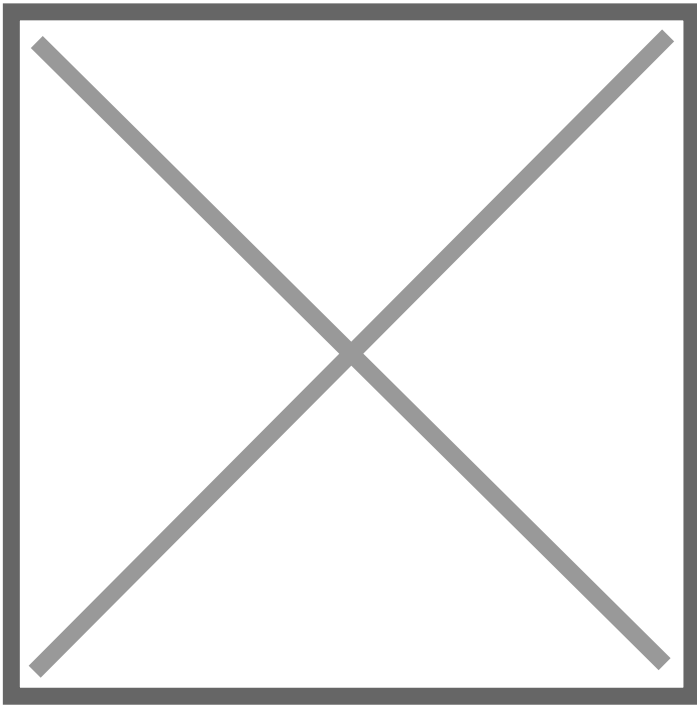


The noisy supper

By [Debra Bendis](#)

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This winter I had the opportunity to observe a Caravaggio painting upclose and often: his *Supper at Emmaus* (1601) was on loan to the Art Institute of Chicago from its permanent home in London's National Gallery. From the *Century* offices, it was only a few steps across Michigan Avenue to see this vibrant, dramatic painting.

The painting depicts three men seated in a dimly lit room around a table set with food and drink. A fourth man, a server or innkeeper, stands next to Jesus and seems to be listening intently. Jesus faces the viewer but is looking downward. His extended right arm suggests that he's been speaking, and the the responses of two more men suggests that his words have profoundly impacted them: a man seated at the left has put his hands on the arms of the chair as if he is about to jump up, while a man at the right has flung his arms wide as if he's received a shock. And he has. The moment of recognition for two disciples has been frozen on canvas. *Supper at*

Emmaus offers a perpetual pilgrimage to the resurrection for all of us Christians who will never share that particular supper with Christ.

Each time I visited the painting, I made a note of my expectations—what did I remember from the last visit? What would I be looking for this time? What is the strength of the painting for me? After time spent observing, I'd note the surprises that the painting offered me. Perhaps in remembering the dimness of the setting I had forgotten the rich colors—reds, greens along with browns. Or I'd missed the rough, street-savvy appearance of the two disciples.

Mostly, however, I noted the muteness of the painting. Although filled with gestures, expressions, life-size characters and one of the most dramatic storylines in history, I heard...nothing. Like old family videos, the sound was missing. Or like new family remotes, the sound was stuck on mute. The more time I spent with these diners, the more I wanted to hear the mundane sounds that would put me right in the painting: the squeak of a chair, a sneeze, a shout from the street, the whisk of a broom. What were the men talking about? I imagined their report of Christ's death, the expressions of personal grief that came out as they relaxed together. I waited, almost holding my breath, to hear exactly what Christ was saying when the disciples recognized him. What did the landlord say? On one level, my experience was frustrating. But this is the beauty of painting: it requires that we provide the missing sensory details. In a [recent interview](#), Pixar movie director Pete Docter talked about his family's old 8mm videos and said they taught him the power of removing sound from a video segment. Because there's no sound on those old films, he says,

You're missing something. It becomes slightly more abstract and yet almost more real...When you get [sound and images] both together...you can sit back and watch it like TV. It's kind of everything's fed to you.

Whereas by taking one of the elements away you have to be more actively participating in the experience.

The absence of one sense in Caravaggio's masterpiece piece forced me to "listen" more closely and thus participate more fully. An occasion that at first seems to be set to mute becomes noisy, bawdy and festive as we hear "My Lord and my God!" followed by a gasp and joyous tears.