

Art 102.01  
Assignment 6  
Drawing the Baroque in  
Europe



**Baroque in the Netherlands**

Hendrick ter Brugghen, *Singing Lute Player*

ca. 1624

oil on canvas

39 5/8 x 31" (100.5 x 78.7 cm)

The National Gallery, London

Hendrick ter Brugghen was one of the most prominent Dutch Caravaggisti painters of the late sixteenth century. His place of birth is unknown but his family was from Utrecht, a town that was primarily Catholic. His father was a civil servant for the court in Utrecht and would later become bailiff for the States of Holland<sup>1</sup>. Eventually, they would settle in Abcoude<sup>2</sup>, which gave Hendrick access to Amsterdam and Holland. It's presumed that Terbrugghen would have been an apprentice in Utrecht before traveling to Italy for several years.

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<sup>1</sup> Wheelock, Arthur K. "Hendrick Ter Brugghen." National Gallery of Art, April 24, 2014.  
<https://www.nga.gov/collection/artist-info.9714.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.,

It was uncommon for Dutch painters to travel outside of the country but the painters from Utrecht were known to have made the journey to Italy in order to broaden their expertise. The northern part of the Netherlands was focused on creating works of art that weren't based on religion or mythological stories but rather landscapes, portraits, and genre paintings. However, the Catholic regions in the Netherlands didn't have to avoid religious or mythological subjects since idolatry wasn't a central issue for the religion as opposed to the Protestant north that saw idolatry as problematic and sinful.

In Italy, he crossed paths with Sir Peter Paul Rubens and other Utrecht painters before returning to the town in the fall of 1614<sup>3</sup>. After his trip, he was known to have adapted Caravaggio's style of using chiaroscuro and tenebrism in his religious paintings as well as his single-figured genre paintings. He will be known as a painter that specialized in broad styles and was able to "create a great sense of dignity and grandeur in his figures."<sup>4</sup> In 1616, he was registered as a master painter in Utrecht's Saint Luke's Guild<sup>5</sup>. According to Terbrugghen's son, Rubens visited his father in 1627 and praised him by saying that he was the "only real painter" that he had crossed paths with in the Netherlands<sup>6</sup>. Terbrugghen would fall victim to the plague in 1629, leaving behind his wife and eight children.

Caravaggio's influence in Terbrugghen's paintings can be seen in his single-figure painting, *Singing Lute Player*. The painting is reminiscent of Caravaggio's paintings, *The Musicians* and *The Calling of St. Matthew*. The painting depicts the male musician, who is holding the lute in his hands, in the midst of singing a note. It's indicative of a genre painting that focuses on everyday life and

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.,

showcases almost a snapshot of a moment in time. Similar in fashion to the Caravaggio paintings, the background is simple to not grab the focus of the central figures of the painting. In this case, the central focus is the musician who is portrayed life-size and takes over the entire canvas.

The background is where chiaroscuro or tenebrism, which is extreme shading of light and dark for dramatic effect, is utilized to create a framing of where the viewer is supposed to focus on. Terbrugghen's tenebrism is more delicate and less dark than Caravaggio's, which is partly due to his use of light grays when blending the colors. Terbrugghen's uses earthly tones, similar to Velazquez' *Juan de Pareja*, with the exception of the red on his doublet, white undergarment, and his skin complexion. The white in his undergarment is perfectly chosen to create opposing directional forces in the painting, which leads the gaze to his hands that strum the strings of the lute and then the white collar of his shirt that brings the focus to his face. In a way, the color white makes a pyramidal composition and creates balance on an otherwise asymmetrical composition due to the  $\frac{3}{4}$  positioning of his body. The red on his doublet runs parallel with the red of his nose, which is used to highlight the soft, moody gaze of the musician.

The implied light is subtle and falls perfectly on his face and both hands. For a musician, the most important instrument other than the instrument one plays is the hands. Artists of the time were known to give a special focus on the hands of their figures since it was like an extension of them. The viewer can see the tension in the hands, which implies movement, but there is a sense of sensitivity or fitness that matches his expression.

While Hendrick Terbrugghen was inspired by Caravaggio's techniques, it's undeniable that he was talented and could hold his own in the art world. The identity of the musician is unknown but the viewer doesn't need to know who the musician is. Terbrugghen expertly highlights the

musician who is proudly showcasing his craft in such a focused manner. The more you focus on the painting the more your ears want to strain to see if you could hear the note that the musician is belting.

### **Works Cited**

Wheelock, Arthur K. "*Hendrick Ter Brugghen*." National Gallery of Art, April 24, 2014.  
<https://www.nga.gov/collection/artist-info.9714.html>.