

THE HISTORY OF DECORATIVE ARTS

CLASSICISM AND THE BAROQUE
IN EUROPE



Edited by
ALAIN GRUBER

The History of Decorative Arts



Classicism and the Baroque in Europe

UNDER THE DIRECTION OF ALAIN GRUBER, *Doctor of the History of Art*

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY

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TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY JOHN GOODMAN

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Folding screen, Jacques de Lajoue, c. 1735–40 (see page 359).

JACKET BACK

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FRONTISPIECE

Detail of a *cabinet d'apparat*.

Paris, Louvre

With its Boulle marquetry and rich gilt bronze fittings, this piece perfectly exemplifies the fusion of Baroque and classical idioms characteristic of Italian and French productions of the period. Within the frame—and presented as if it were a secular host—is a relief figure of Louis XIV as the Gallic Hercules, wearing a wig but otherwise dressed like a Roman warrior. This cartouche, defined by moldings, is supported by lion's feet sprouting acanthus and is surmounted by a trophy of arms. The cabinet's surfaces feature marquetry work of pewter and brass arrayed in delicate configurations of acanthus rinceaux against a tortoiseshell ground.

The fittings are all cast in forms with ancient pedigrees that appealed to classicizing French taste.

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— Preface —

This volume, which treats the period between 1630 and 1760, is the second in a set of three that examine the history of ornament and its application in the European decorative arts.

In France the discipline of art history is relatively young. Certain areas of its inquiry, while long the focus of research in German- and English-speaking nations, have been broached by the French only rarely and selectively, and such is the case with the field under consideration here. Initially, the ambitious undertaking embodied in this project is likely to produce a certain disorientation, for it is premised on an understanding of the evolution of the European decorative arts that goes against the contemporary interpretive grain. In France, and perhaps elsewhere as well, the term *ornament* lends itself to confusion. There is no real consensus among the interested communities—whether professional or amateur—as to its meaning. This lack of precision is a relatively recent phenomenon, however; it seems to have developed in the 1930s, when ornament as defined here lost much of its importance. The following introduction will examine the meanings ascribed to the word during the one-hundred-and-thirty-year period studied in this volume.

It should be self-evident that the work of art can be broken down into three essential elements: form, decoration or ornament, and execution. This taxonomy, which prevailed for centuries and even millennia, is not easily mapped onto contemporary artistic production, or onto the artistic sensibility as presently conceived. But it remains fundamental to any adequate appreciation of works produced in the past.

Form is relatively easy to define: it is judged in accordance with criteria of proportion that are as applicable to architectural volumes as to the shape of a snuffbox or the compositional equilibrium of a painting.

For centuries, execution has been the part that led us to appreciate an artist's craft or virtuosity. The methods and techniques acquired from teachers, refined during an apprenticeship and perfected in the course of a career, determined assessments of a production's quality. Often, and especially in the case of luxury objects, the use of rare and sometimes intractable materials was also taken into account.

Ornament consists of everything that adds to the basic forms a note of elegance, a decorative touch that distinguishes basic tectonic construction from artistic creation. A paradigmatic example often cited in art-theoretical treatises is the difference between a column and a simple post. The latter, however perfectly proportioned, becomes a column only when it culminates in a decorated capital.

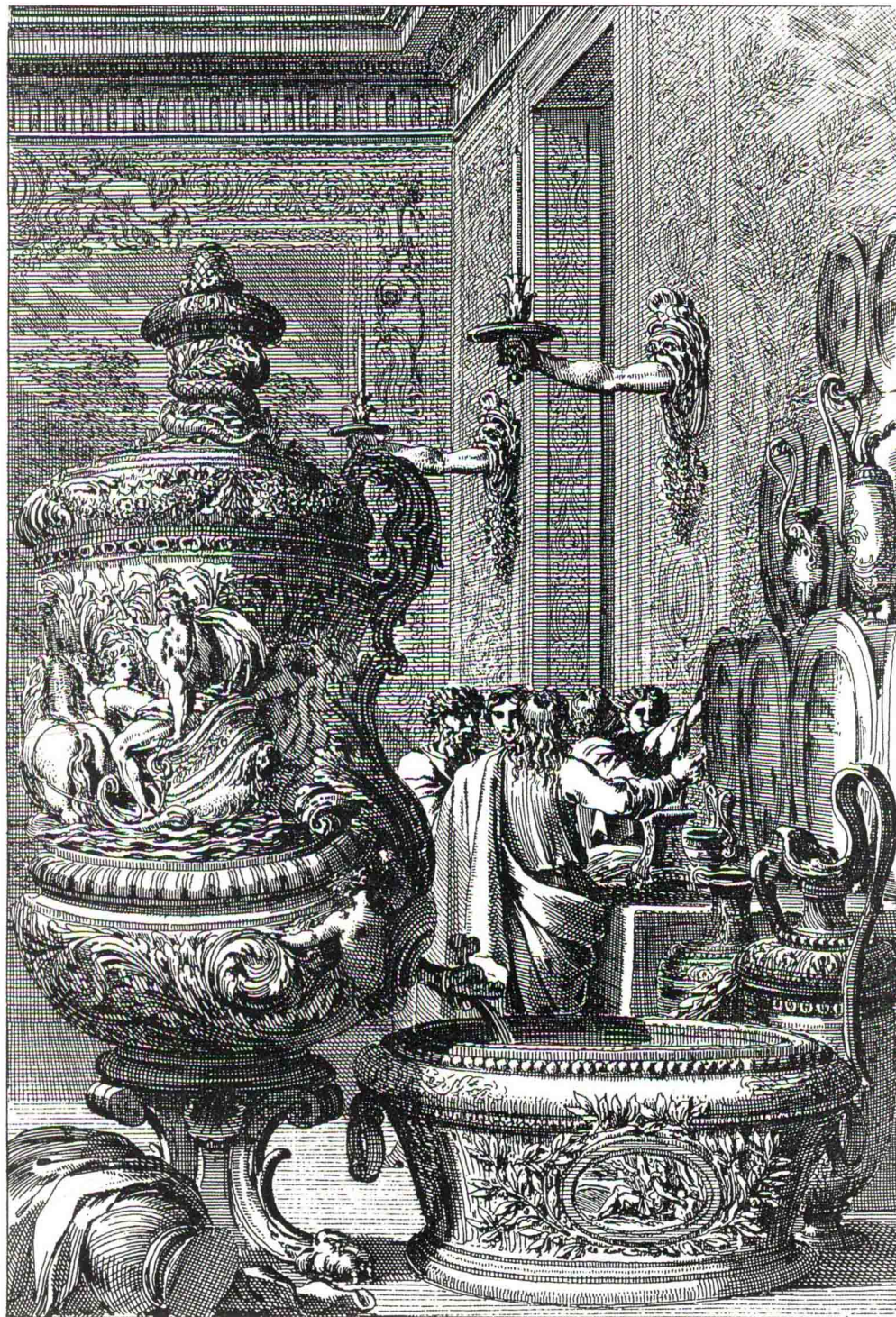
Each of the three volumes in this series consists of five chapters devoted to principal ornamental currents of the period, with an introduction that presents historical and artistic information about the period. Given the richness of the material, the only way to avoid chaos was to be very selective and to impose a strong organizational scheme, and I am fully aware that many will disagree with some of the choices made

here. By way of compensation, each essay is lavishly illustrated with images selected by the authors to elaborate on and reinforce the ideas presented in the texts.

The authors were asked to examine the diffusion and use, on an international scale, of specific sets of decorative motifs devised and engraved by ornamentalists, but each was left free to choose the analytic approach best suited to the problems posed by the particular motif or style.

The reader is thus given two modes of access to the subject: a somewhat theoretical one in the essays, and a more concrete one in the carefully juxtaposed images and accompanying explanatory captions. Hopefully, this arrangement will encourage readers to discern connections on their own, and prompt them to take a heightened interest in the objects that surround them: if we have furthered a richer understanding of the vicissitudes of artistic creation and a fuller awareness of the intricate networks of influence incessantly playing over the field of the decorative arts, then our goal will have been achieved.

Alain Gruber



Engraving from a set entitled *Les Vases*,
Jean Le Pautre, published by Pierre
Mariette, 1657.

Private collection

The principal elements here—a large urn from which liquid flows into a basin—are presented in a decor that, while inflected with antique elements (such as the togas worn by the figures), is in fact a sumptuous Baroque interior. On the walls,

decorated with tapestries featuring rich borders dominated by grotesque motifs, are eccentric candelabra. A mixture of different decorative styles is displayed here not only in the human arms emerging from the auricular lion jaws of the candelabra but also in the vases on the buffet. In the foreground ensemble, acanthus rinceaux are combined with garlands of flowers and figured reliefs.



Large mug, partially gilded silver,
unidentified metalworker, Riga, c. 1680.

Private collection

In accordance with a formula typical of opulent drinking vessels from the Baltic region, this monumental beer mug is mounted on three ball feet that resemble pomegranates but are here composed of acanthus leaves wrapped around

their seed pods. Another of these balls serves as a thumb-piece for the cover, which is decorated with a two-headed eagle, emblem of the free Hanseatic city of Riga. The cup of the vessel is encrusted with an elegant rinceau pattern composed of acanthus and fanciful variations on real acanthus blossoms. Plumes of acanthus are delicately inscribed on the sides of the large, solidly constructed handle.

Introduction



In 1957 Victor L. Tapié published a book entitled *Baroque et Classicisme* that met with great success. The ideas advanced in it were new to France, where the term *Baroque* still retained certain pejorative connotations with which *classicism* was unencumbered. In the interim, French art historians have come to accept his point of view, first articulated by Jakob Burckhardt and thereafter given more sophisticated form by Cornelius Gurlitt, Heinrich Wölfflin, Werner Weisbach, A. E. Brinckmann, Fiske Kimball, and several other German- and English-speaking scholars.

Consistent with the values of the era, Tapié's brilliant and original study was limited to architecture, painting, and sculpture, omitting the decorative arts. It is with the intention of filling this gap as well as in hopes of dispelling the longstanding antipathy between these two categories that we decided to subtitle the present volume "Classicism and the Baroque." For in the domain of the decorative arts the two stylistic tendencies managed to cohabit quite comfortably, even in countries renowned for their supposed aversion to anything touched by the Baroque spirit.

The Baroque loves everything that is theatrical, fantastic, inventive, and luxurious: ample forms; animated movement; lines that are curved, undulating, and broken; polychromy; rich and varied materials; artifice and opulence. In France it was closely linked to the Italianizing taste that held sway at court in the mid-seventeenth century, generating a line of development in the decorative arts that continued more or less unimpeded from 1630 to 1760. However, this current was in dialogue with opposing tastes generated by another France, that of a bourgeoisie sufficiently prosperous and cultivated to impose its own preferences. This class was wedded to tradition, suspicious of originality, drawn to simplicity and even austerity, attached to realism and rationalism, order and unity, renouncing all unnecessary ornament, and thus its natural affinities were with a more classical idiom. While the so-called major arts have usually adhered to classical precepts, the decorative arts are by their nature more Baroque in spirit. The international success of French art in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is probably due in large



Candlestand top in the style of
André-Charles Boulle, c. 1680.

Paris, Musée Carnavalet

This small octagonal top of a stand intended to support a candlestick is decorated with ribbon interlace configurations, alternately angular and curved as in arabesque designs. Pewter ribbons intermingle with copper acanthus florets and rinceaux set into a tortoiseshell ground. Furniture of this type was intended for the most sumptuous surroundings, and was already extremely rare in the period.

part to the remarkable success with which it combined these two apparently incompatible vocabularies, consistently attaining a satisfying formal equilibrium.

Artistic movements are inextricable from historical events, and genius can function only in circumstances favorable to its development. Indeed, such conditions are crucial in the decorative arts, which are intimately shaped by the environment in which they are intended to give pleasure. The political circumstances in Europe around 1630 reflected the instability that had been pervasive there for more than a century. Incessant religious struggles that masked other, more narrowly social conflicts had engulfed all of northern Europe in a wave of blood and destruction that swept across the Holy Roman Empire from 1618 to 1648, precipitating its decline. Only the extent of the havoc wrought by the Thirty Years' War can explain the extraordinary outburst of creativity that followed upon the Treaty of Westphalia. Despite an uncertain future, a taste for embellishment of the everyday world, for luxurious dress and jewelry, became widespread, and paintings, books, and objets d'art were collected with frenzied enthusiasm.

The extensive reconfiguration of territorial boundaries effected at this time, which created Europe essentially as we know it today, was rife with implications for the artistic sphere. In the Medieval period and the Counter-Reformation, art had functioned as an instrument of religion; it now became a powerful political tool. The personalities holding the reins of government began to play a determinative role, controlling important commissions and so shaping taste. While patrons protected artists, they also kept them in a state of dependence. Beginning in the Renaissance, the most admired creative figures were less subject to the constraints imposed by this protectorship arrangement, especially in Italy, but in the rest of Europe it gradually became the norm. The famous quarrel between Gian Lorenzo Bernini, summoned to Paris in 1665, and the entourage of the young Louis XIV provides an emblematic example of the different mind sets then typical of Italy and France. The celebrated architect-sculptor had been asked to submit a design for completing the Louvre, but, seeing that it was greeted with less than the beatific enthusiasm to which he was accustomed, he returned to Italy in a huff. Bernini was in a much more privileged position than most decorative artists, whose works were regarded as nothing more than the realization of ideas generated by ornamentalists. Conditions could be even worse for some of them, if we can believe reports indicating that porcelain craftsmen working for Augustus II (1670–1733), grand elector of Saxony and king of Poland (and called Augustus the Strong), were held in quasi-detention.

From 1630 to 1760, France managed to impose its artistic hegemony on all of Europe. It owed this dominance to a few strong personalities who came from Italy or were deeply indebted to the Italian tradition. In 1612 Marie de Médicis (widow of King Henry IV and regent for her son Louis XIII) commissioned a sumptuous new residence, the Luxembourg Palace, to be modeled after the Palazzo Pitti in Florence, where she had spent her childhood. Ten years later, in choosing an artist to execute an ambitious painting cycle for the palace, she turned to Rubens, who was Flemish but whose sensibility had been shaped by his exposure to the small, luxurious courts of northern Italy. The queen mother surrounded