

# Tenebrism & The Baroque Period

(TMAHA, Chapter 17)

**Medium:** TBD by the Student    **Emphasis:** Tenebristic Lighting

**Supplies:** TBD by the Student; but may include Drawing Kit, Painting Kit or Camera

## Creating Drama Through Light

Over many years of teaching studio art, I have observed that beginner and intermediate art students are often very uncomfortable developing strong contrast. They may be very good at developing light OR dark values, but combining these two opposites and developing the relationship between them in a single work of art seems to evoke uncertainty or fear. However, experimenting with light and dark elements and building strong contrasts is one thing that has historically distinguished many of the great artists. For instance, Caravaggio is famous for excelling in the technique of extreme contrast, referred to as tenebrism, in his oil paintings (TMAHA, 288).

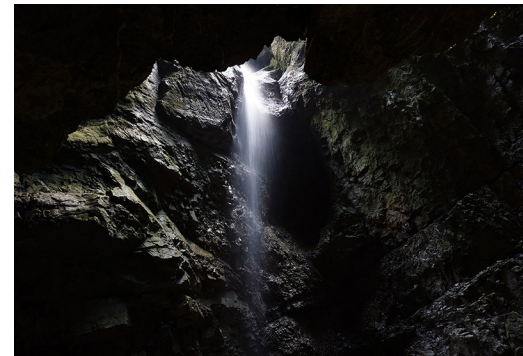
Tenebrism, sometimes called dramatic illumination, is perhaps the most intense lighting effect possible. It features an extremely bright light source, similar to a spotlight effect on a theater stage, while everything else around it is enveloped in darkness. In fact, the darkness often dominates the space and can become a “character” in its own right. The Baroque period is recognized for its dramatic pieces, whether realistic and in the moment or filled with tension and grandeur.

Caravaggio, painting during this period of heightened dramatic imagery, perfected his tenebrism technique which has been copied by artists in various mediums ever since.

Today, we often see this expressive lighting effect used by photographers and marketers to showcase a specific person, object or product. Many of these images, however, are just shot in front of a dark background or even photoshopped on top of one. This creates contrast, which is great, but the light and dark elements do not play off each other for a full tenebristic effect. For example, see how the candles on the left, below, are distinct



Caravaggio's c. 1601 painting titled *Conversion on the Way to Damascus*



from the blackness around them, while the candle on the right has merged with the surrounding shadows? The one on the left, while an interesting photo, does not employ a full tenebristic effect, while the one on the right does. Take a look at the rest of the images to see how tenebristic lighting causes subjects and the shadows around them to blend together.

## Project Instructions

Review the Foundational Principles, as needed, particularly: #2 Value, # 3 Lighting, #5 Composition and #8 Transferring.

For this project, your objective is to develop striking tenebrism with an intense, focused light source on a subject of your choice that naturally leaves everything around it shadowed in darkness. Hopefully, creating the most extreme light/dark effects possible will help you feel more comfortable making other strong (although not necessarily tenebristic) contrasts in future art projects, a skill that can absolutely take your art to the next level.

You may use any medium you want for this assignment, as long as tenebrism remains the focus. Like the photos shown here, you can photograph in a dark setting with carefully placed lights for effect. Or, you can build up contrasting values and colors on canvas with paint, as Caravaggio did. If you prefer drawing, you can develop contrasting values on paper with graphite pencils or charcoal. Similarly, you can bring out the darks and lights (like the Greek Columns on page 53) by using colored pencils or other colored mediums on black paper, an approach that can save time since the dark spaces are already established.

If extreme contrast seems intimidating, remind yourself that experimenting and “pushing the boundaries” by merging lights and darks is necessary for creating dynamic, tenebristic effects. As you can see in the photos, the darker AND lighter, the better. Most importantly, have fun creating a dramatic piece!

