

Chiaroscuro is a technique, employed by artists and photographers alike, which focuses on strong contrasts between light and dark, to transform and highlight certain aspects of the composition. It's also used as an effective way of portraying the curvature and dimensions of the human form. In photography, it's often compared to **rembrandt** lighting, a type of lighting which darkens a section of a figure, making the image more striking and natural, by using stronger lighting in a particular direction. Lighting can also be ambient – seen more often in the works of impressionists, on water. Ambient lighting gives a softer, more natural feel.

**Chiaroscuro** originated during the renaissance. It was developed by working with black paper, and light and dark inks. Most early works of this type were monochrome. Monochrome, and using shading techniques, helped give the impression of three-dimensional volume, which made paintings and photos more bold. Most of the time, minimal light was used. During the baroque era, light was mostly used in a nativity scene, to represent the light of god, and to highlight a religious, or important individual in a painting, the light making them look appealing. Artists such as **Giovanni Baglione**, and **Caravaggio** employed this style during this time, eventually developing **tenebrism** – a form of even more dramatic chiaroscuro, which was dominant in all their works.

"Chiaroscuro is generally only remarked upon when it is a particularly prominent feature of the work, usually when the artist is using extreme contrasts of light and shade." – **Tate**

Michealangelo Caravaggio was born in 1571. He was an Italian artist, and his works were based around the themes of the physical, human state. He used dramatic lighting in his works to express the human emotion. At the time when he was working, there was a focus on religious art – to combat the threat of Protestantism in Spain. Caravaggio employed the use of Chiaroscuro, and tenebrism, to make his naturalistic characters look dramatic, and focus on feelings and emotions. The realism of his figures added even more intensity to the emotions felt in the painting. He was incredibly talented – he worked directly onto canvas whilst painting his models, not even sketching the painting.

**Judith Beheading Holofernes 1598-1599** demonstrates Caravaggio's use of tenebristic lighting, to



create a mysterious, dark feeling. The limited light highlights the action, and important character in the painting. Depending on the subject matter, the light could come from any different direction – here it is straight onto Judith, showing that she is the main character. You can also see the light falling onto the man's arm, it highlights all the muscles and contours of the body, adding realism and focusing on the three-dimensional. Shadows falling on individuals also highlight their attitude, or emotions. The strong dark colors around the older woman, and man, make it clear they are the bad, or sinning characters. Caravaggio's way of painting every single human flaw and

detail is why he was disliked – seen here on the old woman's skin, even further emphasized by the contrasting light. Monet's work, whilst still focussing on the use of light, is very dissimilar to a work like this of Caravaggio. The background is black, and the only illuminated parts are bland, naturalistic, but everyday colors. Alternatively, Monet chooses to use blue as his shadowing color, to reflect the sky, and also takes all the colors he sees, at the time of day, and exaggerates them to make a mood. Because he worked outdoors, he could capture the light and different times of day.

Adding to this, whilst Caravaggio uses shadows and darkness to point out who is the negative figure in his paintings, Rego uses the unappealing body shape and posture, as well as the faces, to make all the

figures in her work unappealing and unlikeable to the viewer, giving her paintings some degree of questionability, into why/what/the characters are doing.

Caravaggio's techniques, and use of realistic, not romanticised, figures, received criticism from some other practising artists during that time.

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Whilst younger, new painters in Rome renowned him for his novelty use of lighting, and his accurate depictions of the human form. However, it was his accurate, lifelike depictions of the human form that made other artists consider his work vulgar. He had many problems with religious commissions, because of the sinister, harsh lighting, and almost grotesquely accurate human form. This is in stark contrast to the work of Paula Rego, who works using rougher brush strokes, more similar to the style of impressionism. She makes her characters short and stocky, and leaves out most detail, so your left to focus on the short, wrong looking stature that they have, and contemplate if the character is good, or if they are bad, as the facial expressions and body make the characters look so menacing.

Impressionism originated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The style of impressionism is characterised by distinguishable, bold brush strokes, and emphasis on the light and colors. The impressionists were the first group of painters to begin painting outside ("en plein air"), in order to observe the colors and effect of outside lighting, so they could capture particular times in the day.

Impasto is the technique often used in works of impressionism. Little, or no mixing of the colors means that the paint can look more vibrant, often leading to a brighter result. This was good for light reflections and sunny scenes. The constant application of paint meant that the edges are typically softer, which

When painting, an impasto technique is often used, to apply the paint thickly, quickly, and without drying. This leads to more vibrant colors, and as the paint is wet, it leads to softer edges, which produces a more relaxed, yet vibrant finish. This is in stark contrast to Caravaggio's use of precision, muted dark colors against bright, and hard, exact edges. Impressionism is good for day scenes, as the relaxed nature of painting means that the colors, i.e. the reds of sunset can be captured quickly, and the softer lighting means that the scene will look more serene and tranquil, unlike the muted colorless paintings of Caravaggio, which contrasts and exact realism create tension and dark tones.



**Nymphaeas, 1915, Monet.** You can see the clear brushstrokes, a contrast from the works of Caravaggio, where detail and precision are key. Monet's relaxed use of brushstrokes make the work look more relaxed, and calm. Monet, and other impressionists focussed more on the reflections and colors of the light, letting it consume the painting, resulting in bright, vivid paintings, with the exaggerated brushstrokes highlighting the rippling of water, that was so commonly painted by Monet. Caravaggio's works seem the opposite; it's almost as the darkness is consuming the whole image – there





reflections of already present colors, that go along with the day. Caravaggio's work don't use exterior light, and are most always indoors. Similarly, Rego's are, but she can use window light, and brighter lights from lamps etc, but Caravaggio just uses dark shadows and one bright candlelight. Whilst Caravaggio's work may have the most contrast, and therefore the most impact, The works of Monet use light in a way that emphasises a certain mood at the time of day – Caravaggio does not capture the light and colors of daytime, sticking to the same, indoor color palette. Rego's works are also based indoors, and she utilises natural light aswell, but she uses a wider color palette, so her shadows aren't as effective. Instead, Rego chooses to focus on the stature of her characters, and places her shadows so that it emphasises the unattractive qualities of her figures. Rego's paintings may also be the most life-like, in color. While Monet picks up on natural colors, and emphasises them to put across mood and feeling, Rego uses the bland colors that she sees in everyday life, and just adds more menacing shadows to this light already. Caravaggio's palette is too harsh to be considered 'everyday, realistic' lighting.

Paula Rego was a Portuguese painter, born in 1935. She was nominated for the Turner Prize, and got an honorary degree from Oxford University in 2005. She was married to another artist, Victor Willing. They together established the London group of artists, together with artists such as David Hockney.

Rego's work is reminiscent of cartoons, and she often puts a surreal, sinister feeling onto her paintings, through use of light, distortion, and figures. It has been described as 'magical realism'. She has been said to be a painter of 'Contemporary Mythologies', this is shown by the way she takes traditional fairytales, or old images, and adds an underlying emotion, feel of sexuality, and feeling to all the characters involved, through the way she paints figures, and her use of light.



Rego's 'The Maids' (1987) was inspired by a 1947 play (of the same name) by Jean Genet, and this is where some of the storyline from some of her paintings come from. The basic storyline of the maids was that the two sisters (the maids) murdered a mother and daughter. The painting focusses on the unnatural closeness of the sisters. Rego uses stocky, unappealing looking figures to make her paintings seem almost repulsive. She also makes the viewer question the sexuality of her figures, as most of them look masculine. Rego uses shadows in her paintings to give a feeling of uneasy, sinisterness. Here on this painting there is a shadow on the wall, aswell as a large shadow on the floor – this makes the characters

seem bigger in terms of the painting, and also makes the figures look intimidating. It helps make the room seem more claustrophobic, and gives a feeling of menace. Rego doesn't utilise Chiaroscuro like Caravaggio, as Caravaggio uses a dark shadow to consume the painting, and illuminates, by candlelight, only certain sections of figures for emphasis, and to give the painting a negative, and menacing undertone. Rego uses brighter light sources, such as windows and lamps, then darkens a larger area of image, for shadowing impact. She also uses the shadow for sides of faces, to make them look sinister. While Rego's work looks more lighthearted than Caravaggio's, her use of short, stocky figures, and the way her faces are unreadable, makes the mood of the painting uneasy, and equally as effective as Caravaggio's work. I think Rego focusses more on figures, faces, and the action in the painting, whilst Caravaggio focusses on smaller details, like facial expression, and picks

them out using a harsh light, for his main effect. Rego's work is more similar to Monet's, as she does use more natural light sources, and tends to use dark colors more sparingly than Caravaggio.



Left, "The Dance" 1988, uses more dramatic shadows than its former, but still uses natural, moonlight, as opposed to strong, contrasting candlelight, like Caravaggio. The blues are emphasised in this work by Rego, which is the reflection of the sky and the water, the natural lighting reflections, which is similar to what Monet does in many of his works, as he stays away from using blacks. Again, Rego has used blue, a typically negative color, to convey mood, of uncertainty and maybe sadness. Similarly, Monet uses yellows, oranges, sunset/morning colors, to convey a feeling of relaxation and tranquility in his works. Caravaggio, like the others, mainly uses black, and muted bright colors for maximum contrast and emphasis. Whilst Caravaggio was praised for his extremely life-like, realistic figures,

Rego's are almost cartoon-like, which makes them look less appealing.

I chose these three artists to study because they focussed most on the techniques of light and dark in their paintings to establish a mood and feel. My favorite is Caravaggio, because I like the stark contrast and detail he can get, by highlighting certain areas and figures, and I also appreciate the accuracy in his work. I also like Monet's work, because of the way he captured and exaggerated certain colors brought on by the time of day, and the subject matter, and then utilized these to give the painting a distinctive feeling. Although I'd prefer to focus on figures for this project, as I have mostly done patterns and objects so far, and I think it would be good for me to try and paint a person. I also think it would be cool to try and distort Caravaggio's technique, and perhaps use more color instead of black shadow, so the painting looks more upbeat, and I could capture a particular time of day whilst keeping the impact from using a singular stark light source. I don't really want to paint any cartoon-similar paintings, like Paula Rego, because the idea doesn't really appeal to me, and I think the way she does figures is really unattractive, yet really intriguing. She has inspired me to perhaps try and distort a body using light, which would look really effective. I'm not sure if I want to use impressionist painting styles, as I prefer to have a smooth surface, and getting accuracy, without having to use techniques such as impasto, but I think I could use it on sections, for a more effective image.

