

Revolutionary Concepts at *Caravaggio: Fashion & Fabrics*, an Exhibition at the Museum of the Order of St John, St John's Gate, Clerkenwell

By Yannis Kostarias

This exhibition, which closed in January, was devoted to a study of the fabrics used by Caravaggio in his picture *The Cardsharps*, identified by the late Sir Denis Mahon in 2006 and now hanging in the Museum. The costumes that are used in all his paintings have obviously been carefully chosen and are always depicted with care. This is especially true of *The Cardsharps*, where the nature of the fabrics and the contrasts of their colours are an integral part of the composition. This led the curator of the exhibition, Francesco Gonzales, to draw upon the outstanding collection of contemporary fabrics which are preserved in the Diocese of Novara and in the Rubelli Collection. Consisting mainly of ecclesiastical vestments, the exhibition revealed how the rich patterns painted by Caravaggio were clearly derived from actual fabrics produced in northern Italy in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.



Fig.1 Museum of the Order of St John - Caravaggio, *The Cardsharps*, 1594 - discovered by Sir Denis Mahon

The exhibition coincided in London with a major retrospective at the National Gallery devoted to Caravaggio and his followers. This once again revealed the extent to which the Italian art world was influenced by the Master. The much smaller show at St John's Gate offered an altogether different perspective. By concentrating on dress and materials shown in one picture it allowed a reassessment of the role of fabrics, both in life and in art. *The Cardsharps* can be read as a landscape of costumes or even as an interaction of time and space that significantly unfold hidden narratives and stories. The core of this exhibition is based on a continuous dialogue between the historical dress on display and Caravaggio's painting, which enhanced the experience of both.



Fig..2- Exhibition Display

Caravaggio's work is remarkable for its masterly depiction of reality. His charismatic and comprehensive set of skills allow the viewer to engage with a painting through dramatic representation, vivid colours, costumes and exceptional light. Caravaggio's artistic abilities allow a whole range of different interpretations. Exploring the display, the exhibition celebrates the painting's colours and textiles in an interesting and successful manner. The costumes displayed are shown in a way that encouraged visitors to explore the museum's space, including the permanent collections, making it possible to choose one's own interpretation.



Fig.3, Central Italy workmanship, detail of the antependium in red silk damask, with embroidery, dated 1613. Nonio, Parish Church

The careful selection of historical costumes and textiles from the Rubelli collection and the Diocese of Novara, revealed how the painting's fabrics would have looked in reality. There was a stimulating dialectic between the painting and the costumes that fostered the interaction between time and memory.



Fig.4 Exhibition Display

Caravaggio's use of particular colours, textile types and patterns define the period. The variety of fabrics and the types of costumes reflect the role of each figure in the painting, and mirror the culture of fashion of that time. The exhibition was notable for its ambitious contemporary context and curatorial methodology. Displays such as this provide a new insight into the culture of fashion in Caravaggio's painting. It underlined the importance of examining old master paintings in the light of contemporary curatorial practice. The exhibition provided rigorous study of the development of fashion in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and illustrated the power of a painting to enhance the interpretation of the fashion of its age.

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