

# The Influence of Renaissance Art on Contemporary Light and Shadow Aesthetics

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**Abstract.** During the Renaissance, the relationship between art and science was exceptionally close, as both disciplines shared the common objective of achieving beauty through harmony, symmetry, diversity, and unity, in addition to uncovering the ultimate truth. The exploration of natural sciences and the revelation of the objective laws governing the development of objects had a profound influence on artistic creation. The investigation into the alterations in natural light has given rise to a new wave of light and shadow art, and this impact has persisted until the present day, with remnants still discernible in contemporary art pieces. This article delves into the groundbreaking advancements and modifications in light and shadow composition in the works of Caravaggio, such as the lighting of the wine cellar and Rembrandt's crowdfunded masterpiece "*The Night Watch*". To investigate the parallels and contrasts between the utilization of light and shadow techniques in Renaissance artworks and contemporary art pieces and photography. The Renaissance epoch marked a pivotal moment in the annals of light and shadow art, and numerous contemporary artworks are derivatively influenced by the artistic creations from that era. Including the application of stage lighting in theatrical performances, photography characterized by stark contrasts in light and shadow, and a multitude of artworks inspired by the juxtaposition of light and shadow.

**Keywords:** renaissance, Light and shadow art, Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn.

## 1. Introduction

Under the social environment of the combination of art and science in the Renaissance period, the structure of the picture changed from plane to three-dimensional. Light and shadow is one of the important factors that move the picture from plane to three-dimensional [1]. Since Lavaggio's breakthrough and innovation of light and shadow in the early 17th century and also at the end of the Renaissance, light, and shadow have become complex and multi-faceted and have been divided into several components. By strengthening the contrast between light and dark, the picture can be transformed from a realistic style close to nature to a more dramatic one. The present state of emotional communication from the perspective of the photographer can arouse the resonance of the viewer. It is this way of shaping light and shadow that experienced the innovation of the Renaissance, the rejection and disregard of the contemporary mainstream aesthetic became a new trend of the society in the later period, and finally became an enlightenment of the emerging light and shadow art in modern times. In modern and contemporary artworks, "Rembrandt's light" is more or less borrowed and quoted. There are also a large number of Rembrandt light applications in modern and contemporary film art known to us, including the famous Japanese film and television work "*Love Letter*" and the latest Chinese film and television work "*Flowers*". In addition to film and television works, stage lighting is included in various photographic works and poster shoots. This kind of lighting method strengthens the contrast between light and dark, and illuminates a beam of light from one direction or from top to bottom, from front to back, or from left to right, and makes a contrast and connection with the thick darkness. This shows that the "Rembrandt light" has a broad influence. The formation of this kind of "dark light and shadow" and the use of modern and contemporary art in the later period are the key issues to be discussed in this paper.

## 2. Background

The study and innovation of natural light and shade in the 17th century were mainly due to the combination of science and art during the Renaissance period, as the scientific research findings and greater contact and observation of nature led artists to use light and shade more widely and creatively. They also found that using light and shade to shape the picture was an essential way to achieve a more natural realism. Leonardo da Vinci, a famous painter, first systematically studied the use of light and shade in painting, and he actively researched and explored, introducing the "contrast of light and shade" into painting [2]. From the study of natural, human bodies, and the transition from flat to three-dimensional pictures, artists have been constantly innovating their research and use of natural light and shade, until Caravaggio, who is considered to have opened the door to the 17th century, pushed the art of light and shade to a new turning point, which had some influence on the creation of later artist Rembrandt. Rembrandt, in inheriting Caravaggio's high contrast artistic creation techniques, added his own unique emotional interest, forming his own personal style.

In the present and contemporary times, there are many creative techniques that have inherited to some extent the light and shadow composition methods of the time, including the "Rembrandt light" commonly seen in films and television, the "contrast method", and the "three-point lighting method" [2]. Light is an expression of the author's emotions, while shadow is a place that is endlessly fascinating. Just like the O. Henry ending, people's emotions are gradually hidden in the darkness as the dramatic story unfolds, and the people or objects in the story are like a grand and vivid stage play that comes alive before the viewer's eyes, captivating and intriguing, with each element interconnected.

## 3. Analysis

### 3.1. Caravaggio

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was born in Milan, Italy, in 1571 to a middle-class family. His Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was born in 1571 into a middle-class family in Milan, Italy, the son of a famous local architect and stonemason. His artistic style was influenced by Baroque art and the late Renaissance. From 1576 to 1584, he was an apprentice in the studio of Titian's apprentice Simon Biedzano in Milan, these four years of study gave him a good foundation for painting, and it was during this period that Caravaggio developed his unique artistic style. Some scholars believe that the following three factors had an important impact on his painting: the local reality, the traditional trend of Renaissance in Milan, especially the influence of Da Vinci's style of combining art and science, and the influence of some northern Italian realist painters (including Venetian painters) [3].

Caravaggio showed no early talent for painting. However, after Caravaggio moved from Milan to Rome in 1592, he met the painter Prospero Orsi, who brought him into the collecting world and gave Caravaggio a lot of help in bringing Caravaggio's art to the world. In 1595, with the help of Orsi, Caravaggio met and gained the favor of Cardinal Monte, and from then on Caravaggio's artistic light finally emerged. Munter's help played a key role in Caravaggio's artistic development. Monte was quickly drawn to Caravaggio's unique style of painting, which provided him with many opportunities to create decorative paintings for chapels. Caravaggio had a lot of energy and was always quick to complete the tasks entrusted to him. However, his violent temper and arrogant personality caused him to suffer repeated setbacks in the artistic road, and he died young at the age of 39 [4]. Caravaggio's success is attributed to his unique style of painting, which is full of genuine feelings, especially when the flamboyant, flamboyant and pretentious Baroque and Rococo styles were prevalent. Caravaggio's understanding of light and shadow had already undergone a breakthrough shift in the 17th century. Caravaggio's early paintings were brighter and more subdued than his later ones before Caravaggio developed his famous "cellar light" technique. The visual three-dimensional sense of general objects is shaped by various elements of light and shadow, such as light, side light, backlight, and the projection generated by light. "Wine cellar light painting" is to weaken the transitional surface such

as side light and backlight by strengthening the contrast of light and dark, creating a dramatic visual effect of light and shadow. Caravaggio will pursue a more vivid picture effect. Contrary to the traditional light-dark transition method, the use of strong light-dark contrast method, to highlight the key point and renders the atmosphere [5]. *Christ's Lunch at Emmaus* and *The Boy Bitten by a Lizard* are examples of Caravaggio's use of "cellar light". "*Christ's Lunch at Emmaus*" is based on the story of Christ, the picture of four people sitting around the table, wearing red clothes, and wearing a white cloak is obviously one of the protagonists of the picture Jesus. In the thick black background, the light in front of Jesus highlights both Jesus and his disciples and forms a shadow behind Jesus. The light well separates the primary and secondary objects and figures in the picture. Just like the modern and contemporary stage lighting, the light focuses on the theme of the story, so that people can't help but follow the eyes, and the rest of the background gradually fades into darkness. There are also many triangular structures in the picture. Caravaggio uses the pyramid-shaped composition commonly used in the Renaissance. With the head of Jesus as the center of the picture, the stretched arms of the old man with a white beard and the bodies of the disciples in green clothes form an open triangle, which supports and extends the picture and arouses the emotions of the viewers together with the strong contrast of light and shadow. Like *Christ's Lunch at Emmaus* and *The Boy Bitten by a Lizard* uses the "cellar light painting method". Half of the boy's face and body are exposed to the light, while the other half is hidden in the dark. The light and shadow in Caravaggio's use not only shapes the characters more three-dimensional, but also narrates the story and drama of the picture. The dynamic display of the figure is more vivid, inciting the viewer's emotions, and firmly locking the viewer's eyes on the subject of the painting, that is, the boy suffering from the bite of the lizard in the painting. Caravaggio's three-dimensional realistic painting technique formed by the contrast of light and shadow or the use of ordinary people to shape the background of religious stories has made his style unique and famous. Meanwhile, his innovative creative technique has also exerted a great influence on the artistic creation of later generations, including the famous light and shadow painter Rembrandt.

### 3.2. Rembrandt

In the turbulent late 17th century, Rembrandt was influenced by society, politics, and religion, and he had a new understanding of the painting technique of light and shadow, and the people-oriented central idea deeply influenced him. Early Rembrandt studied with Jakob van Swanenburg and later with Peter Rust, which had an important influence on his early understanding and perception of light. Later, because he was deeply influenced by the Catholic *Bible*, he began to create religious works, which also had a certain impact on his later understanding of light. In his paintings of religious themes, Rembrandt was deeply influenced by the Italian Baroque painter Caravaggio. He referred to, inherited, and applied Caravaggio's painting method, and combined his perception to make the picture more distinctive. Geographical location and climatic conditions are also of important reasons for the formation of Rembrandt's light and shadow. Influenced by the temperate maritime climate and high latitude conditions, Rembrandt grew up in an environment with little natural light. All these have deepened his understanding of light and shadow and promoted the formation of his unique feelings [6].

Compared with Caravaggio, Rembrandt pays more attention to the depiction of the character and inner world of the characters in the picture. This plays an important role in the formation of his unique "light and shade method" and "Rembrandt light" [6]. Like Caravaggio, he endowed the subject of the painting with the brilliance of human beings themselves and depicted the emotions of people more fully. But unlike Caravaggio's delicate brushwork, Rembrandt retained a large number of brushstrokes, which is a characteristic of his unique personal style.

Rembrandt's pictures are full of dramatic tension, of which his fund-raising group painting "*The Night Watch*" is most famous. In "*The Night Watch*", one can see the composition technique of highlighting the primary and secondary with light and shadow. In this group picture, one can find that the positions of the characters are like two sides in the middle, and the light from front to back is gradually weakening. The whole painting is like a theater performance stage, and the light shines down from

the top of the middle. Separate the primary and secondary. This work of art was completed under the background of fund-raising, and Rembrandt was also dissatisfied by buyers at that time because of his dramatic creative techniques with clear priorities. At that time, the mainstream aesthetic of the social environment was beautiful group portraits, which were used to record the good deeds of buyers and were praised by the world. This kind of dramatic picture makes the story of this painting go to another kind of different story development, and can not achieve equality for everyone, the same important. Rembrandt's greatness lies in his innovation in the treatment of group portraits when he painted *The Night Watch*, and more importantly, he did not paint group portraits for a group of people but expressed the heroic and tenacious spirit of the Dutch people through pictures [7]. In Rembrandt's group paintings, different from his predecessors, he did not portray every figure equally and arranged them equally in the picture. In his picture, there are primary and secondary figures, and there are false and real light, which makes the scene vivid and rich in layers [8]. But Rembrandt not only put some team members in a dark corner but even interspersed 18 people who did not pay, which was unacceptable both from the perspective of the consumer psychology of the buyers and the final presentation [9]. However, no matter the creation background of the work or the buyer's dissatisfaction, this group portrait can not prevent the development and innovation of light and shadow art. In modern and contemporary stage plays, including film and television works, such composition and creation techniques are used to create mysterious or dreamy pictures, which also create inspiration for many modern and contemporary light and shadow artists. Perhaps changing the contrast intensity of light and shadow, the collision of warm and cold light will give the picture a new look

#### 4. Discussion

The use of "Rembrandt light" is very common in modern and contemporary art, and the words "Rembrandt light" are marked in the appreciation and analysis of pictures with the obvious relationship between light and shade in various art magazines. The main application of Rembrandt light is to create an inverted triangular block of light under the eyelid on the side of the nose. The triangular light makes the light surface of the character's face larger than the backlight surface to form a light effect of 37 light and shadow, so it is also called 37 light. The main light can be hard light or soft light. Hard light can make the tone clear and bright. Triangular light should be used with auxiliary light or reflector, and the light ratio of main and auxiliary light should be controlled to be about 1:8 [10]. Rembrandt's "triangular light" is used in two scenes of the famous Japanese love movie *Love Letter*. In the movie *Bo Zi to find Akiba*, saying "I want to write a letter to heaven", in the right rear of the Bo Zi, the left rear of the picture, a beam of warm light hits Bo Zi, the camera turns to the left side of Bo Zi's face, and at this time, a triangle of light is formed on the face of Bo Zi, in the film and television works, such "Rembrandt triangle of light spot" is usually used to reflect the rich emotions of people. In "*Love Letter*", cold light and warm light are used as a contrast, warm light indicates warm positive emotions, while cold light is mostly sad negative emotions, and the triangular light spot here suggests a positive attitude of moving forward. The use of "Rembrandt light" is even more obvious in another recently released Chinese film, "*Flowers*". In "*Flowers*", there are a large number of shots in which the face of the subject is illuminated by the light of three quarters, and the strong light on the side of the face of the subject presents an inverted triangular bright area. "Rembrandt's light" makes the facial features of the character more distinct, and the contrast of light and shade and different degrees of light and shadow change the layer of the picture and the three-dimensional sense of the character. In the film "*Flowers*", "Rembrandt's light" is used in most of the metaphorical plot scenes, rendering a tense, exciting, and mysterious atmosphere, laying a good emotional foundation for the film, stimulating the personal emotions of the viewers, and mobilizing the emotional connection and communication between the viewers and the film.

In modern and contemporary art creation, works with light and shadow as the theme emerges in an endless stream, and the use of "triangular light" is very common. Caravaggio's innovative spirit of breaking through everything and Rembrandt's core of using light and shadow to express emotions

have been inherited and learned, and the inheritance, innovation and breakthrough development of light and shadow art have continued.

## 5. Conclusion

In contemporary art, works with light and shadow as the theme are endless, the use of "triangle of light" is very common. Caravaggio broke through everything and made innovative spirit, as well as Rembrandt's core of using light and shadow to express emotions, which has been inherited and learned. The inheritance, innovation and breakthrough development of light and shadow art is still going on.

The formation process of light and shadow art has experienced countless developments and innovations from the beginning as one of the ways to shape the three-dimensional structure of the picture to becoming an artist's means of expressing emotional meaning to the current and contemporary era as a metaphorical way to express the emotional connotation of the plot and the protagonist in films or photography styles. In the process of repeated trial and error, countless possibilities of artistic expression have been developed. In the current and contemporary era, perhaps the so-called "Rembrandt light" is not entirely consistent with Rembrandt's own painting habits, but Rembrandt's core of using light and shadow art to express inner emotions and arouse the emotions of viewers is still worth inheriting and learning.

Rembrandt devoted his life to pursuing a unique and distinctive expression of light on the spiritual level, and the unique language of light and shadow has become a visual symbol and formal language for expressing subjective emotions and showing the beauty of the picture in the art of light and shadow. This artistic language that moves people by eliciting emotional interaction and resonance is truly touching. The "Rembrandt light" not only has extremely important significance for contemporary painting creation, but also has very important reference value for the light treatment of characters in film and television creation, exerting a great influence on the lighting of characters in films and television. It also gives many film and television works rich emotional features, making the emotions of film and television works more full, which is a great progress in film and television works.

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