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Art, City and Society

Lucrèce (1660)

A few days before I visited the Musée des Beaux-Arts with the Art, City and Society class, I visited the museum with a couple of my friends for fun. There were many paintings that stood out to me, but I did not analyze any of them since I just focused on being completely present in the new experience. One of my friends I was with is very interested in fine art, so she explained a lot of the art in detail, describing the story and history behind different pieces. One of the paintings that she covered was Guido Cagnacci's *Lucrèce*. The tragic story behind the painting inspired me to research and analyze the piece.

Guido Cagnacci was an Italian painter from Santarcangelo di Romagna, Italy on January 1601. He was a prominent figure during the Baroque Period, a style of art that dominated from the 17th century to 1750. He is known for his controversial and highly criticized use of female nudity in many of his paintings. He is also known for using Chiaroscuro, which is the use of strong contrasts between light and dark, bold contrasts that affect the composition. Cagnacci uses both in *Lucrèce*. He found inspiration from the masters at the Bolognese School of Painting, which housed many Baroque painters during the 16th and 17th centuries. He also observed other famous painters such as Melozzo, Guercino, and Simon Vouet. Along with these famous painters, he took inspiration from religious imagery. This was also a source of controversy for Cagnacci, as his paintings tended to be erotic.

The Baroque period is characterized by contrast, grandeur, and incredible detail. This style of art originated in Rome, Italy, but could also be seen in France, Spain, Germany, etc.

Baroque paintings are typically very ornate and provoke shock from the audience. *Lucrèce* is an oil painting based on the story of Lucretia. Lucretia was a noblewoman who lived in ancient Rome and was the daughter of the first emperor of Rome. Before becoming emperor, he ran against Sextus Tarquinius, one of the sons of the last king of Rome. After losing the position of power, Tarquinius assaulted Lucretia to punish her father. After feeling an immense and unbearable amount of shame, she committed suicide by stabbing. This tragedy led to the rebellion that overthrew the Roman monarchy, and Tarquinius's family was driven out of Rome.

When observing the painting, there are many elements that tell the story of Lucretia and her suicide, although it looks relatively basic at first glance. The contrast of color between the woman and the background of the painting is the first thing I noticed. The woman is very pale, which I thought symbolizes her purity and virginity. I believe that her nudity alluded to her being assaulted, but it could be a symbol of purity as well. In the painting, she is wearing a vibrant blue band around her head. Blue is commonly known as a color that signifies purity and virginity, as the Virgin Mary is usually seen garnished with a blue veil or a blue head covering. It also signifies status and royalty, alluding to the status of Lucretia's family. All these bright elements against the black background draw attention to the artistic elements used, further dramatizing the painting. Looking closely at the painting, Lucretia is seen holding a dark object, the knife that she killed herself with, adding emphasis to the relationship between purity and evil with the use of contrasting colors. All these elements and stylistic choices used in the painting are very prominent in other paintings during the Baroque Period.

I chose this painting because it was the first thing that truly caught my attention when I walked into the room. After reading the description of the painting and paying more attention to the details, imagery, and iconography, I felt inspired by her story. I tend to find darker and

emotion-evoking stories more interesting, so that's why I ended up gravitating towards the piece. I also found that the stylistic elements used to add detail to the story were haunting due to how simple the painting looks at first glance. The expression on Lucrece's face does not capture the typical baroque style as it is very realistic rather than grandiose and dramatic, which I also find very interesting since the story behind the painting is very dramatic. I would love to know more about why Cagnacci made this stylistic choice.

The Baroque art style is not usually what I would typically gravitate towards. However, melodramatic pieces such as Cagnacci's *Lucrece* make me want to explore different art from this period and other Guido Cagnacci paintings. I loved the contrasting details used in *Lucrece* and how they all worked together to tell her story in a shockingly melodramatic and slightly controversial way.