Bacchus*, the boy's dress is even more revealing and has more makeup with intentional display of the neck line where the makeup ends to emphasize the tension between beauty and artificiality. However, unlike *Bacchus*, the scene with the *Boy Bitten By a Lizard* would be much more challenging to stage, because of the drama-charged action. This drama is created in part by the "theatrical light"<sup>6</sup> as The National Gallery calls it.

As per usual for a piece by Caravaggio, there is a high light contrast, creating sharp, crisp shadows almost cutting the picture. This high contrast also creates an intense dramatic effect. The

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<sup>5</sup>Fried, Michael. *The Moment of Caravaggio*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2010. Print. 39.

<sup>6</sup>"Michelangelo Merisi Da Caravaggio." *The National Gallery, London*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Nov. 2014.

light source comes from one source on the left, a window fixture, because it is an indoor scene and it can be. The shadow particular creates an shocking effect on the boy's right hand (left side of the painting). His middle finger is contorted and bent downward breaking level with his other fingers. At first sight, because of the shadow cast by his ring and pinky finger, it seems as if his middle finger is cut off at the knuckle, or possibly bitten off. With a closer look his finger is actually intact and a small green lizard can be seen still hanging off his finger, with its jaw still clenching his finger. However the lizard because of its size and the shadow is barely noticeable. Like the shadows the pain of the bite is also sharp and dramatic.

The boys gaze is not directed at either the viewer, or the fruits and flowers, or his hand bitten by the lizard. In *Bacchus* the boy confidently and seductively looks directly at the viewer. Here in a very similar context the boy's gaze is just off center and to the right of the viewer. It seems as if Caravaggio intentionally pretends that the scene was originally staged with the boy in a similar pose like the one of the boy in *Bacchus* but is suddenly and surprisingly bitten by the lizard and the focus of his gaze is pulled away from the viewer slightly in the moment of the bite. This creates the realistic illusion that the boy was genuinely surprised by a lizard bite. The expression is so real that even though it was obviously staged and posed for, the viewer might be drawn to believe that the model was still unaware of the lizard and his reaction was real.

In shock from the bite, the boy contorts his body, twists his fingers, and makes the most unusual of facial expressions. The boys pose signifies multiple emotions all in one action. This still frame of a split second action captures the multiple instantaneous human expressions. Caravaggio creates an ultra realistic snapshot of a split second human reflex. He conveys, fear, surprise, and pain through his body language. His mouth is open, possibly shouting from fright. The open mouth doubles in this painting as a sexually suggestive act. This facial expression is not unlike another Caravaggio piece, *Medusa*. It features the completely severed head of *Medusa*, frozen in a state of shock even after her death. The boy's reaction to being bitten by the lizard is just as powerful as one experiencing the trauma of death. Biting is also considered a sexually stimulating activity. Perhaps the teeth penetrate the skin of the boy. A bite is sharp but not lasting pain, which gives this piece so much instantaneous thrill and excitement. Biting is also very carnal, especially biting into flesh, creating an even more sensual impression.

The character is a boy, young and innocent, yet sexualized. He is dressed lavishly and relatively modestly but his right shoulder is exposed and is pushed out of his clothes and directly at the viewer. Despite the fact he is a boy, his masculinity nearly completely removed. Everything about him is feminine. His hair lengthy, curled, and shapely. He wears makeup with blush on his cheeks, and his lips are red. Most obviously the flower in his hair tucked gently behind his ear. Which make his reaction to the lizard bite considered even more feminine and cowardly uncharacteristic of the male stereotype. Fried refers to this tension as “the struggle between feminizing love and the masculine code of honor.”<sup>7</sup> He goes further to compare the gender tension to the tension between the initial and secondary interpretation of the piece. Fried contests Hibbard and Donald Posner’s interpretation of these androgynous boyish pieces as homosexual and homoerotic subject matter. It cannot be concluded for certain whether the subject was intended to be homoerotic or not, nevertheless it certainly breaks down gender boundaries and solicits sexual tension.

His innocence and vulnerability make it even more sexual, when he is “violated” in a way by the lizard. The boy must’ve reached for the fruits and been unpleasantly surprised by an unseen lizard amidst the fruits and foliage. As he reaches for the fruit to indulge himself the opposite happens, he is assaulted by the bite of the lizard. He rips his hand away but the lizard does not let go. This indulgence of fruit connotes physical desire, eroticism. Art critic and biographer of Caravaggio Andrew Graham Dixon goes as far to say that “this boy has fallen victim to the blandishments of love and in the process has caught [...] the poison chalice of his lover who has given him the clap.”<sup>8</sup> Dixon supposes it was inspired from one of Caravaggio's personal sexual experiences, many people in his time were inflicted with sexually transmitted diseases.

The background is in the details. Behind the boy is a plain, drab, grey wall without any notable features besides a single shadow, so it might seem to a novice viewer as if Caravaggio didn’t put in attention to the surroundings of the painting. This is not the case, upon a closer look at the reflection of the flower vase, shapes of windows are visible. The reflection of a room

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<sup>7</sup>Fried, 42.

<sup>8</sup>Dixon.

painted in the curving contour of the glass. This technique is like *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride* by Jan Van Eyck where on the wall a curved glass mirror reveals more about the room than is visible from the forward angle of the larger piece. However again there is an initial mystery about the reflection in the glass. The window is obviously on the left yet the reflection of the window appears to be reflecting on the right side of the room. How could this be? Actually this displays Caravaggio's attention to detail and commitment to exact realism. Scientifically speaking the physical optics of the curvature of the glass vase would indeed appear as it does in the piece, even though to the common viewer might appear counterintuitive to have the reflection on the right while the object is actually on the left. Fried refers to this as "'scientific' realism."<sup>9</sup> It also acts to guide the viewer's gaze to the right of the painting at the left hand of the boy drawn back cringing in the shadows.

The painting is painted on woven linen canvas with the use of calcite based ground mixtures for brown tones to create shading.<sup>10</sup> He used this type of materials along with blended oil and egg tempera to control the opacity of the colors particularly for the sake of Caravaggio's extreme shadows on skin tones. Because of the ample use of shadows across the different colors in his pieces, it demands a high level of blending between the lighter and darker parts of the representation of the same color. For example only on the skin of the face of the boy there is an entire spectrum of shaded pale skin tone. The right side of his face (left in the painting) is lit up while the left side of his face (right in the painting) is almost completely dark. On the tip of the boy's nose Caravaggio expresses the glossy shine of his skin with complete white, while in his mouth, nostrils, and eyes there is complete black. Brushstrokes appear in parts of the work particularly around the flower vase, both on the petals of the flower and the reflective shine on the glass vase and water.

Although *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* is not Caravaggio's most famous works or even possibly intended by Caravaggio to be one of his major pieces. The subject matter is not historical or religiously powerful however it brings these characteristic of drama, and action theatrics into a setting which usually does not have that kind of excitement which creates mystery and wonder.

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<sup>9</sup>Fried, 54.

<sup>10</sup>Keith, 38.

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(Left)

Caravaggio, Michelangelo M. *Boy Bitten By a Lizard*. C.1595. Oil on canvas. The Nation Gallery, London.

(Right)

Caravaggio, Michelangelo M. *Boy Bitten By a Lizard*. C.1595. Oil on canvas. Fondazione Roberto Longhi, Florence.