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The Baroque Style in Western Europe

The Baroque style corresponds roughly to the closing years of the sixteenth century, overlapping Mannerism and lasting, in some areas, as late as 1750. Religious and political conflicts, especially between Catholics and Protestants, continued in the seventeenth century. The Thirty Years' War (1618-48) sapped the power of the Holy Roman Emperor. Holland rebelled against the repressive Catholic domination of Philip II of Spain. As a result, what had previously been the Netherlands was separated into Protestant Holland and Catholic Flanders (modern Belgium). From 1620 the Puritans fled religious persecution in Europe and sailed to New England. In 1649 England beheaded King Charles I and introduced parliamentary rule.

Building on the explorations of the 1500s, the seventeenth century was an age of geographical colonization and scientific development. European powers competed for control of the Far East and the Americas. In science and philosophy, the seventeenth century made great strides-- though not without controversy. In England, William Harvey established the system of blood circulation. Isaac Newton discovered the laws of gravity, which brought him into conflict with the Catholic King James II. Rene Descartes, the French thinker, based his philosophical system on a method of systematic doubt. He emphasized clear, rational thought, embodied by the humanist phrase "I think, therefore I am." Descartes avoided conflict with the Church only by acknowledging that God was the source of the original impulse to reason.

Perhaps the greatest threat to established theology came from the astronomers. The earth definitively lost its place as the center of the universe, and the sun, always a central image in the imagination, now became the demonstrable center of the solar system. The discoveries of Nicolas Copernicus, Johannes Kepler, and Galileo Galilei were vigorously opposed by the Church. In Rome, the Inquisition forced Galileo to recant and banned his book. These scientific advances were paradoxically accompanied by a rise in religious fundamentalism. Superstition and fear of the Devil and the Antichrist swept Europe. In America as well as in Europe, these fears led to the most devastating waves of witch hunts.

Baroque Style

The term "Baroque" is applied to diverse styles, which highlights the approximate character of art historical categories. Like "Gothic," Baroque was originally a pejorative term. It is a French form of the Portuguese *barocco*, meaning an irregular, and therefore imperfect, pearl. The Italians used the term *barocco* to describe an academic and convoluted medieval style of logic. Although Classical themes and subject matter continued to appeal to artists and their patrons, Baroque painting and sculpture tended to be relatively unrestrained, overtly emotional, and more energetic than earlier styles.

Baroque artists rejected Mannerist virtuosity and stylization in favor of the direct study of nature. A new taste for dramatic action and violent narrative scenes emerged in the visual arts of the seventeenth century. Inner emotions were given a wide range of expression --a departure from the Renaissance adherence to Classical restraint. Baroque color and light are dramatically contrasted and surfaces are richly textured. Baroque space is usually asymmetrical and lacks the appearance of controlled linear perspective. Landscape, genre, and still life, which had originated as separate, but minor, categories of painting within Mannerism, achieved a new status in Baroque.



Variety within the Baroque style is partly a function of national and cultural distinctions. Baroque art began in Italy, particularly Rome, whose position as the center of western European art had been established during the High Renaissance by papal patronage and Rome's links with antiquity. In the course of the Baroque period, however, Paris took over as the artistic center of Europe, a position it retained until World War II (1939-45). Two major Baroque architectural achievements, the completion of St. Peter's and the sumptuous court of the French monarch Louis XIV, characterize this shift from Rome to Paris.

19.13 Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Pluto and Proserpina*, 1621-2. Marble, over-lifesize. Galleria Borghese, Rome. In Greek mythology, Pluto's abduction of Persephone (Proserpina in Latin) explained the seasonal changes. When Proserpina's mother, the Earth goddess Ceres, went in search of her daughter, vegetation ceased to grow and winter fell. Ceres found Proserpina in the Underworld. Because Her daughter had eaten Pluto's pomegranate, she was doomed to spend half the year in his domain. During the six months of Fall and Winter, Ceres mourns and nature dies. Spring and Summer return when Proserpina rejoins her mother.

Sculpture Bernini

By far the most important sculptor of the Baroque style in Rome was Bernini. His over-lifesize sculpture *Pluto and Proserpina* (fig. 19.14) represents the most violent moment in the myth --the abduction of Proserpina. A muscular Pluto grabs hold of a struggling Proserpina, his fingers convincingly digging into her flesh. She, in

turn, pushes his head away from her as she assumes a version of the Mannerist *figura serpentinata* (see p.276), squirming to escape Pluto's grasp. Here, however, the pose is in the service of a violent narrative moment, rather than being a virtuoso Mannerist exercise. Both figures are in *contrapposto*, leaning backward from the waist. Flowing hair and beard echo the rippling motion of the body surfaces and reinforce the sense of action. Seated next to Pluto is Cerberus, the three-headed dog who guards the Underworld. One head eyes the abduction intently, while another howls behind Proserpina's foot.

Bernini creates erotic tension between Pluto and Proserpina by a combination of pose and gesture that is characteristic of the Baroque style. Although Proserpina struggles against Pluto, she also turns toward him. In pushing away Pluto's head, her fingers curl around a peak of his crown. And, in protesting, she opens her mouth slightly and tilts her head back as if in ecstasy. Pluto, pulling back his head, eyes her amorously. The repeated formal back and forth planar motion of the figures echoes both their own psychological ambivalence and that of Cerberus's two visible heads. This ambivalence derives from the myth itself, for Proserpina is committed to Pluto for one half of the year and to her mother for the other half.



19.14 Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *David*. 1623. Marble, lifesize. Galleria Borghese, Rome.

In the lifesize marble sculpture of *David* (fig. 19.15) of 1623, all trace of Mannerism has disappeared. Once again Bernini has chosen to represent a narrative moment requiring action. David leans to his right and stretches the sling, while turning his head to look over his shoulder at Goliath. In contrast to Donatello's relaxed and self-satisfied bronze *David* (fig. 15.17), who has already killed Goliath, and Michelangelo's (fig. 16.15), who tensely sights his adversary, Bernini's is in the throes of the action.

The vertical plane of the Renaissance Davids has come a dynamic diagonal extending from the head to the left foot. That diagonal is countered by the left arm, the twist of the head, and the drapery. Unlike the *Pluto and Proserpina*, Bernini's *David* is a single figure. Nevertheless, his portrayal assumes the presence of Goliath, thereby expanding the space --

psychologically as well as formally--beyond the immediate boundaries of the sculpture. Such spatial extensions are a rather theatrical characteristic Baroque technique for involving the spectator in the work.

19.15 Gian Lorenzo Bernini, interior of the Cornaro Chapel, Church S. Maria della Vittoria, Rome. 15-52. The Cornaro Chapel illustrates Bernini's skill in integrating the arts in a single project. Here he uses the chapel as if it were a little theater. Directly opposite the worshiper, the altar wall opens onto the dramatic encounter of St. Teresa and the angel. Joining the worshiper in witnessing the miracle are members of the Cornaro family, who are sculpted in illusionistic balconies on the side walls.



19.17 Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Ecstasy of Teresa*, Cornaro Chapel. S. Maria della Vittoria, Rome. Marble. Height of group 11 ft 6 in (3.51 m). St. Teresa was born in Avila, Spain, in 1515. She was a Carmelite nun who described the mystical experience depicted here. An Angel from Heaven pierced her heart with a flaming golden spear. Pleasure and pain merged, and she felt as if God were "caressing her soul." She was canonized in 1622.



Even more theatrical is Bernini's "environmental" approach to the chapel of the Cornaro family (fig. 19.15). The main event over the altar is the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*. Lifesize figures are set in a typically Baroque niche with paired Corinthian columns and a broken pediment over a curved entablature. As in the *David* and *Pluto and Proserpina*, Bernini represents a moment of heightened emotion --the transport of ecstasy. The angel prepares to pierce St. Teresa as he gently pulls aside her drapery (fig. 19.17). His own delicate drapery flutters slightly as if he has just arrived. Although Teresa appears elevated from the ground, she is actually supported by a formation of billowing clouds. Leaning back in a long, slowly curving diagonal plane, she closes her eyes and opens her mouth slightly, as if in a trance. Her inner excitement contrasts with the relaxed state of her body, and is revealed by the elaborate, energetic drapery folds, which blend with the clouds. Behind St. Teresa and the angel are gilded rods, representing rays of divine light. They seem to descend from Heaven and enter the niche behind the altar.

This scene synthesizes the Baroque taste for inner emotion with Counter-Reformation mysticism. Only a sculptor as great as Bernini could combine the powerful religious content of this scene with its erotic implications in a way that would satisfy the Church. Also characteristic of the Baroque style is Bernini's ability to draw the observer into the event. This is further reinforced by the theatrical

arrangement of the chapel. The sculptures of the Cornaro family on the side walls occupy an illusionistic architectural space, which combines the Ionic order with a barrel-vaulted ceiling and a broken pediment. The onlookers witness and discuss St. Teresa's mystical experience just like theater-goers watching a play.

Italian Baroque Painting

Caravaggio

The leading Baroque painter in Rome was Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610), who was born in the small northern Italian town of Caravaggio. When he was eleven, his father, a stonemason, apprenticed him to a painter in Milan. Caravaggio moved in about 1590 to Rome, where his propensity for violence landed him in repeated difficulty. During his relatively short life and despite the interruptions to his career caused by his brushes with the law, Caravaggio worked in an innovative style that influenced painters in Italy and northern Europe. He painted directly on the canvas, making no preliminary drawings. His depiction of religious themes was tended to appeal to the ordinary observer and was not aimed at a social or cultural elite. In his more private commissions, Caravaggio was equally direct in depicting subjects and themes of a homoerotic nature.

The Calling of St. Matthew (fig. 19.18) is a good example of Caravaggio's innovative approach to Christian subjects. The scene is based on an account in the Gospel. Christ and an apostle approach a group of older men and youths who are gambling. They are seated at a table (whether indoors or outdoors is unclear), counting money. Among them is Matthew, the tax collector. Christ points to him with a gesture that is a visual quotation of Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* (fig. 16.18), as if to say "Follow me." This iconography implicitly parallels Adam's original creation with Matthew's recreation through Christ. The coin set in Matthew's hatband underlines his present preoccupation with money. His own gesture echoes that of Christ, however, and indicates that his future will be dedicated to Christ's service.

In the *Calling of St. Matthew*, Caravaggio's tenebrism, or use of sharply contrasting light and dark, enhances the Christian message. Christ enters the picture plane from the right, along with a diagonal shaft of light that penetrates the darkness of the street. Nighttime and the illicit activities of night are suddenly illuminated by Christ's miraculous light. Light is ironically juxtaposed with sight in the two figures on the far left. The young man who does not see Christ because he is focusing intently on money is covered in shadow. The old man leaning over him peers through his spectacles, seeing the money but oblivious to the significance of the event taking place beside him.



19.18 Caravaggio, *The Calling of St. Matthew*, Contarelli Chapel, s. Luigi dei Francesi, Rome. 1599-1600. Oil on canvas, 10 ft. 6 3/4 in. x 11 ft 1 7/8 in. In 1608 Caravaggio fled Rome after killing a man in a dispute over a tennis match. Caravaggio's criminal behavior and his acquaintance with Roman street life clearly contributed to the character of this picture. He died of a fever in 1610 before news of the pope's pardon had reached him.

Caravaggio's *Amor Vincit Omnia* (*Love Conquers All*) (fig. 19.19) of about 1602 is a picture totally devoid of Christian content. It is perhaps his most overtly homosexual painting. Cupid slips from the edge of a rumpled bed, coquettishly mocking the world. His tilted head and the *contrapposto* of his torso create a series of Baroque diagonals that are accented by light. The wings appear alive,

and the edges of the feathers catch the light. Records indicate that Caravaggio kept such wings in his studio in Rome in order to enhance the realism of his pictures. The erotic implications of the curved tip of the left wing are clear and direct. They simultaneously challenge and attempt to seduce the viewer.

In contrast to the darkened background of the *Calling of St. Matthew*, the *Amor* contains recognizable objects with a particular iconographic meaning. On the bed are a crown and scepter. Instruments of geometry and music, a manuscript and a quill pen, and a heap of armor are strewn about on the floor. Behind Cupid's right thigh is a starry globe, possibly representing astronomy. The message of this painting is that love, and specifically homosexual love, conquers all.

19.18 Caravaggio, *Amor Vincit Omnia*. c. 1602. Oil on canvas, 5 ft 5/8 in X 3 ft 7 3/8 in.

Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin. Caravaggio painted this picture for the Marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani, a wealthy Roman patron. Homosexual references pervade Caravaggio's religious pictures, but never so overtly as in his secular works. Soon after arriving in Rome, Caravaggio joined the homosexual household of Cardinal del Monte, a leading patron of the arts. Despite his personal proclivities and criminal record, Caravaggio's talent was recognized and fostered by ecclesiastical patronage.



Women as Artists: From Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century

Over the past twenty years, art historians have researched and reevaluated the role of women artists in western art. As a result, women's achievements in the visual arts, and the obstacles they have had to overcome, are much better understood. Pliny's *Natural History* lists the names of five women in ancient Greece and Rome, together with their works, although nothing else is known of them. From the Roman period through the end of the fourteenth century, there are very few records of any individual artists, men or women. During the Middle Ages, women played a major role in the production of embroidery and tapestry --more so in northern Europe than in Italy. They were also active in the illumination of manuscripts, although this was largely confined to the daughters of wealthier families. Until the late thirteenth century, illumination was done by nuns, and a woman needed a dowry to enter a convent.

The bylaws of the Company of St. Luke, a confraternity of artists in Florence, founded in 1361, mentions dues to be paid by women members. However, no women's names are found in the Company's records. From the fifteenth century onward, beginning in Italy, women artists emerge from obscurity. There is evidence, for example, that a woman submitted a model for the lantern of Brunelleschi's dome over Florence Cathedral, though her name is unknown. Previously, women artists in Italy had usually been nuns, women of education and talent, but their work had been limited through their isolation from the wider artistic community. Artemisia Gentileschi was the first woman to join the Company's successor, the Accademia del Disegno (Academy of Design), in 1616.

The elevated status of the artist in the Renaissance was largely the result of a new humanist educational curriculum. For the first time, artists mixed socially with the princes of the Church and the nobility-- as intellectual equals rather than as artisans and craftsmen. Gradually, the new educational standards were extended, especially among the ruling classes, to women. They were encouraged to engage in a wider range of activities, including poetry, music, and art (in that order). The courts of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy produced women who were outstanding cultural patrons, as well as having significant artistic accomplishments in their own right. By the sixteenth century it was generally agreed that the daughters of the middle classes should be educated. Women who wanted to become artists had to be trained in the work- shops of established masters, and many were the daughters, sisters, or wives of artists. Nevertheless, attributions are always a problem with women, for works by women were likely to be delivered under the name of the male head of the workshop.

Vasari, writing in the sixteenth century, discussed the issue of women artists in his biography of Madonna Properzia de' Rossi. He begins her biography with typically humanist references to antiquity, in this case citing women of ancient Greece and Rome as models of female success. He points out that women were great warriors, poets, grammarians, and scientists. His own age, he observes, has produced women of distinction in Latin and Greek scholarship and in art. One Properzia, who was accomplished in playing and singing, set about carving peach stones. So impressive were her scenes that she was given monumental commissions in marble sculpture and painting. She was also praised as a copperplate engraver. Her draftsmanship was of the highest quality, and Vasari himself owned several of her drawings. Despite the advances made by women in the Renaissance, however, practical obstacles remained. Marriage, usually followed by continuous childbearing, interfered with some promising careers. Women were barred from drawing live models, which prevented competition on equal terms with men. Artemisia Gentileschi drew from female models, but familiarity with the male nude was important for monumental works. It is thus no accident that, until recently, it was in the fields of portraiture and still life that women tended to achieve distinction.

Gentileschi



Caravaggio's lifestyle did not lend itself to the maintenance of a workshop or the employment of apprentices. Nevertheless, he had a major influence on western art. Among his followers, known as the *Caravaggisti*, was Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1652/3), the first woman artist to emerge as a significant personality in Europe. Artemisia's *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (fig. 19.20), which shares the Baroque taste for violence, illustrates an event from the Book of Judith in the Old Testament Apocrypha (see p.17). The Assyrian ruler Nebuchadnezzar has sent his general Holofernes to lay waste the land of Judah. A Hebrew widow, Judith, pretending to be a deserter, goes with a maidservant to the camp of Holofernes and flirts with him. Arranging to spend the evening alone with him, Judith gets him drunk, uses his own scimitar to cut off his head and escapes with it. Artemisia depicts the moment at which Judith plunges the blade through Holofernes's neck. The violence of the scene is enhanced by the dramatic, Caravaggesque shifts of light and dark and by the energetic draperies. A series of diagonals converges around the victim's head, which Judith pulls back so that the viewer confronts his horror directly.

19.20 Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*. c. 1614-20.

Oil on canvas, 6 ft 6V3 in x 5 ft 4 in (1.99 x 1.63 m). Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Artemisia learned painting from her father Orazio. In 1611 Orazio hired Agostino Tassi to teach her drawing and perspective. Tassi raped Artemisia and then refused to marry her. When Orazio sued Tassi, Artemisia was tortured with thumbscrews to test her veracity before Tassi was convicted. Undoubtedly affected by this experience, Artemisia is especially known for her pictures of heroic women.

From *The Life of St. Theresa of Avila*, trans. by E. Allison Peers (London: Sheed and Ward, 1979), pp. 192-93.

Saint Theresa of Avila, *Life*: "Completely Afire with a Great Love for God," 1562

The Counter Reformation was often marked by the banning of heretical books, by church control of education, and by the suppression of Protestant doctrines, worship, and congregations. However, the Counter Reformation was also characterized by the reawakening of spiritual fervor.

One of the great forces of the Counter Reformation was the Spanish nun Theresa of Avila (1515-1582). Born in Avila, Spain, Theresa exhibited fervent piety in her early life. As a child she was found by her uncle at the outskirts of Avila. Her intention had been to journey to southern Spain, where she planned to evangelize the Moors and where she anticipated that she would meet with martyrdom. As a teenager she entered a Carmelite monastery¹, where she adopted a regimen of silence, seclusion, abstinence, and austerity.

Shortly after she received the Carmelite habit, Theresa began to have transitory mystical visions. At the age of thirty-nine she had a deeply moving experience of the nearness of Christ, which she considered to be the moment of her true spiritual conversion. Thereafter she embarked upon a program of spiritual reform within the Catholic Church. She began to found monasteries in Europe that aimed at restoring the austerity and contemplative character of early Carmelite life, and she directed missions outside Europe in distant areas, including Persia, the Congo, and the Middle East. Members of Theresa's reformed communities were known as the Discalced, or Barefooted, Carmelites, because they wore sandals in place of shoes and stockings.

Theresa initially faced suspicion within the church about the genuineness of her visions. Opponents whispered that her visions were the work of the devil. In order to describe her spiritual state for her confessor,² Theresa wrote her autobiography, *Life* (1562). The book, which was later enlarged in scope for public audiences, reveals the capacity for ecstatic worship.

In *Life*, Theresa describes the trances and visions that she experienced during and after her conversion. She also devotes much of her attention to a discussion of prayer. Theresa depicts the different stages of the life of prayer in metaphorical terms, taken from the manner of securing water to irrigate a garden. A selection from Theresa's *Life*, "Completely Afire with a Great Love for God," is presented here.

Theresa was proclaimed Patroness of Spain by the Spanish parliament in 1617 and was canonized—that is, declared a saint—by Pope Gregory XV (lived 1554-1623; pope 1621-23) in 1622. The sculptor Bernini (1598-1680) created a dramatic representation of Saint Theresa transported by her spiritual joy, *The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa* (1645-52), for the Cornaro Chapel of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. In this sculpture, the saint is represented in the sandals that she and the members of her reformed communities adopted. Her influence was felt not only in Spain but throughout Europe and in much of the non-European world.

I spent some days, though only a few, with [a] vision continually in my mind, and it did me so much good that I remained in prayer unceasingly and contrived that everything I did should be such as not to displease Him Who, as I clearly perceived, was a witness of it. ...One day, when I was at prayer, the Lord was pleased to reveal to me nothing but His hands, the beauty of which was so great as to be indescribable. ...A few days later I also saw that Divine face, which seemed to leave me completely absorbed....



Gianlorenzo Bernini, *The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa*, Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome, 1645-52

Your Reverence may suppose that it would have needed no great effort to behold those hands and that beauteous face. But there is such beauty about glorified bodies that the glory that illumines them throws all who look upon such supernatural loveliness into confusion....

It is not a radiance that dazzles, but a soft whiteness and an infused radiance that, without wearying the eyes, causes them the greatest delight; nor are they wearied by the brightness that they see in seeing this Divine beauty....

It pleased the Lord that I should sometimes see the following vision. I would see beside me, on my left hand, an angel in bodily form—a type of vision which I am not in the habit of seeing, except very rarely. Though I often see representations of angels, my visions of them are of the type which I first mentioned. It pleased the Lord that I should see this angel in the following way. He was not tall, but short, and very beautiful, his face so aflame that he appeared to be one of the highest types of angel who seem to be all afire. They must be those who are called cherubim:³ they do not tell me their names but I am well aware that there is a great difference between certain angels and others, and between these and others still, of a kind that I could not possibly explain. In his hands I saw a long golden spear and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he drew it out, I thought he was drawing them out with it and he left me completely afire with a great love for God. The pain was so sharp that it made me utter several moans; and so excessive was the sweetness caused me by this intense pain that one can never wish to lose it, nor will one's soul be content with anything less than God. It is not bodily pain, but spiritual, though the body has a share in it—indeed, a great share. So sweet are the colloquies of love that pass between the soul and God that if anyone thinks I am lying I beseech God, in His goodness, to give him the same experience. During the days that this continued, I went about as if in a stupor. I had no wish to see or speak with anyone but only to hug my pain, which caused me greater bliss than any that can come from the whole of creation. I was like this on several occasions, when the Lord was pleased to send me these raptures, and so deep were they that, even when I was with other people, I could not resist them. ...When this pain of which I am now speaking begins, the Lord seems to transport the soul and to send it into an ecstasy, so that it cannot possibly suffer or have any pain because it immediately begins to experience fruition. May He be blessed forever, Who bestows so many favors on one who so ill requites such great benefits.

¹ The Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel is a religious order founded by Saint Berthold in Palestine in 1154. The Order of Carmelite Sisters was founded in 1452. The primitive rule stressed poverty, vegetarianism, and solitude.

² A person authorized to hear confessions.

³ A celestial being considered to be a member of the second order of angels, often represented as a winged child.