**Baroque and Rococo**

In my last lecture we considered the origins of the baroque; and in Mr Gilbert’s last two lectures he considered examples of baroque art in the National Gallery. In this lecture I want to survey the course of baroque art and consider its eighteenth century aftermath which we call the rococo.

The baroque period covers some 150 years from about 1600 to 1750; and may be conveniently divided into three phases (1) Early Baroque c 1600-1625 (2) High Baroque c 1625-1675 (3) Late Baroque and Rococo 1675-1750.

We have already considered two early baroque painters, Caravaggio* (Supper at Eumaneus, London National Gallery) and Annibale Carracci* (Bacchus playing to Silenus, London National Gallery).

Caravaggio, we agreed, might be described as an early baroque realist, Annibale as an early baroque classicist.

In architecture we considered the church I Gesu, mother church of the Jesuit order, as a very early example of baroque architecture. Since it was completed as early as 1584 it is sometimes called pre-baroque or proto-baroque. But since it reveals most of the qualities of early baroque architecture we may as well call it early baroque and have done with it.

The development of this early baroque style is continued in the work of the architect Carlo Maderno. Here is the façade of Maderno’s Santa Suzanna completed in 1603 (Note projection at three levels; horizontal and vertical articulation; disappearance of the all surface by increasing sculptural richness, cartouches, niches, statuary) (Wittkower: a clearly directed dynamic movement horizontally as well as structurally.)

It was Carlo Maderno, too, who completed the building of St Peters. The original plan for St Peters by Bramante completed in 156 was for a centrally planned church.* Michelangelo* simplified Bramante’s plan but preserved the centralized character when he redesigned the structure in 1546. One of the first of the baroque Popes, Paul V, decided to alter the centralized plan and add a great nave. Maderno began the great nave in 1607,* completing it in seven years; and completed the façade in five years.* Paul V’s preplanning of St Peters was symptomatic: the baroque age preferred long axial vistas to centralised plans.

Let us now turn to the High Baroque, which covers the fifty years from 1625 to 1675.

The outstanding genius of the period was Gianlorenzo Bernini, sculptor, architect and painter.
1. An early work. Aeneas and Anchises 1618, screw-like flame-like (the *figura serpentine*).
2. The David, 1623; Borghese Warrior; Michelangelo’s David. The one self-contained the other in violent action. Sculptural movement flows out and implies more than one sees, implies the existence of the antagonist Goliath, though he is not there. The spectator is involved.
3. The Apollo and Daphne.*

Such statues reveal the dynamic, energetic side of the baroque. But the High Baroque was not only interested in the portrayal of dynamic movement. It could also endow the figure with a new emotionalism while shown in a condition of rest. The is seen clearly in Bernini’s religious sculpture.

Consider for example his Sta Bibiena of 1624 and his St Longius of 1629.

(The head upturned, the gaze and eyeballs skyward, the eloquent and dramatic gestures)

The baroque language of visual rhetoric may well strike modern taste as affected and even hypocritical today. But if we want to understand this baroque emotionalism instead of rejecting it out of hand, its origins may be found in the religious devotional practices of the seventeenth century.

Two are of special relevance: **probabilism** and **quietism**.

The **probabilists** made things a bit easier for the erring penitent. They claimed that in matters of conscience on which authorities differed, it was quite lawful to follow any course which had the support of some recognized doctor of the church. The doctrine, which had an effect of loosening and liberalising the moral rigor of the 16th century. Later it was censured for being too lax.

Then there was **quietism**. The central idea behind quietism is that, if you want to be good the best thing to do, is to do nothing. Because if you start doing anything at all its sure to be wrong or sinful. Quietism was a kind of mysticism which flourished more in the second half of the century. It, later, was censured too.

[The Mary Magdalene. Receptive, passionate, spirituality, the flying garments used to suggest the saints agony and suspense.]

The outstanding example of this spiritual emotionalism is however Bernini’s famous Ecstasy of San Theresa* in the Cornaro Chapel of Sta Maria della Vittoria, Rome. S. Theresa was one of the most popular of the Counter Reformation saints. Bernini has
chosen the critical moment when the Saint experiences her mystical union with Christ—the experience as the saint described it herself was half psychic and half physical—the moment, that is, when the angel pierces her soul with a flaming golden arrow. This sculpture and its setting in the Cornaro chapel, which was completed between 1645-52 may be taken as typical of the High Renaissance sculpture.

In the first place note that Bernini breaks down the division between sculpture and architecture. One flows imperceptibly into the other. This is a feature of baroque art. Architecture, sculpture and painting, cease to maintain their independence. They tend to merge into a single art form, in order to create one total impression.

Note, secondly, that Bernini concentrates upon one single point of view. He has placed the sculpture in a deep niche, so that it is virtually impossible to see it unless one stands in the nave directly opposite the Cornaro Chapel. In this regard Baroque sculpture differs sharply from Mannerist sculpture. Mannerist sculpture preferred many points of view. They were very fond for example of the cork-screw form or figura serpentine, as we may see it in a typical Mannerist piece, Giovanni Bologna’s Rape of the Sabine Women.* This serpentine of flame like form was very popular in Mannerist art and was much discussed. The important mannerist writer, Lomazzo, attributes its importance to Michelangelo, who, he wrote, advised one of his scholars to always make ‘a figure pyramidal, Serpent like, and divided by one, two and three’. In which precept, Lomazzo added, ‘ the whole mysterie of the art consisteth’. For the greatest grace and life that a picture can have, he added, ‘is that it expresses motion, and there is not form so fit to express this motion as that of the flame of fire’.

But Bernini turned away from serpentine, flame like may sided composing back to the High Renaissance main view-point composing. But of course he did it, as he did most things, with a difference. Although he makes use of a dominant viewpoint there is in Bernini’s sculpture far more use of diagonality, of recession and of a space continuum which flows out from the sculpture. Thus in the Theresa the vision takes place high above us as though upon a cloud suspended in mid-air. Much use is made of actual light effects. The pediment hides a window paneed in the golden rays which fall down upon all sides of the group. No sculptor before Bernini had attempted to use light in his way. Above angels push aside the clouds to allow the heavenly light to fall from on high. There is thus a direct link established between the painted angels in the vault and the sculptured angel with the arrow. And to heighten the dramatic effect; Bernini has placed the figures of actual members of the Cornaro family in balconies similar to theatre boxes. Finally we may note Bernini’s use of different stones.

All this means that he conceived his enormous project very much like a large here-dimensional painting; but one which was to be observed from one principal point of view.
First let us look at three of Bernini’s major architectural works. Firstly, the great Baldacchino* over the high altar of St Peters (1624-33), in which the using of sculpture and architecture is again manifest, and behind it the symbolic chair of St Peter* in which light is again used to symbolize spiritual light, as we saw it in the Cornaro Chapel.

Secondly, Bernini’s great Calennalli(?tabernacle?) before St Peters built between 1624 and 1633, which set new standards in open air axial planning, and was to be of immense influence, in the emergence of the monumental and majestic vistas which we associated with baroque planning.

Thirdly, the great staircase of the Vatican, known as the Scala Regia in which Bernini disguised the diminishing width of the corridor as it rises towards the landing by his monumental order of Roman iconic columns.

The outstanding figure of the High Renaissance in architecture is, however, not Bernini, but Francesco Borromini (1599-1667). Unlike Bernini, who was a prosperous, extraverted man of the world, Borromini was introverted, mentally unstable and ended his life by suicide.

Even Bernini and his contemporaries regarded Borromini’s architecture as extravagant and fantastic, and his architecture became the bête noir of eighteenth century classicism. His style is clearly revealed in his first important work, S. Carolo Alle Quattro Fontane* 1665-7. Here both in plan and in elevation a feeling of undulating movement is established by means of convex and concave surfaces. The radical difference between Borromini’s architecture and the Renaissance, Mannerist and early Baroque architecture which had preceded it is based upon his system of proportioning. Borromini rejected the classical principles of planning by means of modules: that is by multiplying and dividing a basic arithmetical unit, such as the diameter of a column. Instead he designed by means of geometric units. In the one case the plan and its divisions was achieved by adding module to module; in the other by taking a particular geometric figure and dividing it into coherent geometric sub-units. By such means Borromini was able to develop complex spatial geometric surfaces. The dome of S. Carlo is oval; the dome of his next important church S Ivo della Spaienza,* Rome, is a complex star-hexagon structure.

Wittkower calls S. Agnese the High Baroque revision of the centralized plan of St Peters.

The dome is similar to St. Peters, with its elegant ribs and lantern tower. But Borromini placed it on a much higher drum, and recessed the central portion of the façade so that instead of hiding the dome, as the Madern’s façade does at St Peters the dome itself becomes almost a visual part of the façade. It s flanked by to elegant
towers which frame the dome and give height and grace to the building. Two such towers were intended upon St Peters. St Agnes considerably influenced Wren’s designing of St Paul’s London.

The most important of the Italian Baroque painters was Pietro da Cortona. His most important work is the ceiling and walls of the Barbarini Palace,* Rome. It represents a grandiose allegory of the Barberini Pop Urban VIII pontificate. Divine Providence is seen high on the ceiling exalting and protecting the Barberini Power. This is the ultimate development of that sotto in su painting which we saw beginning in the work of Magntegna and is sometimes known as quadratura painting. Note how, above the real cornice of the ceiling Cortona has constructed a painted cornice which gives him five great fields in which to exploit his illusionistic devices. This be it noted is a largely secular allegory full of antique references. But the same quadratura painting was used extensively in churches. One of the most famous is that by Giovanni Battista Gauilli in the ceiling of Il Gesu,* which is a kind of apotheosis of the Jesuit Order.

In Bernini, Borromini, and Cortona, he High Baroque style flourishes most vigorously and freely. We have already, however, noted that within the baroque there is a persisting classicistic trend. We noted it, or example, in the early baroque classicism of Annibale Carracci. This early baroque classicism is also apparent in the work of guido Reni, notably in his ceiling fresco of Aurora of 1613 for the Casio Rospilliosi(?),* Rome, wherein the figures still move across the picture plane in a classical frieze-like manner.

A classicizing tendency continues also during the high Baroque. Here the most important artists are the painters Nicholas Poussin, Andrea Sacchi; and the sculptors Algardi and Duquesnoy.

Poussin has already been discussed in Mr Gilbert’s lectures, so I do not propose to discuss his work at any length here. The difference between the ideals of the High Baroque painters like Cortona and the High Baroque classicists, like Sacchi was revealed in a controversy which took place between Sacchi and Cortona in the Academy of St Luke. And this difference is also revealed by contrasting a typical painting by Poissin, who was one of the Sacchi circle in Rome with the Palazzo Barberini* ceiling by Cortona.

The argument was concerned with history painting which was then regarded as the highest category of art, higher that is than portraiture, or genre studies, or landscape. **History painting,** we must remember, for the seventeenth and eighteenth century, did not mean quite what it might mean to some of us today. It was, hat is, not simply painting historical events; it was in academic theory the noblest form of art. The Murray’s in their little dictionary define it as follows: ‘generalised representations of the passion and intellect as symbolized in classical history and mythology or in
subjects taken from Christian iconography.’ In other words history in this sense only refers to ancient history and the scriptures. Modern history was not admitted into the category until the late eighteenth century.

Now High Baroque painters like Cortona used great multitudes of figures in their history paintings. The classicists however advocated a few figures only (about nine or ten), and each part is to be assigned a distinct part, using its expression, movement and gesture, to contribute something basic to the whole story. They argued too that the picture must possess the classical unities of time place and action; and that each figure should be read like a poem or tragedy.

Cortona, on the other hand, defended his high baroque style not by rejecting the long standing connection between painting and poetry, for this was for too generally assumed by all parties for anyone to reject during the seventeenth century. Instead, he argued that just as an epic must have a main plot and many episodes, so a history may have a main theme and many sub-plots. And this demanded many figures. Sacchi argued by contrast that history painting should be like a tragedy, with few figures—simplicity and unity being its essence.

In sculpture high baroque classicism is best revealed in the work of Algardi and Duquesnoy.

In order to gain some feeling for Algardi’s style; let us turn back for a moment to Bernini. Bernini among other things is significant in the history of art for creating the baroque portrait bust. In this new iconographic type he deliberately sought to combine a realistic portrait with such general characteristics as nobility, pride, heroism and majesty.

Here is the bust of Cardinal Scipione Borghese,* Bernini’s own great patrons and one of the greatest of all the patrons of the High Baroque. And here is Bernini’s bust of Louis xiv. The baroque bust invented by Bernini lived a vigorous life in European art for over two hundred years.

Against Bernini’s high baroque busts, Algardi’s form a striking contrast. Here is his bust of Francesco Bracciolini(?)*. The forms are incisive, precise, detailed—solid and serious—but they lack the wonderfully, extroverted and confident pompousness of Bernini. Algardi has been described as ‘realist classicism’. And yet despite its realism and its classicism; it still conforms, surely, to the general qualities of the baroque style.

The classicism of Duquesnoy may best be seen in his Statue of Sta Suzannah,* in Sta Maria di Loreto, Rome and we might compare it with Bernini’s Sta Bibiena. Bibiena is shown in the ecstasy of the moment communicating with God the Father. Duquesnoy instead represents the timeless and objective state of sainthood. The
classical garb falls naturally according to the laws of gravity, the saint is represented in a state of both mental and physical repose. Duquesnoy based the statue on an ancient statue of Urania on the Capitol; and it is not surprising that the great antiquarian, connoisseur and theorist of the time, Giovanni Bellori, greatly admired Duquesnoy’s work.

I want to turn now to the late baroque. Towards the end of the seventeenth century Rome gradually gave way before Paris as the most dynamic art centre of the world, where Louis xiv’s absolute monarchy under his gifted minister Colbert deliberately undertook a French form of Baroque classicism.

Rome itself became a great international centre for the study of art; but French and English and German artists, connoisseurs and students came to it during the late seventeenth and eighteenth century increasingly with a view not of studying the contemporary art of Italy but of studying antiquity as its source. As early as 1666 Louis’s minister has established the French Academy in Rome, where students who had won the Prix de Rome and others gathered to study Roman antiquities. The French Academy at Rome did much to fashion the strong classicist trend which was to dominate French art during the seventeenth and much of the eighteenth centuries.

In architecture, the beginnings of French classicism may be witnessed in Louis xiv’s redesigning of the Louvre. He invited Bernini to Paris to undertake the task. But after he had spent some months there and submitted three plans Louis rejected them all. Louis rejected Bernini’s plans in favour of those of Louis Le Vau his court architect and Claude Perrault. Perrault’s east front of the Louvre* is clearly conceived in a much cooler and restrained Roman style than any Italian baroque we have seen.

This very restrained baroque classicism was continued in Louis’ Palace at Versailles, designed by Le Vau and Jules Hardouin-Mansart. Around the palace, the great landscape gardener Andrea le Notre* designed the greatest of all baroque gardens: with immense axial vistas, much statuary, fountains, clipped hedges and terraces. The qualities of French baroque classicism in architecture are displayed very clearly in Hardouin-Monsart’s Les Invalides, Paris. Both the plan and the dome clearly echo Michelangelo’s St Peters and the façade is in the manner of the east front of the Louvre. If we compare it with Borromini’s S. Agnese, we have the distinction between the High Baroque Italianian exuberance of one and the late classical and French baroque of he other.

Under Louis xiv and Colbert, French art became highly centralized under the Royal Academy of painting and sculpture established in 1648. The leading painters of the time Charles Le Brun, Pierre Mignard and Hycnthe Rigaud were all baroque classicists involved in glorying Le Roi Soleil and his absolute state.
Le Brun (Hercules, the heros(?) of Diomedes(?))
Mignard
Rigaud

Louis xiv died in 1715 and with his death there comes a loosening a freeing of the late baroque, until it creates in France a virtually distinct style, the Rococo.

Miss Gray will have a good deal to say about the Rococo in her next lecture. All that I can do here is to describe it very briefly. Firstly whether it can be described as a distinct style in itself or whether it is to be regarded as the last stage of the baroque remains a matter of debate. It has been claimed that Italian rococo is no more than the last phase of Italian baroque whereas French rococo is a style in its own right. Perhaps these are really questions which should really worry no one by art historians.

However of this we can say of the Rococo. It is a secular dominantly secular style; whereas baroque had been dominantly religious. It is a courtly and aristocratic style. It is very much a style of interior decoration, and for this reason silversmith, graphic design, wall-paneling and carpentry. But it does influence painting, sculpture and architecture also. Further, it is a surface style, makes elegant use of curves, and delights in asymmetry. It is a style which is playful, elegant, erotic, colorful; and it emerged which artists and patrons—especially the mistresses of Louis xv like Madame de Pompadour—were just about fed up to the back teeth with classicism and its high seriousness.

In painting the first and greatest master of the Rococo was Watteau. And we may conclude this lecture by contrasting his Pilgrimage to Cythera painted in 1717 with Ruben’s Garden of Love.

The Rubens is lustful, vigorous, robust; the Watteau is elegant, beautifully atmospheric in its colour, and dominated by a mood of poignant transience. There is, indeed, in all Watteau’s paintings what Robert Burton would have described as a ‘sweet melancholy’ a recognition of the transience of all things, youth, life and love. It was such an unusual picture that the French Academy, which had to classify all its paintings into categories could find no category for it. Obligingly they found a new one; and called it a fête galantes; and not surprisingly the fete galates became the most characteristic type of Rococo painting.
Library Digitised Collections

Author/s:
Smith, Bernard

Title:
Baroque and Rococo

Date:
1956-1966

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/56291