

Betty Gilson
Key Largo
<http://www.artistrue.com>
Email:betty@artistrue.com
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The Baroque

In the midst of an era of exploration and rediscovery, at the beginning of the 17th Century, the Catholic Rome, which survived the Protestantism, will experience an extensive sense of rebirth of the art of ancient Rome.

If in the High Renaissance, man, in general, was the object of art, in the new style, Baroque, a particular man—the ruler, the pope, or the noble—was the center of attention. The “human thought departed forever from the certainty of faith and entered the questioning age of science” (Wood, 160). But the church managed to separate the world of science from faith with the help of art. Art was a tool for manipulating thought through emotion.

Caravaggio, an Italian baroque painter, is very well known for his naturalistic style. He also is well known for the use of simple people in his early works and later religious paintings. The dramatic light-and-dark effects—termed chiaroscuro—in his works is another characteristic of his style. The way he painted religious subjects was shocking for his time. It was his way to rebel against the conventional way. In his paintings, the viewer is an active participant.

From the study of his paintings, it's obvious that Caravaggio studied and assimilated the styles of the High Renaissance masters, especially that of Michelangelo. Caravaggio's impact on the art of his century was considerable, and unfortunately, just like Rafael, he died young—at the age of 37. Some of his paintings are “Medusa” (after 1590), “St. Francis in Ecstasy” (approx. 1595), “The Calling of Saint Matthew” (1599), “Entombment” (1603).

If Caravaggio was great painter, Gianlorenzo Bernini, born in 1598, was a great sculptor. He has an unprecedented virtuosity in the way he manipulates marble. Bernini “created illusions of living, moving, yielding flesh in states of such transience that a single instant seems forever frozen in time...Bernini's double illusion, of marble that becomes clay and clay that becomes flesh, is unprecedented” (Wood, 164).

David is one of his masterpieces. He moves, turns aggressively to confront the observer, who takes Goliath's place. David is “anecdotal and temporal, instead epic. He is theater, not meditation” (Wood, 165). Bernini's theatricality could best be observed in the “Ecstasy of Saint Teresa.” Love and creation are the key to understanding this masterpiece.

Even though Italy had more than its share of masters, France wasn't left behind. Great artists such as Rubens, Van Dyke, and Velasquez sustained the myth of power among nobles.

Rubens was able to transform the ordinary in something exceptional and “infuse it with a drama equal to that of Bernini...he was a painter of dynamism and sensuousness” (Wood, 170). One of his works is “Presentation of the Portrait of Marie de Medici to Henry IV (1633).

Van Dyke, who was Ruben's pupil, was "supremely capable of capturing the essence of that gilded aristocracy teetering on the brink of regicide and disastrous civil war" (Wood, 172). "Charles I on the Horseback" (1633) is one of Van Dyke's paintings, which portrays the aristocracy of time.

Diego Velasquez's style, favoring the emulation of nature in a broad, direct manner, would inspire later artists, particularly Manet and Picasso. In his earliest style, he painted the poor. After moving to Philip IV's court, he would adapt his style to suit the purposes of his paintings. Some of his paintings are "Philip IV on Horseback" (1634-35), "Surrender of Breda" (c. 1630) and especially "Las Meninas" (1656), which even today makes us wonder with its puzzling subject.

We can not end this essay without mentioning the Dutch art of the 17th century. Holland, and especially Amsterdam, became the greatest economic power in the world at the time. In this new society, art took a new form. Group photographs were very popular at the time. In this period, artists "attached significance to every aspect of their material world and viewed life and humanity critically but sympathetically" (Wood, 178). Some of the talented painters from this period are Jan Vermier, Gerard Ter Borch, Pieter de Hooch, Jan Steen, Willem Kalf, Jacob van Ruisdael, Aelbert Cuyp, Frans Hals, but most importantly, Rembrandt.

Rembrandt's paintings combined some of the following qualities: propulsion, energetic disorder, personal and private history, psychological nuisance, monumental self-scrutiny (in self portraits). "The humanity that reverberates through his work, the great themes of compassion, love and

reconciliation on which he meditated are a high point in the history of Western art” (Wood, 193). His self-portraiture was unprecedented in Western art before. In his paintings, self-individuality becomes matter for contemplation.

Overall the Baroque style achieved some of the following:

- Exuberant style;
- Well-thought art design based on a plan;
- The ideals of the classical world have been subordinated to the values of the triumphant Christianity;
- Subjects in movement;
- Illusion of the reality;
- Level of reality is challenged;
- The viewer is engaged with the object;
- Light and dark (chiaroscuro);
- Depiction of inwardness;
- Pictorial allegory.

“In a century that began with Caravaggio, and that included artists as diverse as Rubens, Rembrandt, and Velasquez, humanity came to terms with itself and its environment. No other earlier period had looked more deeply or penetratingly into the human heart, and no other period had ever attempted to catch in images the wide spectrum of human existence. It was left to the following era to escape once more into pure fantasy, into play, into dreams, and sometimes into nightmares” (Stewart et. al.,147).

Works Cited

Stewart, Andrew et. al. *Art of the Western World: Study Guide*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1989.

Wood, Michael, Bruce Cole and Adelheid Gealt. *Art of the Western World: From Ancient Greece to Post-Modernism*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989.