

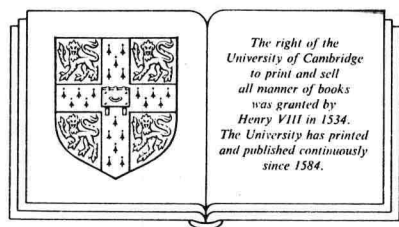
*The Cambridge Introduction To Art*  
**THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY**

MADELEINE & ROWLAND MAINSTONE



# The Seventeenth Century

MADELEINE & ROWLAND  
MAINSTONE



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## Preface

To anyone who likes to use their eyes, the art of the seventeenth century has much to offer. Great masterpieces of painting, sculpture, and architecture were produced. The artists were superb storytellers and very skilful at arousing emotions, suggesting character, or conveying a mood. Different artists told the same story in different ways or saw different things in the people whose portraits they painted or the landscapes they knew. But they all spoke very directly to those who would see their work, so that we can often read it almost as we would read a book.

Perhaps the best approach, if we are coming to this art for the first time, is to allow it to speak directly to us in this way. The illustrations in this book have been carefully selected to allow us to do just that, as far as is possible without standing in front of the painting or sculpture or building itself. Of course we should also take every chance we get to see the originals. In front of a painting we can try to figure out what the subject is, what the people in it are doing, why they are there at all. In front of or inside a building we can ask what effect it has on us and why. Just doing this – even with the help of the illustrations here – can be interesting and will allow us to judge how far the work still ‘speaks’ directly to us after three hundred or more years.

Reading a work of art is, however, not very different from reading a book – or a poem. It is an art at which we become better with practice and which becomes easier when we know something of the ‘language’ and of the artist’s intentions. The text of this book has been written to help us to acquire this art. It tells something about the background against which the artists worked, about what they were asked to do, and about what they themselves were trying to do. We also see how they achieved some of their effects and learn to identify the particular qualities of different works.

Each chapter explores a theme that was important in the art of the century – themes like its development from the art of the previous

## Preface

century; the search for dramatic realism; colour and movement; the more restrained approach favoured by other artists; the portraits that give us an unrivalled insight into the characters and pretensions of people of the time; and different attitudes to the landscape and the surroundings of everyday life. After looking at the illustrations we can, if we like, go straight to those themes that interest us most – or even to the discussions of individual works – before reading the book as a whole to gain a more balanced idea of the achievements of the century. Explanations of terms that may be unfamiliar and further notes on the principal artists mentioned will be found at the end.

The book is intended only as an introduction, so some suggestions for further reading are made at the end. It was Madeleine Mainstone's hope, in writing it, to share with her readers – as she had so successfully shared with those to whom she lectured while Keeper of Education at the Victoria and Albert Museum – her own enthusiasm and deep love for the great art of this century. Unfortunately she was already a victim of cancer when she began the book. She died without being able to finish it, but not before she had written many marvellous and moving descriptions of individual paintings and pieces of sculpture – many of the descriptions in chapters 2 and 3, and most of those in chapters 4 to 7. It has fallen to me to fill in the main gaps, to sketch in backgrounds, and to write the concluding chapter and most of the introduction. This I have tried to do in the same spirit, as one of the last tributes I can make to her who shared her life with me for so long and to whom I owe so much in so many ways. Two other people must be mentioned – Anne Boyd of the Cambridge University Press, whose idea this series of books was and Patricia Hurford, a personal friend. I am sure that Madeleine would wish me to thank them on her behalf for their continued encouragement and help at a difficult time. To her thanks I should like to add my own for their further encouragement, without which I should have been reluctant to accept that mine should be the *summa manus*.

ROWLAND MAINSTONE  
St Albans, April 1980

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# I Introduction

The seventeenth century saw a marvellous upsurge of artistic activity. It was the age of giants like Bernini and Rubens, Claude and Poussin, Rembrandt and Velazquez, and of many other masters of almost equal stature even if they are less well known today. It was also a confident and optimistic age, at least in those centres that were most productive. There were patrons and artists who could think and act on a grand scale. And there was little of the fear that we sometimes have today of appealing directly to the emotions of the viewer.

To the art of this period we now normally give the name Baroque. That art was not all-of-a-piece. Each great master had his own style. Such individual differences in style were reflected in broader differences between the arts of different countries – between, for instance, the art of Rome in the early part of the century and the later art of France or Holland. But artists in France and Holland and elsewhere kept in touch with those in Rome, and they all shared a keen interest in the art of the Renaissance and in that of ancient Rome. This meant that there were also important similarities.

Baroque art began in Rome, just as Renaissance art had begun in Florence. It began in the service of the Catholic Church and of wealthy princes of the Church. When we have seen how this came about, we can compare some of the works of art themselves with earlier works. This will give a first idea of some of the most typical characteristics of the art. Later in the book we shall see something of the differences of style that developed during the century.

## EARLY SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ROME: THE CHURCH TRIUMPHANT

In the years immediately after 1527 few can have seen any real prospect of Rome becoming again the artistic capital of the Western



world or of the Catholic Church and the papacy being largely responsible for this revival. In 1527 the city had been sacked by a large army of Spanish mercenaries at a time when the Church was already under strong attack from reformers like Luther. There was great destruction and many of the inhabitants who had escaped death but lost their homes went elsewhere. Yet, for those who stayed, the need to rebuild and restore the economy seems to have provided the same sort of spur to action as we have seen in countries devastated by more recent wars.

The Church fought back by reforming itself. Some of the initiative was taken by saintly and highly competent individuals – like St Ignatius who founded the influential missionary and teaching Society of Jesus (commonly known as the Jesuits), St Francis Xavier who was an early member of the Society and a missionary in the east, St Philip Neri who founded the Oratorians, and St Theresa who reformed the Carmelite Order. In 1542 Pope Paul III summoned a council of the whole Church. This Council of Trent, after sitting intermittently over almost twenty years, reaffirmed and clarified all the basic Catholic beliefs and tightened and codified the practices of the Church. There was to be no compromise with the Protestant Lutherans, Calvinists, and others like them.

The mood of confident defiance that animated the council was better expressed by the majestic Christ of Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*, completed shortly before it opened, than by any work of painting or sculpture of the later part of the sixteenth century. This was not because the council had been iconoclastic as had some of the Protestants. It had not sought, as they had, to banish paintings or statues of Christ or the saints from churches. It had, on the contrary, approved such representations for the instruction of the faithful. But the emphasis was initially on buildings.

Work continued on the rebuilding of the old basilica of St Peter's, the dome being completed in 1590. Large new churches were built for, among others, the Jesuits and the Oratorians. And, towards the end of the century under Pope Sixtus V, the city itself was replanned as we see it today – with long straight streets connecting focal points adjacent to important churches. Each focal point was marked by a fountain or an antique obelisk. It was the declared aim of Sixtus V to make the city once more a worthy capital, a worthy Christian

Michelangelo Buonarroti,  
detail of Christ from *The  
Last Judgement*, 1536–41,  
fresco, Sistine Chapel,  
Rome.



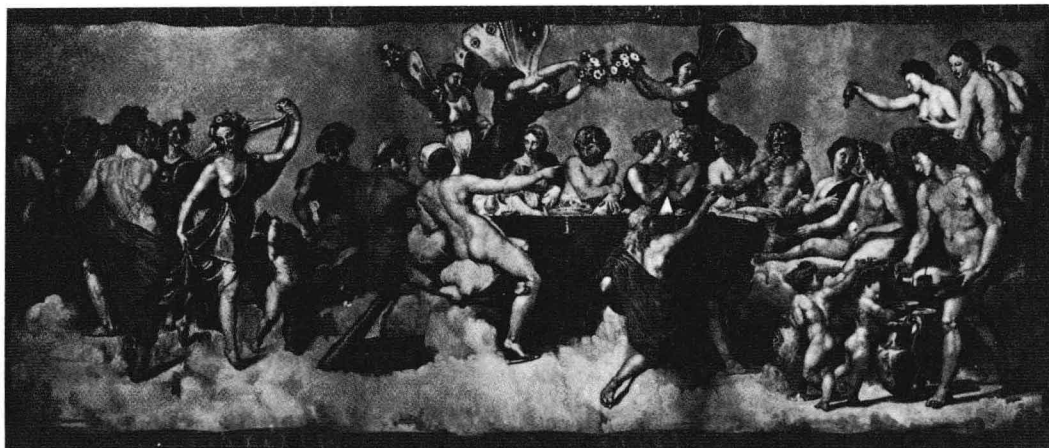
successor to pagan Imperial Rome. To help achieve it, surviving ancient monuments were freely plundered or adapted.

By the early seventeenth century there was no more need for defiance. The Church had triumphed and there were now plentiful commissions for new altarpieces and many other kinds of work. This made Rome a magnet for leading artists from the whole of Italy and from the Low Countries, France, and Spain as well. Much of their work had a deeply religious content, whether it reinterpreted old themes or explored new ones such as the lives of some of the reforming saints mentioned above – men and women who had died only recently and who continued to inspire many. Indeed many of the artists were themselves deeply religious men. But there were also commissions for non-religious works for the decoration of palaces and villas. Neither the artists nor their patrons seem to have felt any inconsistency between their Christian faith and a delight in all that life had to offer. So they were not afraid to turn also to the rich legacy of pagan myths that had been passed on by the humanists of the Renaissance.

#### FROM RENAISSANCE TO BAROQUE ART: PAINTING

These pagan myths – stories of the gods of ancient Greece and Rome – had often been chosen as subjects for paintings, sculpture, or for palace decorations in the later decades of the Renaissance. One such decorative scheme was that carried out by Raphael and his assistants in the suburban villa of a rich banker, Agostino Chigi, in 1516. There, in a room opening to the garden, the *Marriage Feast of Cupid and Psyche* was painted on the flat centre of the ceiling as if on a tapestry stretched as a temporary awning beneath an open sky.

In 1595 this villa, now known as the Villa Farnesina, had passed into the hands of the young Cardinal Oduardo Farnese. The cardinal had also inherited the family palace on the other side of the Tiber, the Palazzo Farnese, and its superb collection of marble statues found among the ruins of ancient Rome. He asked Annibale Carracci, a painter from Bologna, to decorate the ceiling of the large dining room of this palace with what might be regarded as an early



above  
Raphael, *Marriage Feast of Cupid and Psyche*, 1516, fresco, Villa Farnesina, Rome.

right  
Gallery of the Palazzo Farnese, Rome, showing Annibale Carracci's ceiling fresco.





Annibale Carracci, *The Triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne*, 1597–1600, detail from ceiling fresco, Palazzo Farnese, Rome.

Baroque counterpart to Raphael's decoration – with scenes from the lives of the gods as described by Ovid.

Annibale, with a larger surface to cover, adopted a more complex scheme than Raphael's. He imagined that, instead of the actual ceiling, there was a balustrade above the cornice, and that the space of the room opened out further above this balustrade with glimpses, even, of the open sky. His painted sky can be seen in each corner. Elsewhere the real architecture of the room is shown as continuing upwards to support a second higher cornice that is only partly visible. This imaginary upward continuation is richly decorated with carved figures and bronze roundels, all rendered in paint and made more convincing by nude youths painted in true flesh colours as if they were sitting or comfortably kneeling on the true cornice in front of the balustrade. The main scenes of the lives of the gods were set within this architectural framework as if they were framed pictures.

The picture in the centre of the ceiling shows Bacchus and Ariadne triumphantly riding in a chariot drawn by leopards and

goats and preceded by a fat drunken Silenus sitting on an ass. He is supported by happy naked youths making music and dancing tipsily. A satyr and a maenad recline in the lower corners and enhance the feeling of depth as the sunlit procession moves forward against a natural landscape. The overall mood is an exuberant gaiety.

This gaiety, the sense of depth that is conveyed, the realism of the painting, and the sense of movement are some of the characteristics that were to become typical of much Baroque painting. None of them is present to the same extent in Raphael's ceiling. Notice, for instance, the relatively static poses of Raphael's figures and the way in which they are lined up before us almost as a flat frieze. We cannot, however, credit Annibale alone with all these innovations. They had also appeared by this time in Venetian painting, which Annibale knew well.

To do justice to the Venetians, we can compare two religious paintings – a large altarpiece, *The Assumption of the Virgin*, painted by Titian in 1516–18 for the Frari Church in Venice, and another of the same subject painted by Annibale's brother Agostino in about 1592.

If we set aside the fact that Titian shows us rather more, with God the Father waiting at the top to receive the Virgin and an angel beside Him holding a crown to be placed on the Virgin's head, what differences in character are there? Most obviously, perhaps, there is a greater unity between the elements of Agostino's picture. There is a more continuous flow of movement between the figures, just as there is in Annibale's *Bacchus and Ariadne*. But there is also a stronger contrast between the figures, a contrast which makes a strong impact and arouses our emotions. We may say that Agostino's picture is more dramatic, so that we feel more readily drawn into the action. These also were to become common characteristics of Baroque art. We must however beware of saying that Agostino's is therefore the better picture. In the arts, gain in one direction often means loss in another, and we may today find Titian's version the more profound and ultimately the more moving. This is partly a matter of our own temperament and partly a matter of the two artists' abilities to achieve what they set out to do. What is important to us here is that it was Agostino's approach that better satisfied the



above  
Titian, *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1516–18, oil on panel, 690 × 360 cm, S. Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice.



above right  
Agostino Carracci, *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1592, Galleria, Bologna.

temperaments of the Catholic faithful of the seventeenth century. In other respects, such as the realism of treatment of the individual figures and the use of colour, there is less difference between the two versions. Here Agostino had learnt from Titian as Rubens, in particular, was to do later.

#### SCULPTURE AND ARCHITECTURE

These Baroque characteristics can also be seen to a large extent in sculpture and architecture. Naturally they are not seen in quite the same way and they did not appear so clearly until a little later. The three artists in whose work they then appeared – Bernini, Borromini, and Pietro da Cortona – were not even born until the closing years of the sixteenth century, and architecture has always been an art in which change takes longer to achieve because of the time it takes to build.

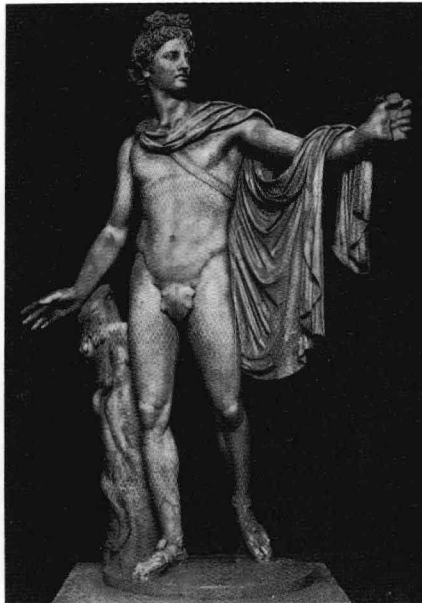
Direct comparisons can now be made not only with Renaissance

art, but also with the sculpture and architecture of ancient Rome and, to a lesser extent, of ancient Greece – with what is known as classical art. Little remained of classical painting. But much did remain, and much still remains, of the sculpture and buildings of ancient Rome, and the sculpture included numerous copies of earlier Greek works. These remains served as both a model and a challenge to seventeenth-century artists, as they had done to the artists of the Renaissance, though seventeenth-century artists looked at them differently and were most excited by different examples. We can see this well if we compare the marble figures of the Old Testament David carved by Michelangelo at the beginning of the sixteenth century and by Bernini more than a hundred years later.

Michelangelo certainly studied and drew classical sculptures as well as live models in his own studio. His *David* is a typical Renaissance work. It is clearly related to the so-called *Apollo Belvedere*, which had been discovered not many years previously and is probably a Roman copy of a Greek original of the fourth century BC. They have the same stance, with the weight on one leg and balanced by an S-shaped twist of the whole body. Michelangelo's *David* has a greater sense of energy than the *Apollo*. Nothing is frozen. Every muscle is alive beneath the skin. We feel that movement is only briefly stilled before the hurling of the stone that will kill Goliath. But stilled it is in both statues. And there is a similar stilling of movement in the imperious gesture of the later Christ of the *Last Judgement*.

Bernini shows David in the very act of hurling the stone. Even the tightly clenched lips tell of the intense concentration and effort of this moment. Though there is no surviving Classical sculpture that has quite this expressiveness, the so-called *Borghese Warrior* of the second or first century BC is now a closer parallel than the *Apollo*. Notice also that, if we stand in front of Bernini's *David* (as one originally had to since it was set against a wall), we not only see the action but are caught up in it. The stone will soon shoot past us; we may even feel that we are Goliath. Small details – like the curling of the toes of the right foot over the edge of the plinth to gain a better grip – add to our sense of immediacy and of participation in the action. In comparison, Michelangelo's *David* is a completely self-contained work.





from left to right  
Michelangelo Buonarroti,  
*David*, 1501–3, marble,  
height 434 cm, Accademia,  
Florence.

*Apollo Belvedere*, original  
probably fourth century  
BC, marble, height  
224 cm, Vatican, Rome.

Gianlorenzo Bernini,  
*David*, 1623, marble,  
height 170 cm, Borghese  
Gallery, Rome.

When, later, he sculpted *The Ecstasy of St Theresa* for a chapel in the Roman church of S. Maria della Vittoria, Bernini sought by rather similar means to awaken a more religious emotion. St Ignatius had set great store on the value, to a Christian, of reliving the emotional experiences of Christ's passion, resurrection and ascension, and of meditating on the torments of hell and the happiness of communion with God. Bernini, like many others at this time, followed the spiritual exercises prescribed by St Ignatius. The St Theresa group is intended to help the person kneeling at the altar below it to enter into the mystical experience of the saint. According to her own account an angel visited her armed with a golden spear tipped with flame. He plunged the spear several times into her heart, causing intense pain but also leaving her consumed by the love of God. Again Bernini gives us a momentary glimpse – a glimpse of the moment when the angel holds the spear poised for another thrust. But what he really shows us is a vision of the event. He has created this vision before our eyes as we kneel in the chapel. In fact the sculptured group of saint and angel is only part of the total vision. The saint, in polished white marble, swoons back on a darker coloured cloud while gilded rays of divine illumination stream down from above, lit by a hidden window. In the vault above, the heavens open to reveal more angels. And our sense of the reality of the vision is increased by the way in which its architectural frame breaks



