Topic 054

Chiaroscuro

What is the Definition and Meaning of Chiaroscuro?

Although lacking a precise definition, the fine art term "*chiaroscuro*" (from the Italian for "light-dark"; or the French "clair-obscur") describes the prominent contrast of light and shade in a painting, drawing or print, and the skill demonstrated by the artist in the management of shadows to create the illusion of three-dimensional forms.

The point is, solidity of form is only detectable in the presence of light. (For instance, it is only as dawn approaches that objects or figures - hitherto detectable only as slightly darker blobs than their surroundings - acquire volume and a three-dimensional appearance.) And if light emanates from a single source, it illuminates objects according to a specific set of rules. *Chiaroscuro* describes how the painter depicts the 3-D illumination of objects thus creating the illusion of solid forms.

Origins

Although the Early Renaissance painter Masaccio (1401-28) - see works like *The Holy Trinity* (1428) and *The Tribute Money* (1426) - as well as High Renaissance artists Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) and Raphael (1483-1520) are commonly considered to have pioneered the use of *chiaroscuro* to create the illusion of relief - notably in the modelling of the human body - the term is most often applied to works created during the Mannerism and Baroque eras, notably by Caravaggio (1571-1610) (and his Caravaggisti followers), and Rembrandt (1606-69).

[Note: The separate term "chiaroscuro woodcut" refers to coloured woodcuts printed with different blocks, each using a different coloured ink - a process invented by the German Hans Burgkmair in 1508; while "chiaroscuro drawing" refers to drawings on coloured paper where typically light is depicted in white gouache, and dark in inks.]

What is the Difference Between Chiaroscuro and Tenebrism?

Both *chiaroscuro* and the Mannerist painterly style known as *tenebrism* (from the Italian word "tenebroso" meaning "murky") are concerned with the treatment of light and shadow in a two-dimensional painting or drawing. And at first glance a *tenebrist* painting might look very similar to one containing strong *chiaroscuro* effects.

However, there is a clear theoretical difference between the two terms. As described above, *chiaroscuro* is a painterly shading technique used specifically to give 2-D objects a sense of volume: that is, to make them look like three-dimensional solids. Whereas *tenebrism* is a dark-

light compositional technique by which some areas of the painting are kept dark (that is, totally black), allowing one or two areas to be strongly illuminated by comparison.

Tenebrism is used for purely dramatic effect (it is sometimes called "dramatic illumination"). There is no modelling involved: no attempt to give figures a sense of three-dimensionality. In effect, tenebrist darkness is purely negative, while *chiaroscuro* shadow contributes positive form.

Some paintings, such as Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus* (1602) combine both three-dimensional-style *chiaroscuro* and dramatic tenebrist-style lighting.

What is the Difference Between Sfumato and Chiaroscuro?

As noted, *chiaroscuro* involves the combined use of light and shadow. However, the meeting point of these two values may give rise to sharp lines or contours. Leonardo da Vinci pioneered the technique of *sfumato* in order to soften the transition from light to dark. In his notes on painting he says that light and shade should blend "without lines or borders, in the manner of smoke. (In Italian, *sfumato* means "vanished gradually like smoke"). *Sfumato* typically involves the use of several translucent glazes to create a gradual tonal spectrum from dark to light, thus eliminating undesirable sharp contours. *Sfumato* is exemplified in the faces of the *Virgin of the Rocks* and the soft facial shading on the face of the *Mona Lisa* (c.1503, Louvre). The technique of *sfumato* was also mastered by Giorgione (1477-1510) and Correggio (1490-1534).

Origins and History of Chiaroscuro

The first use of chiaroscuro-style three-dimensional shading (known as "skiagraphia" or "shadow-painting" in Ancient Greece) is traditionally ascribed to Apollodoros, the noted painter of 5th century Athens. Enduring in a somewhat primitive form during the era of Byzantine art (c.400-1400), the technique was refined in the West during the late Middle Ages and by 1400 was a standard feature in both gospel illuminations and painting.

Chiaroscuro During the Renaissance

Chiaroscuro in 15th century Northern Europe became an essential technique for all religious painters following the visions of Saint Bridget of Sweden, who claimed to have seen light being emitted by the Christ-child Jesus. In their consequent depictions of the Nativity and other scenes involving the infant Jesus, Renaissance artists such as Hugo van der Goes (1440-82) frequently made this holy light the predominant source of illumination, relying heavily on chiaroscuro in the process. Leonardo (*Virgin of the Rocks*) was another hugely influential pioneer of the technique. A compositional approach which was duly extended to the adult Jesus in scenes of the Last Supper by several painters including Tintoretto (1518-94). If most religious *chiaroscuro* during the Renaissance era served to create scenes of serenity and calm, Mannerism painters such as Caravaggio, Paolo Veronese (1528-88), Giovanni Baglione (1566-1643), Georges de La Tour (1593-1652) and others - tended to use it for more dramatic effect after earlier efforts by the likes of Ugo da Carpi (1455-1523).

Chiaroscuro During the Baroque

Baroque painting relied heavily on the use of shadow for its dramatic effect. It was Caravaggio who deployed dramatic illumination to its greatest effect with his method of *tenebrism* - a technique which spread across Europe under the name caravaggism. Due to the influence of Caravaggio in Naples, *chiaroscuro* became an especially popular technique in the city, which was the second largest city in Europe, after Paris (and a Spanish colony). For a short guide, see: Painting in Naples (1600-1700). For more details of the early 17th century, see: Neapolitan School of Painting (c.1600-56); for later events, see: Neapolitan Baroque (c.1650-1700).

Chiaroscuro became a feature of Spanish Baroque art in the hands of artists like Francisco de Zurbaran (1598-1664) and Naples-based Jusepe de Ribera (1591-1652), while it was also employed by the German-born Rome-based painter Adam Elsheimer (1578-1610), whose nocturnal scenes occupied a mid-ground between pure *chiaroscuro* and pure *tenebrism*. It was left to the two greatest Northern European painters, Peter Paul Rubens and Rembrandt to take *chiaroscuro* to new heights of dramatic three-dimensionality: Rubens, in works like *Descent From the Cross* (1608-12, Onze-Lieve-Vrouve-Kerk, Antwerp) and *The Consequences of War* (1638, Palazzo Pitti); Rembrandt, in paintings like *The Anatomy Lecture of Dr Nicolaes Tulip* (1632, Mauritshuis), *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (1635, The Hermitage), and Bathsheba (1654, Louvre). Other notable exponents of 17th century Baroque *chiaroscuro* included Gerrit van Honthorst (1592-1656) and Gerrit Dou (1613-75) of the Dutch Baroque school, Jacob Jordaens (1593-1678) of the Flemish Baroque, and the Bolognese artist Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri) (1591-1666).

Chiaroscuro During the 18th Century and early 19th Century

The tradition was maintained during the Rococo period by painters like Fragonard (1732-1806) in works such as *The Swing* (1767, Wallace Collection) and *The Bolt* (1777, Louvre), and by Watteau (1684-1721) in the leafy backgrounds of his fetes galantes. It was also exemplified in *The Death of Marat* (1793, Museum of Fine Arts Brussels) by the neoclassicist Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825); and in *La Grande Odalisque* (1814, Louvre) by the classicist Ingres. In England, chiaroscuro was relied upon by the Romantic expressionist Fuseli (1741-1825) in *Lady MacBeth Sleepwalking* (1784, Louvre), and by Joseph Wright of Derby (1734-97) in *The Blacksmith's Shop* (1771, Derby Art Gallery). In Spain, Goya used a variety of light and heavy chiaroscuro in works like *Christ on the Cross* (1780, Prado Museum) century, *Nude Maja* (1800, Prado), *Saturn Devouring His Son* (1821, Prado).