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THE ARTS OF  
MANIZIND

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**The Arts of Mankind II**

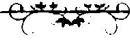


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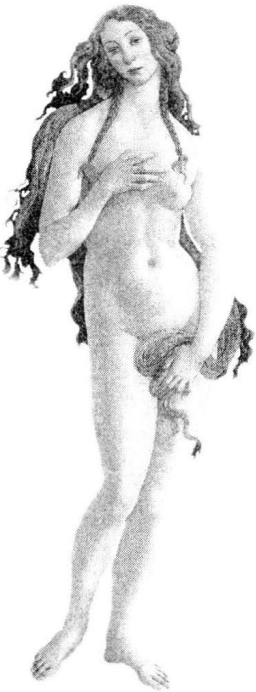
## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

## BAROQUE



*The Church and the State proceed to the counterattack and how this affected the development of the arts*

THE ARTS OF MANKIND By Hendrik Willem Van Loon



**I**F YOU WANT TO UNDERSTAND the century and a half which followed immediately upon the outbreak of the Reformation, I recommend the portraits that were painted during this period. They will explain the era of the great religious wars much better than all the books that deal with the subject.

They are able to do this for quite a variety of reasons. For one thing, there was the new weatherproof technique which allowed people to paint in oil. The fresco painters of the earlier half of the Middle Ages, with their fast drying backgrounds consisting of wet plaster, had always been obliged to do their jobs in too great a hurry to do a really good piece of work. Oil painting, therefore, had been of tremendous help to the portrait painter and although at first the Church had frowned upon the practice, the portrait painter had become a man of considerable standing in the community and was growing much richer than his colleagues who specialized in holy scenes.

But two things are necessary for a good portrait. One is an artist who knows his business. The other is a model worthy of his best efforts, and the sixteenth century was an ideal age for





just the sort of faces a portrait painter would love to take on as his subjects. For it was an age of very outspoken and very strong characters. They were the only type that could hope to survive in an era of such unusual violence and fury, when war and pestilence were apt to reduce the population of a city or an entire country to one-tenth of its former size in less than half a year's time. The advantages of birth and breeding were reduced to a minimum. It was a question of kill or be killed and only those who were most fit to survive under these harrowing circumstances had a chance to maintain themselves.

Today the lower middle class seems to produce the strong men that are needed for the occasion but in the sixteenth century the leaders were born from among the peasantry or from the lower classes of the nobility, which except for its name was only one step removed from the earth animals among whom it spent most of its days. Peasants started the revolution and peasants conquered the world. Peasants became the leaders of mercenary bands which made and unmade empires. Even the princes of that period gave evidence of a very peasantry sort of mentality. They were born in a castle that smelled strongly of gunpowder. They lived on horseback. Wherever they went they carried the smell of the stables with them. Their jokes were those of the village tavern. Their conversation reflected the atmosphere of the barracks where they felt really much more at home than in the apartments reserved for their womenfolk. A hundred years of almost continuous warfare made it possible for them to spend most of their time in some armed camp, a life that suited them to perfection. They preferred leather to satin and silk. Whenever they had to dress up for an official occasion, they appeared uncomfortable in very heavy brocades which made them stand apart from everybody else, like Luther in that telltale picture of Lucas Cranach—a heavy, square-toed yokel with both feet solidly on the ground. And the women were little better than the men.

The period of the Baroque was the ideal age for fat people. Perhaps it would be better to call them heavy. For most of these men led very active lives. The extra weight they carried about with them was not an evidence of physical laziness. It was the result of heavy living, heavy eating, heavy drinking, of deep slumbers after heavy meals. All of which contributed to make this an ideal age



for the portrait painter.

A modern painter must spend a lot of time "draping" his subjects. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the subjects had already draped themselves. Even when they were merely talking to a servant, they seemed to be posing for their portraits. For that was the way they were accustomed to live, doing things slowly, ponderously, and with solemn gravity.

Visit a Baroque palace and try to figure out how you could possibly turn it into a comfortable home. Medieval rooms lend themselves beautifully to being lived in by modern people. Once you get over a certain feeling of emptiness and a disgust with the lack of hygienic facilities, you will swear that you have never before experienced such a sense of peace and such perfect harmony between beauty and usefulness. A Rococo palace, whether big or small, as soon as it has been provided with a few modern conveniences, makes a delightful home. It creates an atmosphere in which you feel that you can be at your very best—in which you can be pleasant and polite even to people who bore you, and in which on occasions you can even be much wittier than you have ever been before. But Baroque palaces are only fit for the people who built them and even with the best of modern interior decorators they will never be anything else but vast uninhabitable barns without a vestige of *Gemütlichkeit*.

The very name "Baroque" betrays the small esteem in which this style was held by the men and women of the Renaissance who witnessed the coming of these vast and dreary piles of stone. In Spanish a *barroco* was a huge pearl of irregular shape, a bivalvular affliction that somehow had gone wrong and looked grotesque rather than beautiful. It had not been meant as a compliment, any more than the sneering "Gothic" or "Hunnish" which the Italians had applied to everything that had come to them from the north. I have already mentioned the spread of the Baroque form of architecture throughout Europe. But I have said nothing so far about the Baroque attitude of mind and that, of course, in turn decided the sort of art that was produced during this period and was much more important than anything else.

It is difficult to give you any definite dates but I think it is safe to say that



*The beginning of the dance. The Indian witch doctor*



the Baroque started with the outbreak of the Reformation in the middle of the sixteenth century and ended with the death of Louis XIV, soon after the year 1700. In some parts of Europe it continued for a little while longer. In others it had already disappeared. But during these entire hundred and fifty years, the Christian world was primarily dominated by problems that either directly or indirectly were of a very decidedly religious nature.

Luther and Calvin had broken up the universality of religious experiences of the Middle Ages. Each man must now decide for himself which of the many new prophets of salvation offered him the best guarantee of future happiness. And soon Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, Baptists and Anabaptists, Supralapsarians and Infralapsarians, Latitudinarians and Limitarians, Trinitarians and Ubiquitarians, and a score of other conflicting sects were bidding against each other for domination over the minds of the millions.

Out of these arguments and disputes there arose a century of such strife as the world had rarely seen. It culminated in thirty years of a most disastrous form of warfare. Before these groups had been definitely convinced that none of them could ever hope to destroy all the others and that they must agree upon a compromise, the whole of Europe had been turned into one vast battlefield in which the Christian world was treated to the sight of Catholic generals leading Protestant armies and Protestant generals leading Catholic armies, of Protestant mercenaries plundering Protestant countries and Catholic mercenaries despoiling Catholic countries, of a Catholic commander in chief offering to sell out to the champions of the Protestant cause and of a Protestant king accepting subsidies from a Roman cardinal.

The end was a complete stalemate. After thirty years of fighting (during eight of which the diplomats were preparing for peace) both sides agreed to a truce. A most disastrous truce, for it confirmed Article Three of the religious peace of Augsburg of the year 1555, by which each ruler had been given the right to enforce his own particular faith upon all of his subjects, regardless of the wishes of the majority.

As a result, all of Europe was to be henceforth divided and subdivided into an endless number of small principalities, each with a religion of its own and



each one the sworn enemy of all its dissenting neighbors. And the Church of the Middle Ages was forced more than ever to play its classical role of the "Church militant."

It was one of the most far-reaching changes that have ever affected the civilization of Europe and it made a deep impression upon all the arts. For the painters and sculptors and architects and musicians ceased to be peaceful craftsmen who plied their trade to the greater glory of a universal God. They were forced to enlist in the different little armies that meant to reconquer the world for some tribal Deity. A picture ceased to be a picture. It became a piece of propaganda. A church ceased to be a house of worship and meditation. It became a meeting place for those who happened to belong to the same religious sect. And only such songs were tolerated as could also be used as battle hymns by the defenders of whatever "true faith" was the prescribed creed of their own little bailiwick.

In this terrific and merciless struggle, the Catholic South fought with the help of the visible arts, while the Protestant North depended more upon the audible arts. A strange catch-as-catch-can between painting and architecture on the one side and music on the other: Bach vs. Velasquez in ten rounds!

But I am trying to make things a little too simple, for there really has never been an historical period as hopelessly complicated as that of the Baroque. For another contender for honors had now appeared upon the stage. That was the dynastic state, the state in which all the power was in the hands of a single man, either a king or his prime minister. This dynastic state was not the result of the religious developments of that day. It had been born out of the need for a highly centralized form of government during an age when all countries were fighting each other for part of the spoils of Europe and Asia and Africa and America.

Once founded, however, its rulers were forced to make common cause with the Church, for these princes, too, must be forever on guard not only against their enemies from abroad but also against those at home. Those at home might only be religious dissenters or potential dissenters, but they too if possible must be brought back into the fold of the faithful. And, borrowing a leaf from





the Book of Conduct of the Church, the worldly authorities decided that nothing would serve their purposes as well as a deliberate campaign of splendiferous overawing. In consequence thereof the Baroque period became an era when both the Church and the State set out to impress the common man with their glory and their glamour and their power and their wealth until the poor subject was so completely overpowered by the majesty and splendor of his spiritual and worldly masters that he considered himself fortunate to be allowed to pay his taxes and share the least tiny little bit in this display of magnificence.

With so vast a panorama before us it is impossible to devote much space to the details. I can give you only a barest outline of what happened during this period to a few of the main actors in the tragedy of the Baroque. I must begin with the power that placed itself at the head of the Counter Reformation and that completely ruined itself in the attempt.

That power was Spain. Having spent eight hundred years fighting the Moors for the possession of their country, the Spaniards had worked themselves into a frenzy of religious zeal that made them the natural defenders of the faith the moment the Church, which had been their main support during this long period of martyrdom, was threatened by a new sort of infidel.

The Renaissance had not deeply influenced the Iberian peninsula. It had added an element of restlessness to the existing Gothic. This was called the Plateresque style. Like Baroque, the term was borrowed from the silversmith's trade. It implied that a highly complicated sort of architectural ornament had been superimposed upon the simpler outlines of the original Gothic. It never was very thoroughly developed in Spain because the Baroque soon afterwards overtook it and made an end to both the older and the newer Gothic. But in a modified form it reached the other side of the ocean and became responsible for those bizarre façades we find on so many churches in Latin America. And whatever chances it might have had to survive were destroyed by the coming to the throne of King Philip II.

A single man, holding all the power this monarch did, can make and unmake entire forms of art. This poor fanatic—the John Calvin of the Catholic faith—

tried to express himself in one enormous and enormously dreary building—that vast dump of cold gray stone near Madrid known as the Escorial. But even his own devoted subjects could not follow him there and the Escorial remained a solitary example of a style which was eminently fit for the self-imposed prison of a religious maniac but not for human habitation. As soon, therefore, as His Majesty had descended into that crypt where he lay next to the son whose future wife he had married (for in that strange family all things were possible), the example of the Escorial was allowed to be forgotten.

But it would be an exaggeration to say that Spain thereupon became the leader of the Baroque style. The Spaniards were to contribute more than any other people to the spread of the Baroque spirit all over Europe, but their building days were over. For buildings cost money and Spain was bankrupt. A completely mistaken notion about the management of its foreign possessions, a racial pride that removed all non-Spanish elements (both the Moors and the Jews, the hardest-working members of the race) and that completely overlooked the importance of the small farmer in the economic scheme of things—such a country could not hope to survive even while owning all the gold mines of the New World.

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But while economically Spain had ceased to count, it was still to have an enormous influence upon the spiritual life of the world through the sudden appearance of its most picturesque religious leader, the most noble Don Iñigo López de Recalde, better known to us as Saint Ignatius of Loyola.

I have mentioned that the era of the Baroque was dominated by men of peasant origin. Technically speaking, Ignatius was a member of the Spanish nobility and he even received part of his earliest training as a page at the court of Ferdinand and Isabella. But that ancestral castle of Loyola was about as much of a palace as the mansion in La Mancha where the most noble Don Quixote de la Mancha was to see the light of day.

Cured of all earthly ambitions by the misfortunes of his youth and crippled for life by a cannon ball at the siege of Pampeluna, this soldier of the king enrolled under the banner of the Cross and in due course of time became the most determined leader of the forces that were gathering together to reconquer



the souls of men for the one and only Church. The Society of Jesus which he founded was a military organization rather than a religious institution. It despised no weapon whatsoever in its warfare upon the infidels. And as the arts are a most powerful means of evoking and guiding the human emotions, the architect and the painter and the musician were all of them pressed into the service of God.

The architects might be Italians and pupils, perhaps, of the great Lorenzo Bernini, who had embellished St. Peter's in Rome with a fine Baroque frenzy and who in a way may be considered the father of the Baroque style in church building. But the men who approved of the plans and who provided the necessary funds were members of the Society of Jesus and whenever you visit a town in Austria or Poland or Portugal or Bavaria that shows the unmistakable characteristics of the Baroque, a restless desire to impress and overpower at all costs, you will probably discover that it was the work of a Jesuit and ten to one is still popularly known as "the Jesuit church."

But if Spain could no longer afford to build for herself, it could still find enough money to provide its artists with a little canvas and paint and those artists, too, became propagandists of the highest order for the cause for which their poor country was ruining itself.

The earliest and one of the greatest of them all was a foreigner, a Greek from the island of Crete, Dominicos Theotocopulos, known in Rome (where he arrived in 1570) as Domenico Theotocopuli, and called El Greco by the Spaniards who could never have managed that complicated combination of Greek syllables, but who never ceased to regard him as a "foreigner" with all that word implies.

Why, when, or wherefore he moved from Italy to Spain we do not know, but in the year 1575 we find him painting pictures for a church in Toledo and next we hear of him in Madrid, doing an altarpiece for Philip II which the King himself refused to place in his private chapel in the Escorial. El Greco had put high hopes on this work. He had been in constant trouble in Toledo for certain "improprieties" the clerical authorities had discovered in his pictures and such discoveries might lead to a very unpleasant personal encounter with



the Inquisition. The King by buying a picture from him now extended his protecting right hand over the Greek master. But why he would not have it in his private chapel we do not know. Perhaps he did not like it and in that case a lot of people have since then shared His Majesty's feelings. For a love for El Greco is an acquired taste, like a love for the music of the Arabs or the Chinese. The coloring is unlike that seen in the work of any other man but you can soon overcome a slight feeling of monotony. The figures, however, will probably continue to trouble you for quite a long time. The usual explanation is that El Greco, being a Greek, must have been under Byzantine influence. Even though the Byzantine Empire had been destroyed fully a hundred years before Domenico appeared on the scene and his own city of Candia was a Venetian colony at the time of his birth, the ancient Byzantine traditions lingered on for several centuries longer. In Greco's case, however, they were greatly exaggerated by the fact that he seems to have suffered from some ailment which, especially during his later years, prevented him from handling his brush in any other way than that which produced his rather awkward and triangular figures. The sense of *folie de grandeur* which is so typical of everything he did, that upward sweep of a grand seigneur throwing ducats to the beggars outside his coach, would be entirely in keeping with this suspicion.

Such details are not merely a matter of idle gossip. They have often very considerably influenced the art of some great master. Rembrandt's rapidly increasing nearsightedness seriously affected all the etching of his later years. Beethoven's deafness influenced every composition he wrote after 1812. And Pascal would probably have been a much more cheerful philosopher if he had not suffered so severely from facial neuralgia.

However, whatever may have caused El Greco's drawing to look so completely out of gear, it did not seriously interfere with the general state of his health. He lived to a ripe old age and died as one of the most prosperous and esteemed painters of his day, deemed worthy of a funeral "as if he had been a nobleman instead of a painter," as his contemporaries so quaintly observed.

In this he had been only a little less fortunate than another great Spanish artist who not only had a funeral "as if he had been a noble-man" but who





actually had been elevated to that rank before he ceased to paint and then on account of his most valuable services to the state. I now refer to Don Diego Rodriguez de Silva y Velasquez, Velasquez being his mother's maiden name by which, however, he came to be known, according to the pleasant old Spanish custom which allows the mother to be as important in producing offspring as the father.

Young Velasquez was trained for the law that he might succeed his father as one of the legal luminaries of Seville. But having shown marked talent for painting he was sent to a studio where, like most people of genius, he did not learn very much. His teachers, to give them their due, did not amount to a great deal either, but they were good enough to give him a thorough grounding in the elementary principles of their art.

Like Leonardo and Michelangelo and indeed all great artists, he was a veritable mule for work. He lived to be sixty-one and for a great number of years occupied a court position which kept him very busy, the position of chief supervisor of the royal living quarters. This meant that he was not only responsible for the palaces the royal family occupied when at home but that he must also provide suitable rooms for the King and his vast retinue whenever His Majesty went forth upon one of his endless voyages. For the King whom Velasquez served did a great deal of traveling.

Some of it was rather complicated, too. There was the famous occasion in the year 1660, the year, by the way, in which Velasquez died. The daughter of the Spanish King was going to marry King Louis XIV of France. As neither sovereign apparently trusted his neighbor sufficiently well to be willing to set foot on the other fellow's territory, it was arranged that the ceremony should take place on a small island in the middle of a river that separated France from Spain. The royal tents and everything else necessary for this affair, which was the main social event of the century, were entrusted to Velasquez, and the world was full of praise for the way he handled everything. He had even been allowed to be present at the official dinners and receptions!

You have to know your seventeenth century very thoroughly to feel what such an honor meant when the recipient was a mere artist. It was just as if a

modern debutante coming out at a million-dollar party at the Ritz should invite her caterer to come and join her at dinner. Of course, in the case of Velasquez there was one mitigating circumstance. The painter had been duly ennobled by his grateful master. But that operation too had been far from easy. For not only had Velasquez been obliged to prove that there were no traces of Jewish or Moorish blood in the veins of himself or of any of his ancestors, but also that there never had been a suspicion of heresy in his family. Finally—a typically Spanish detail—he must give assurance that none of his people had ever been contaminated by either trade or commerce. When all this had been settled to everybody's complete satisfaction and when it was shown that he himself had never actually sold a picture but had always worked for a salary (like any other court functionary), the patent of nobility was at last granted.

In the National Gallery in London you will see the benefit which this curious little transaction bestowed upon posterity. As a person basking in the royal favor and a nobleman in his own name, Velasquez could now afford to paint that marvelous *Venus and Cupid* which otherwise would undoubtedly have caused him several very uncomfortable interviews with the dignitaries of the Inquisition and which (even if he himself had escaped with his life) would have led to the destruction of the picture. But now he could not be touched, for he was protected by the favor of the King and even the Inquisition was obliged to make halt before his door and treat him with all possible consideration.

It was also the royal favor, which sent him forth upon his second voyage to Italy to buy statues for the Spanish court. I don't know why, but the Spaniards were never very good sculptors. King Philip IV felt that he needed some statues for his royal palace and Velasquez was dispatched to Italy to see what he could get. Being primarily a painter, he acquired a great many works of Titian and Tintoretto and the other great Italians and when the doors of the Vatican were opened to him most graciously (such a close friend of His Spanish Majesty must be received with great politeness) he improved the occasion by painting a picture of Pope Innocent X which is as fine a portrait as any that was ever





painted.

Most of his other pictures had to do either with the royal court or with scenes directly connected with that court—maids of honor, royal buffoons, and hunchbacks of all sorts (these poor little creatures were then kept by the rich as today they keep pet dogs and cats, but as a rule they were not half as well treated), successful generals in the act of conquering cities for their royal master (the famous *Lanzas* or the *Surrender of Breda*), a great many royal wives (the poor ladies had a most unfortunate habit of dying in childbirth), royal children (Don Baltasar Carlos on horseback), royal sculptors (Martinez Montañes), royal admirals, royal ministers (the Count of Olivares) and finally and perhaps the noblest of all his works, *Las Hilanderas*—the spinners of the royal tapestry works. Everything very “royal” as befitted a man who almost every day received a visit from his royal master in his studio in the royal palace and who (according to tradition) had taught enough painting to his royal master to allow the royal hand to smear the cross of the order of Santiago on the self-portrait that Velasquez had included in his picture of Philip’s young daughter Margaret.

This picture I especially recommend to you if you want to understand the atmosphere in which Velasquez worked. Philip IV and his wife are both present, reflected in a convenient mirror. In the fore-ground lovely young girls, dressed in all the splendor and discomfort of royal maids of honor, are trying to amuse the royal offspring, who already seems sadly conscious of the fact that “a Queen of Spain was supposed to have no legs.” But as a final touch, and one which suddenly makes us realize that we are in the world of the Baroque, two most repulsive dwarfs, one female and one male, are standing right in front of the group of children. These were supposed to be ideal little playmates for a Spanish infanta, who some day might be called upon to rule half of the world. For the final results, consult your daily paper and read the news that comes to you from Madrid and Bilbao.

Yet underneath all these absurdities we can discover an idea, and an idea which seemed a highly desirable and an entirely practical one for the people of the Baroque. Murillo and Alonso Cano and Giuseppe Ribera were working to





impress the multitudes with the glories of the Church. Velasquez from his side was bestowing such beauty upon everything connected with the court that all people must surely fall under the spell of the Royal Majesty. Yet somehow or other his pictures failed to accomplish this, for there was no letup in the violence with which the Dutch subjects of the Spanish monarch continued to fight for their political and religious independence. They had already so successfully defeated His Majesty's armies and navies that the northern part of their country had become one of the most powerful champions of the entire Protestant cause. The southern part, however, remained faithful to the Church. This division was to have great influence upon the art of the two countries, which was a curious development, for until then there had hardly been any artists in the north, and such young men as had been ambitious to learn the trade of the painter or the musician had invariably gone south to study with a Flemish teacher. From the middle of the sixteenth century it was to be the other way around. Surely the arts set us some strange puzzles!

During the fifteenth century Dutch art amounted to nothing and Flemish art was at the head of the procession. During the sixteenth century the two were almost equal, but the Flemings were still in the lead. During the seventeenth century the Dutch shot far ahead of their southern competitors. During the eighteenth century, neither of them amounted to anything. If you know the answer, please let me have it.

The fact that oil painting was invented in Flanders had given the Flemings a head start of almost a full century over their northern neighbors. The building craze of the Middle Ages had long since spent itself. The old Gothic churches were slowly preparing themselves to serve as targets for modern artillery practice, a fate that seems to await all public edifices of the old continent. The prosperity of such cities as Bruges and Ghent was gone. The old, old story! Capital and labor fighting each other until, like the Kilkenny cats, they had completely destroyed each other. But a great deal of accumulated capital still lay hidden away in those ornamental chests with seven locks that had been the pride of every medieval household. And since pictures are one of the most