Rembrandt’s debt to the Italian Renaissance art has long been recognized and discussed within the paradigm of the regional painterly directions of disegno and colore. Less acknowledged is his familiarity with and appropriation of later Italian art. The affinities between Rembrandt and Caravaggio have often been indicated, especially with respect to chiaroscuro. Rembrandt’s familiarity with Caravaggio’s Madonna of the Rosary has been noted, but Rembrandt’s adaptation of aspects of that grand altarpiece has not been adequately discussed. This essay considers how the Rosary contributed to Rembrandt’s organization of space and figures in his early paintings.

Within the paradigm: Rembrandt as representing colore

The competitiveness and divergent aims and qualities of the Tuscan-Roman and Venetian “schools” of painting became famous through the publications by Vasari (Le Vite, 1568) and Dolce (L’Aretino, 1537), among others. The distinct artistic and critical values of disegno and colore were most specifically applied to Raphael and Michelangelo on the one hand, and Titian on the other. More generally, writers applied these terms to the artists of Florence and Rome, and to those of Venice. All subsequent European artists would have to take this debate into account, as it would be used as a standard against which they would be measured, however individually they would interpret it. In Italy, the Carracci melded the linear and painterly directions to forge a new manner of painting that combined naturalistic observation and intense color with idealized standards. Their art had an immediate impact upon the next generation of painters, who included Caravaggio, Reni, and Guercino. Reformulated by Van Mander (Het Schilder-Boeck, 1604), these two distinct directions of disegno and colore offered new possibilities to the artists of the emerging Dutch Republic; they offered visual models to imitate, improve upon, and surpass, comparable to literary models within rhetorical training and practice. Van Mander’s presentation of disegno and colore provided a context for Dutch Baroque artists and writers, in the opposing directions of the linear and painterly, or smooth (net) and rough (ruwe). In his radical editing and reworking of Van Mander’s Den Grondt, published in 1702, Wybrand de Geest recognized Rembrandt as representative of colore, and substituted his name for that of Titian.1 In this capacity, De Geest glorified Rembrandt as practitioner of the ruwe manner of painting, and tended to privilege it over the net manner. We now recognize that Rembrandt’s art reconciled these two directions, with the constant goal of creating the illusion of physical and psychological intensity.2 Rembrandt exploited these Renaissance directions for both painterly richness and invention.3 But Rembrandt also took what he found interesting and useful from German, Netherlandish, ancient, Mughal, and later Italian art. He invented his own varied style, in part, by applying the inventions and concepts of his predecessors and near-contemporaries to his sustained goal of realizing the “greatest and most natural movement,” of the emotions and their physical manifestations.

Seventeenth century writers on art recognized the limitation of the binary opposition of disegno and colore, even as they applied several other binary oppositions. One is the polarity of arts and ingenium, a trope established in antiquity, that defines artistic ability by innate talent and practice.4 Another polarity is the paradigm of the learned painter and the vulgar painter, an opposition that similarly establishes extremes of knowledge and inclination.5 In Dutch art literature, the paradigm of net/ruwe, as established by Vasari, expressed by Van Mander, and continued by Wybrand de Geest, may not have had a consistent meaning, but rather, was applied by individual authors as it was found convenient. For example, Philips Angel’s ruwe was not the roughly applied pigment of Titian, but the loose, deft, and fluent brushwork of Gerard Dou.6

Acknowledging and championing the achievements of the Carracci and Caravaggio, Italian seventeenth century art critics attempted to go beyond a system of two extremes, occasionally by using rhetorical models. Giulio Mancini (Writings, 1617–1621) established four orders: 1) Caravaggio and his followers, naturalistic; 2) Carracci and their followers, a mix of the styles of Raphael and North Italy; 3) Cesare d’Arpino, following nature less exactly; and 4) all other artists. Giovanni Battista Agucchi (Treatise, written 1607–1615) established four schools, geographically defined: the Venetian, natural and sensual; the Roman, grand and rooted in antiquity; the Lombard, natural in a tender, easy and noble manner.7

Rembrandt and Italy: Beyond the disegno-colore Paradigm

Amy Golahny

1 Wybrand de Geest 1702, p. 92; see further Golahny 2001.
3 One example of Rembrandt’s explicit combination of disegno and colore is in the Bathsheba (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art) of 1643, which has an unevenness in its execution but surely is Rembrandt’s invention; see Golahny 1983, pp. 671–675; and also Sluijter 2006, p. 346.
5 For the polarities of the learned and vulgar painter, see Emmens 1979, p. 125.
way; and the Tuscan, diligent and detailed. Mancini and Agucchi attempted an inclusivity, defined both by region and aesthetic goals. Recognizing these purposes, and yet needing a pinnacle of achievement later in the century, André Félibien claimed that Poussin could not only synthesize the Roman, Florentine, and Venetian styles into one, but also adopt each one separately and by so doing, conquering all the stylistic territories of Italy.7

Later Dutch writers on art, notably Samuel van Hoogstraten (1678), did not set forth such systematic categories based on geography and painterly qualities. Although Wybrand de Geest recognized Rembrandt’s affinity with the ruwe, he did not pursue further analysis. Rembrandt is a participant in the disegno/colore opposition, even as he would have been aware of other paradigms, and made use of them as appropriate.

My interest here is to consider aspects of the relationship of Rembrandt and Italian art with particular reference to one striking painting that was in Amsterdam during Rembrandt’s early career: Caravaggio’s Madonna of the Rosary (fig. 1). Rembrandt’s adaptations of Italian art often involved practical solutions to compositional situations, and the Rosary certainly offered such solutions. Even as Rembrandt combined the net/ruwe paradigm in concept and craft, he made use of the Rosary’s solutions to compose his paintings in a direction that went far beyond that of his instructors and his peers. Rembrandt learned about the net/ruwe directions from reading Van Mander and from viewing artworks in Holland, but he also studied more current Italian painting, including the Rosary.

As background, we may keep in mind several examples of Rembrandt’s adaptations in portraits and histories of Italian Renaissance invention for concept and design, from his early to his late work. These include the Nicolaes Ruts (1631; New York, The Frick Collection), Self-Portrait Leaning on a Ledge (etching 1639; painting 1640; London, The National Gallery), Saskia as Flora (1641; Dresden, Gemäldegalerie), Aristotle with a Bust of Homer (1653; New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art), Homer Dictating to a Scribe (1663; The Hague, Mauritshuis), and Juno (ca. 1663; Los Angeles, The Hammer Museum). Among the histories are the drawing Mars and Venus caught in Vulcan’s Net (ca. 1637; Amsterdam, Amsterdams Historisch Museum), the etchings Hundred Guilder Print (ca. 1647) and Three Crosses (1653), and the paintings of the Descent from the Cross (1633; Munich, Alte Pinakothek) and Danae (1636; St. Petersburg, The Hermitage).8 We may also keep in mind relevant art theory as it was presented by Van Mander, Franciscus Junius, and Samuel van Hoogstraten, among others.9 These authors advised artists on composing and painting their works within rhetorical methods, which support Rembrandt’s practice.

The literature on Rembrandt and Italy is particularly rich in its consideration of Rembrandt’s use of Italian art of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It is meagre with respect to Rembrandt’s use of art of the early seventeenth century. In this regard, an exception is J. Bruyn’s 1970 article that related Rembrandt’s nudes and expressiveness to Annibale Carracci’s compositions, and Rembrandt’s Jeremia (1631; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) to Guido Reni’s single-figure designs on a diagonal.10

More recently, the contributors to the 2006 Amsterdam exhibition Rembrandt-Caravaggio surveyed the analogies made by critics of the two artists in the literature, and set forth the parallel values in the works of both artists in using chiaroscuro, following nature, expressing the passions, favoring moments of revelation, and appealing to the viewer.11 Both artists were recognized by their contemporaries as rule-breakers, and both are now recognized as adapters of others’ inventions. Both were keenly aware of what artists on the other side of their respective Alps offered as inspiration. If we generally emphasize Rembrandt’s motif borrowings as evidence of his knowledge of Italian art, we may also recall that Caravaggio knew and borrowed from motifs by northern artists.12 Even as the authors indicated the shared aspects of the paintings by Caravaggio and Rembrandt, they pointed out their differences: Caravaggio tended to work ’uyt den geest’ and maintain an ideal of human form, even as he professed to paint only what was in front of him, while Rembrandt, who worked both ’naer het leven’ and ’uyt den geest,’ tended to emphasize the physicality and particularities of his subjects. Considering the artists together, we realize that their differences outweigh their similarities.

Caravaggio’s Madonna of the Rosary in Amsterdam

From 1616, when Louis Finson (ca. 1580–1617) moved to Amsterdam with his art collection, there was a significant group of Caravaggio original paintings and copies documented in Amsterdam; these include a Judith and Holofernes, a Crucifixion of St. Andrew, a Dying Magdalene, and the Madonna of the Rosary. The grandest of these was the original Rosary, of which Finson’s copy was also with him in Amsterdam. Finson bequeathed his paintings to Abraham Vinck (ca. 1580–1619). In November 1619, following Vinck’s death, the Andrew and the Rosary were assessed for anticipated sale by a group of artists, including Pieter Lastman. By 1625, the original Rosary had been purchased by a group of Antwerp artists, Jan Brueghel and Rubens among them. Installed in St. Jacobskerk, the Dominican church of Antwerp, the Rosary was published in an etching by Lucas Vorsterman, with some variation, and in reverse. In February 1630, Lastman was again asked to assess a painting from Finson’s collection, this time the artist’s own copy of the Rosary.13

As an Italian altarpiece in Amsterdam, Caravaggio’s Madonna of the Rosary was unusual, but it was truly extraordinary for its size and its spatial structure. The Rosary offers a semi-circular organization of figures on different levels, arranged around the central core of the seated and elevated Madonna and Child. The Dominicans on the right hold a lively discussion among themselves, while on the left, St. Dominic holds out a rosary in each hand and receives the entreaties of the kneeling supplicants. The gazes and hands of all figures actively communicate, creating a bustling activity around the calm Madonna and Child, as the gentleman donor engages the viewer. A fluted column at the left serves three purposes: it reinforces the standing figure of St. Dominic, supports the splendid red curtain that serves as a canopy, and echoes the stateliness of the Madonna and Child.14 The basic core with encircling

7 For Mancini, Agucchi, and Félibien, see, conveniently, Sohn 2001, pp. 140–44.
8 The essential bibliography for this material is found in Broos 1977.
9 See most recently, Weststeijn 2005a and Weststeijn 2005b.
11 Kat. Amsterdam 2006, passim.
12 Kat Amsterdam 2006, p. 13 and passim. For Caravaggio’s use of prints after Jorg Breu and Pieter de Witte, called Candido, see Kloeck 2002.
13 For the documentation of these paintings in Amsterdam and their assessments, see V. Manuth in Kat. Amsterdam 2006, pp. 180–92.
14 The circumstances surrounding the commission of the Rosary are unknown; one possibility is that the altarpiece was commissioned from Caravaggio in Naples by Luigi Carafa-Colonna (1567–1630) to honor his grandfather Marcantonio II Colonna, whose victory at Lepanto was credited to the intervention by the Madonna of the Rosary. If so, the portrayed donor
figures is a structure that was adaptable to many purposes. Although this structure is not unique to Caravaggio and the Rosary, it is Caravaggio’s Rosary that uniquely was accessible to Rembrandt in Amsterdam.

Lastman most likely first saw the Madonna of the Rosary in Amsterdam as soon as it arrived, and thereafter at least in 1619 and its copy in 1630. Although he was expert in his knowledge of Italian art and familiar with Caravaggio’s paintings from his sojourn in Italy, Lastman recognized in the Rosary a remarkable arrangement of figures on different levels. He immediately adapted these features in his paintings Paul and Barnabas at Lystra (1617; Amsterdam, Amsterdams Historisch Museum) and Ulysses confronting Nausicaa (1619; fig. 2). Lastman also recognized in the Rosary a central primary figure around which secondary figures could be placed, and adapted this organizing feature for his Judgment of Midas (1618; Galleria Luigi Carretto, Turin). In these three works, Lastman also adapted both kneeling and standing figures that derive from the Rosary, most notably in the main figures of Ulysses and Nausicaa. In the later Veturia and the Roman Woman pleading before Coriolanus (1625; Dublin, Trinity College), Lastman further adapted

would be a posthumous portrait of Marcantonio, and the column would be an emblem of the family name. See Puglisi 1998, p. 275.

aspects of the Rosary’s core structure, by elevating Coriolanus upon a platform and arranging other figures on various levels in a loose circle; he also adapted several of the Caravaggiose figures with dramatic foreshortening to create the suggestion that several of the figures come forward of the picture plane.

Presumably Lastman possessed no paintings by Italian artists. In the inventory of Lastman’s goods, made in June 1632, the paintings by named artists are all by Netherlanders. He surely owned paper art that concerned Italian art or copies among the fourteen items of prints and drawings: “Een groot kunstboeck met printen; Een [doos] vol teijckeningen van peerden met wat andere printen; En deel roo teckeningen van Pieter Lastman… Thien boecken met teijckeningen; Eenige gedrukte printen.” The use of Italian models in Lastman’s workshop is difficult to measure except as Italian motifs occur in the paintings of Lastman and his known pupils and associates. Lastman’s consistent references in his own paintings to works by Caravaggio would indicate that the sources for these references were in his studio, and likely among the paper art. Most likely, Rembrandt was familiar with those examples of Italian art that were in the studio where he spent around six months in 1624-1625.

For Rembrandt, the works by Caravaggio that were in the Netherlands provided many possibilities for adaptations of figural postures and appropriation of structural principles. Rembrandt may have seen the Rosary before it left for Antwerp, or he could have known Finson’s copy, which remained in Amsterdam between 1619–1630. From the Rosary and the other Caravaggio works in Amsterdam, Rembrandt seized upon Caravaggio’s examples for illuminated figures, spot-lit, emerging from surrounding shadow. Yoriko Kobayashi-Sato has demonstrated how Rembrandt sought to unify the spatial backgrounds of his early paintings by following Caravaggio’s example. Rembrandt also looked at Caravaggio’s works for a variety of expressive postures, of which these two mentioned here are selected. Through the intermediary of Lastman, Rembrandt adapted another figure derived from Caravaggio for the triumphant Delilah of Samson Blinded (Frankfurt, Städelisches Kunst-}

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2 Pieter Lastman, Ulysses confronting Nausicaa, 1619, oil on oak, 91.5 × 117.2 cm, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich, Alte Pinakothek

Institut); Albert Blankert noted how her pose derives from the alarmed maiden in Lastman’s 1619 *Ulysses confronting Nausicaa*, a painting that also demonstrates Lastman’s interpretation of figures and spatial arrangement from the *Rosary*.\(^{18}\) Lastman’s maiden is a variant of the fleeing youth in Caravaggio’s *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* (Rome, San Luigi dei Francesi), which Lastman had earlier adapted for the fleeing maid in his 1609 *Ulysses*. It is plausible that Rembrandt knew both versions of Lastman’s *Ulysses*, that he was aware of the lineage of Lastman’s maiden, and that he was familiar through a copy of Caravaggio’s *Martyrdom*. A possible later reference to Caravaggio is in Rembrandt’s *Lucretia* (Minneapolis, Minneapolis Institute of Art), where the pose approaches a version of Caravaggio’s *David holding the Head of Goliath*.\(^{19}\)

**Rembrandt and the Madonna of the Rosary: Structuring the Stage**

The *Rosary* offered an arrangement of a structural core, prominent column, figures on different levels, and vivid communication. These components consistently appear in a number of Rembrandt’s early paintings, and they continue throughout his work in various permutations. Among Rembrandt’s earliest paintings, a central core of figures provides the structural organization. One example is in the 1626 *Baptism of the Eunuch* (Utrecht, Museum Katherijne Convent), where the kneeling eunuch and standing Philip serve as the solid core, reinforced by a dog and the other figures.

Several of Rembrandt’s early paintings feature a central core of figures strengthened by a nearby column, a combination of elements that condenses those of the *Rosary*. Two of these represent Simeon and Hannah in the temple with the holy family, and the temple location thus makes the column appropriate. In the *Presentation in the Temple* of ca. 1627–28 (Hamburg, Kunsthalle), the kneeling Simeon, Mary, and Joseph are overshadowed by the standing Hannah; the massive column strengthens this group. Rembrandt considered how the head of the Christ Child, firmly held by Simeon on his knee, is centered, both in the center of the painting and also in the vertical center of the column. Moreover, the kneeling, praying Joseph, seen from the back with bare feet, derives from the type of kneeling man with bare feet that recurs in Caravaggio’s work, notably in the supplicants in the *Madonna of Loreto* (Utrecht, Museum Katherijne Convent), where the kneeling eunuch and standing Philip serve as the solid core, reinforced by a dog and the other figures.

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Similarly, Rembrandt planned the 1631 *Simeon’s Song of Praise*, so that the core group of figures is backed by a column (fig. 3). Here, the church interior is elaborated, yet the core of Simeon, Mary, Joseph and two onlookers is reinforced by a massive and centrally placed column. The central group of figures of the Holy Family and Simeon from the Hamburg painting have been retained, but the figure of Hannah has been rotated almost ninety degrees to the left, so that she is seen from the back. The standing Hannah serves as a “book-end” or framing device for the central figures. Behind Hannah is another column, so that the architecture frames the main figures. Perhaps Rembrandt found order in this symmetry, but these paired columns may also be a subtle doubling of Caravaggio’s column in the *Rosary*.

These three paintings, among others, also involve figures placed on different levels, as a means to gain spatial depth. They share meaningful gestures and intense expressions. Rembrandt would have been familiar with these characteristics because they are articulated by Van Mander and appear in paintings by Lastman, among others. Caravaggio’s art presented these qualities in a concentrated visual form.

**Judas Returning the Silver and the Rosary**

Although Rembrandt adapted aspects of the *Rosary* in various early paintings, such as those mentioned above, he most effectively appropriated and integrated its components of core, column, varying levels of figures, and communication in the *Judas Returning the Silver* of 1629 (fig. 4). The central core comprises the seated, bulky Caiaphas and the standing priest behind him; the massive column to the left reinforces their merging forms. Rembrandt’s Caiaphas, priest and Judas form a group that is analogous to Caravaggio’s Madonna, Child and a kneeling supplicant; Rembrandt elders who lean forward, one with outstretched arm, form a loose analogy to Caravaggio’s St. Dominic, with outstretched arms. The figures on various levels form a circular arrangement around this core: Judas, three hovering men, and the seated man at the table to the left. Caiaphas turns aside, his hand rejecting the kneeling Judas’ remorse; his hand and head, turned in opposing directions, form a spiral that connects the Judas and the other priests. In this pose, Caiaphas mediates between Judas and the elders. Through their gestures and visages, Caiaphas, the priests, and Judas give external expression to their inner thoughts and feelings, which range from revulsion, mild surprise, to agonized remorse. In emotional intensity, Caravaggio’s figures act out their roles with appropriate features, but are idealized types, rather than naturalistically observed actors.

Rembrandt’s initial composition, as reconstructed from x-rays and associated drawings, was quite different. It established the three figures of Judas, Caiaphas and the standing high priest upon a dais, with an arch and wall with the shield behind Judas; these are retained in the final composition. However, Rembrandt struggled with the architecture and with the left portion. Initially, a column and archway stood behind Caiaphas and the standing priest, and drapery filled the left side, to create a dark area at the left, with an empty stool and standing elder.\(^{21}\) In the second phase, Rembrandt retained the curtain at the left, and considered placing two figures, one seated, and both turned toward the center, in the left corner. Finally, Rembrandt eliminated the curtain, moved the column over to the left, and added a table with book; he altered the two figures (one seated and one standing) from the second phase, and illuminated the entire left side, suggesting a bright light source that also casts light upon the thirty pieces of silver on the floor, upon the main figures, and on the shield hanging above the dais.

Already familiar with Caravaggio’s *Rosary*, Rembrandt may have been inspired by it in his main components of central core paired figures with a kneeling supplicating figure, as Caiaphas and the priest occupy the position of the Madonna and Child, and as Judas occupies the position of the supplicants. In the course of working out the solution for the left corner, Rembrandt turned again to the *Rosary* for a pair of figures, of which one would engage the viewer’s gaze and the other

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18 Blankert 2004 demonstrates that Rembrandt’s Delilah derives from Lastman’s *Ulysses* of 1619, rather than the original Caravaggio *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew*, in which the figure adapted is a boy and in reverse.

19 See H. Gerson: *Rembrandt Paintings*, Amsterdam 1968, p. 503; see further Broos 1977 under Br. 485.

20 A similar kneeling man is the pilgrim in Caravaggio’s *Madonna di Loreto* (Rome, Sant’ Agostino). Although Caravaggio’s altarpiece neither left its original location nor was reproduced in print, it may also have been known to Rembrandt from a now-lost intermediary, either a copy or a drawing. Such untraced intermediate sources may not be ruled out, since Lastman and other Dutch artists would surely have studied Caravaggio’s paintings.

21 For the genesis of the Judas, see Kat. Kassel/Amsterdam 2001, pp. 226 – 236; and Bomford 2006, pp. 55 – 58.
would direct the viewer’s attention back to the central area. In the left corner of the *Rosary* are two figures, one looking out at the viewer, and one leaning toward the center; Caravaggio’s gentleman donor, with a ruffled collar, gazes out to involve the viewer, and also points to St. Dominic, and his kneeling woman, seen from the back, inclines her head toward the central Virgin and Child. These two are analogous to Rembrandt’s hunched and open-mouthed elder, who looks out at the viewer, and the seated elder who turns away from the large book toward Judas. Rembrandt’s hunched elder looks out with a distressed, open-mouthed cry. In each painting, these figures are paired with another who leans toward the center. Rembrandt adapted the pair as an effective juxtaposition for the corner.

**Conclusion**

Caravaggio’s *Rosary* most notably introduced to Amsterdam a technique that broke away from a stage-like arrangement, known as Alberti’s “window.” The *Rosary*, along with the other Caravaggio paintings in Amsterdam, demonstrated how the Albertian stage could be discarded for a fluid picture plane that thrust figures forward and backward, to create a fully three dimensional space. The example of the *Rosary* caused Lastman to shift around 1617 from aligning figures generally parallel to the picture plane to compositions arranged on diagonals and on different levels. Lastman furthermore began to use postures with dramatic foreshortening, to suggest that the figures come forward of the picture plane, even as he continued to regard the painting as a theatrical stage. Prompted by Caravaggio’s precedent, Lastman was fascinated with kneeling postures that allowed figures to show the soles of their feet, as in the Ulysses figure and others. Rembrandt was the beneficiary of Lastman’s interest in this pose, deriving from Caravaggio, and used it so that the feet could appear to project into the viewer’s space (as in the kneeling Joseph in *Presentation in the Temple*, Hamburg). Thus, from his early paintings, Rembrandt was familiar with the Albertian window and the means to break through it. Rembrandt would have begun his training in Leiden and Amsterdam with full awareness of current Italian artistic developments as demonstrated by the Caravaggio paintings in Amsterdam.
In adapting the structure of Caravaggio’s *Rosary*, Rembrandt grasped its pragmatic applicability. Indeed, Rembrandt embodies Michelangelo’s statement, as quoted by Angel, “Away, then, with following the manner of masters! Michelangelo remarked most fittingly: ‘He who always follows another will never surpass him’ ….”²² Rembrandt grasped the principles of Caravaggio’s spatial organization and dramatic expression in the *Rosary* so thoroughly that the result appears to owe little to his appropriated guide. Michelangelo would have approved.

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Acknowledgments
I am grateful to Emily Kopley for offering comments on an early version of this essay, and to CASVA of the National Gallery of Art, Washington D. C. for supporting research that contributed to it.