

The background of the book cover is a detailed, close-up photograph of a dark green fabric with intricate white and gold embroidery. The embroidery features large, swirling acanthus leaves, delicate floral motifs, and clusters of pearls or beads hanging from the fabric. The lighting highlights the texture and depth of the needlework.

The culture of excess Stephen Calloway

BAROQUE BYBONE

PHAIDON

The culture of excess **Stephen Calloway**

BAROQUE BOOK ONE



For Oriel

Phaidon Press Limited
Regent's Wharf
All Saints Street
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The Canning Jewel

Baroque pearls mounted in gold and enamel.
Probably of Italian manufacture, c.1560
Named after an early English owner, the
Canning Jewel is a quintessential example of
the kind of courtly jewels made by Mannerist
and early Baroque goldsmiths in Italy,
Flanders and Southern Germany in
the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to
display *barocci* or naturally deformed pearls.



The first objects ever to be called 'baroque' were the bizarre irregular natural pearls so highly prized by collectors in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries both for their weird beauty and great rarity. The finest became the jealously hoarded treasures of the 'cabinets of curiosities' of princely and noble collectors, wrought by cunning goldsmiths into exquisite jewels in which the magical nacreous form of the pearl became the writhing body of a sea-monster or a demigod. But by a strange etymological quirk, 'baroque', coined from *barocca*, the word used to describe such pearls, came to have a curious variety of meanings: not merely strong and convoluted, but also extravagant and whimsical, grotesque, and even coarse and vulgar.

It was in this last, pejorative sense that the word was first used of the new and distinctive style of building and ornament that emerged originally in Italy, and rapidly spread throughout Europe and even to the Americas as the seventeenth century progressed. Historically, as a style in architecture, decoration and the decorative arts, the Baroque grew out of the intellectual conceits and bizarre visual excesses of the Mannerist phase of the late Renaissance, bringing a new and unparalleled vigour equally to religious and secular art and architecture. The Catholic church

expressed its spiritual ideals and vast temporal resources in the splendour of Baroque imagery, whilst throughout the century princes and grandees displayed their wealth, power and taste by the building and furnishing of enormous Baroque 'palaces of art', in the creation of gardens filled with statuary, grottoes and pavilions, and in the formation of magnificent collections. At Versailles, the greatest of all royal palaces, Louis XIV made opulence the most overt and unmistakable symbol of his kingship, whilst by enforcing the sumptuary edicts of the court upon his rich but unruly nobles, he made it also no less potent an instrument of his power. Most of our notions of *grand luxe* derive from this extraordinary milieu in which even minor aristocrats and the rising merchant classes sought to emulate the splendours of court in their dress and in the architecture and decoration of their houses.

These seventeenth-century ideals have proved remarkably enduring over the last three hundred years, and spread across the globe. Every Northern culture has its own version of the Baroque, more or less understood, whilst the Dutch merchants taught the style to Chinese porcelain painters and the Portuguese left its traces as far away as Goa. South American bishops espoused the Baroque, and

Versailles

The *Chambre du Roi*, 1701

Conceived as a grandiose expression of royal taste and power Louis XIV's bed-chamber has remained the touchstone of baroque opulence and the epitome of *grand luxe*.

Villa Palagonia

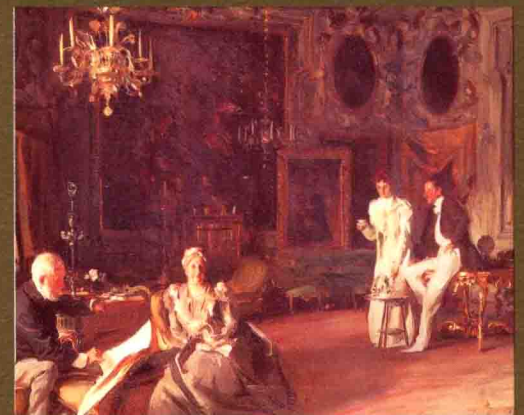
Bagheria, Sicily, mid-eighteenth century. Ballroom details

The Villa Palagonia, with its celebrated mirror-ceilinged ballroom, is the most eccentric of a group of Baroque noblemen's palaces built in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries outside Palermo, as summer retreats for the court. Saecheverell Sitwell was fascinated by the way in which the faceted panels of looking-glass painted with *trompe l'oeil* baroque ornaments multiplied the reflections of those who passed beneath.

Palazzo Barbaro

An Interior in Venice, 1897-99, by John Singer Sargent

Sargent's conversation piece depicting his friends the Curtis family in the grand *salone* of the Palazzo Barbaro signals a new attitude to the faded grandeur of baroque Italy. Henry James, another of the family's artistic friends, wrote his novel *The Wings of the Dove* whilst staying in this magnificent Venetian palace.



R. Wenig

King Ludwig Sleighing at Night from Neuschwanstein to Linderhof, 1880

One of Ludwig's greatest delights was to rush across the moonlit landscape of mountains and lakes which divided his gothic fortress at Neuschwanstein from the yet more outrageous baroque fantasy of his pavilion at Linderhof. In the carved and gilded sleigh, lit like a Venetian barge with lanterns, the King sat wrapped in wolf furs and embroidered velvet. The four white horses were controlled by postillions dressed in eighteenth-century livery.



James Pryde

The Derelict, c.1909

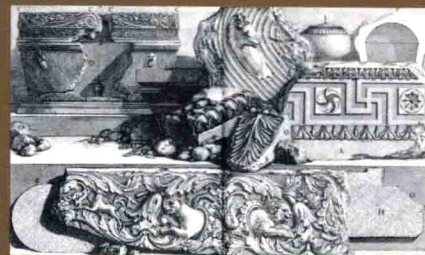
After the early success of his graphic work of the 1890s, Pryde's vision was irrevocably changed by a visit to Holyrood Palace in Edinburgh. Obsessed by the image of a dilapidated, late seventeenth-century Baroque bed, at one time reputed to have belonged to Mary Queen of Scots, Pryde conceived a series of twelve pictures, *The Human Comedy*, in which the bed became the symbol of life from birth to death. A thirteenth scene, *The Death of the Great Bed*, ironically remained unfinished upon the artist's easel at his death in 1941.



Giovanni Battista Piranesi

Plate from Antichità Romane de' Tempi della Repubblica e de' Primi Imperatori, Rome, 1748

Piranesi's vision of ancient Rome was the product not merely of an intense archaeological curiosity but also of his essentially baroque imagination. His selection of details such as these fragments of the sarcophagus discovered in the tomb of Cecilia Metella reveals his appreciation of the opulence of late Roman architecture and ornament.

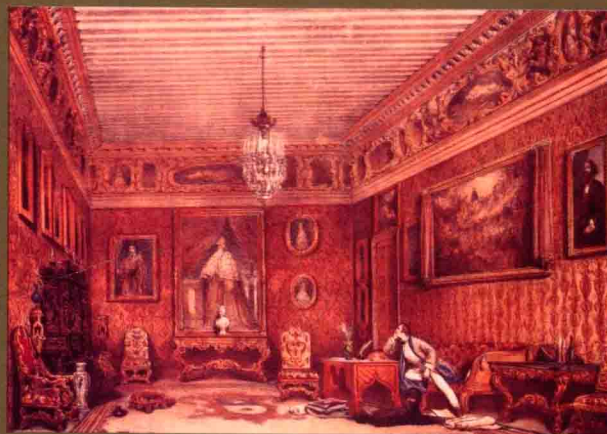


Lord Byron in Venice

Byron in the Palazzo Mocenigo, Venice

Colour lithograph after the painting by John Scarlett Davis, 1820s

Tired of the restraints of life in England, and enjoying the excitement of Italy, Byron decided to stay for some time in Venice; early in 1818 he leased the Palazzo Mocenigo, a grand but sombre setting in which he indulged his fantasies, talked long into the night with Shelley, kept assignations with his mistresses and wrote much of *Don Juan*. When he was out, visitors bribed his servants to allow them a glimpse of the baroque rooms and the poet's strange menagerie of dogs, birds and monkeys.



Monsu Desiderio

Fantastic ruins with St Augustine and the Child, early seventeenth century

Born François de Nomé in Metz, Monsu (c. 1593-1644) worked for most of his life in Naples, where his feverish imagination was fired by that city's distinctively bizarre brand of the Baroque. His nervous drawing style and fondness for theatrical light effects, together with a delight in ruined architecture, make him an important precursor of the Neo-Romantic painters of the Thirties and Forties such as Eugène Bernan.

Giovanni Battista Piranesi

*Second frontispiece to Volume II of *Antichità Romane*, 1748*

Piranesi prefaced each of the great folio volumes of his views of the remains of the buildings and monuments of ancient Rome with elaborate double-page architectural *capricci* in his most exuberant manner. The subsequent influence of these baroque visions of classical grandeur has been considerable; not least upon the makers of Hollywood epics.

John Piper

The Grotto, Montegufoni. Pencil, ink and wash, late 1940s

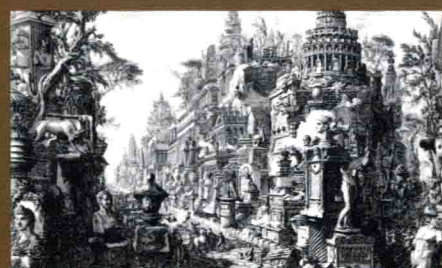
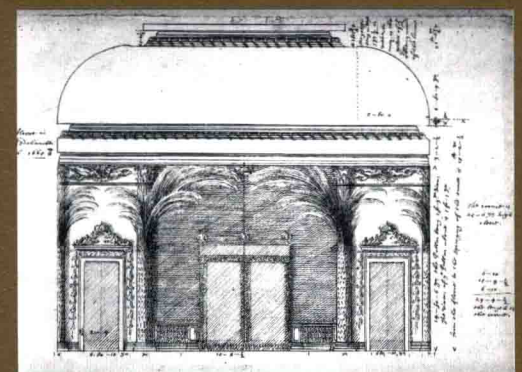
Piper's illustration, published in the fourth volume of Osbert Sitwell's autobiography, *Laughter in the Next Room*, 1949, shows one of the main figure groups of the baroque grotto of the old castle; it represents the goddess Diana stoned by peasants, in shell- and rock-work.

John Webb

Design for a bed alcove for the bed chamber of Charles II at Greenwich Palace, 1665

Webb (1611-72) was the most talented follower of Inigo Jones. His designs for the interiors of the great Restoration palace which the king began at Greenwich remained unexecuted when work ground to a halt.

This design for a royal bed enclosed by a balustrade is in the French Baroque style, but the palm motifs introduce a far more exotic and theatrical note. The design was later taken as the basis for Lord Spencer's room in his mid-eighteenth-century London town-palace, Spencer House.



clung to the style long after the fashion was dead in Europe; not much later, North American industrialists and rail-road millionaires began to revive it again in their enthusiasm for excess.

It was at the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, that the first stirrings of that revival had become evident. Lord Byron, exiled in Italy, had himself portrayed seated in the great gilded salon of the Palazzo Mocenigo in Venice; almost dwarfed by the grandeur, he seems to epitomize the Romantics' new interest in the Baroque for its overwhelming scale, its love of imbalance, its quality of striving and for its palpable sense of danger.

Only a decade later, but in a rather more hard-headed vein, the aging but astute old Duke of Wellington observed that the Baroque and Rococo were excellent styles for those seeking to express their grandeur through decoration, for the simple reason that upstarts could never hope to copy such effects cheaply. The true costs of recreating the Baroque could be staggering. Poor mad King Ludwig II of Bavaria, the Dream King, lost in his fantasies of grandeur, spent every penny of his fortune in vast schemes of building. He built castles, grottoes and a Trianon at Linderhof with a baroque formal garden

high in the Alps. Finally, his obsession with the grandeur of his idol, the 'Sun King' Louis XIV, led him to build a copy of the Versailles Hall of Mirrors, even bigger than the real thing, in his palace at Herrenchiemsee on an island in a lake fifty miles from his capital at Munich.

Though the association of the Baroque with excess was well understood by the august Victorian and Edwardian creators of 'bankers' baroque' or the great American robber barons, the rediscovery of the essential eccentricity and bizarre nature of the Baroque, and the recapturing of its all-but-forgotten whimsicality, has been a phenomenon of the modern era. In 1924, Sacheverell Sitwell, in his extraordinary book *Southern Baroque Art*, was the first to reveal the wilder artistic sensibility that lay behind the mask of architectural grandeur; whilst in the previous year his elder brother Osbert had perceptively written in his introduction to the catalogue of the Burlington Fine Arts Club's pioneering exhibition of Baroque art held in London: 'The Baroque epoch was, in truth, an age of experiment, and for that reason alone, the present generation should find in those new stirrings much of interest and sympathy.' In the present century the baroque impulse has taken many forms, but it is the compelling story of the rediscovery of the