THE ART OF THE COUNTER REFORMATION

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Baroque art was wrought under the strain of change during a warfare that was as wide as Europe and that conscripted art for propaganda more consciously and vehemently than any age has done until our own. A baroque work bears the stamp of official sanction as unmistakably as the Berlin Chancellery or the Foro Mussolini, since it was as directly intended for indoctrination.

The historical situation that eventually produced baroque art began to develop soon after 1500, when the ancient heterogeneous unity of the Western Church broke asunder. The widespread movement for separation and religious nationalism led by Luther, Henry VIII, and Calvin profoundly disorganized the Papacy by withdrawing a large part of Europe from a central ecclesiastical rule to the rule of national churches more easily controllable by the civil governments. As the struggle accentuated differences too profound to be patched up, the Papacy was brought to the realization that it must reorganize if it was to survive in a world so changed. Though many Catholics recognized the urgency of the growing danger, some twenty years were wasted in wrangling before a council could be convoked in 1545 in the North Italian

ABOVE: The Temptation, woodcut by Christoffel Jeghers after Rubens, 1635. Rogers Fund
To steel the young hearts for their career of martyrdom both the English and the German colleges were frescoed with frightful scenes of suffering endured for the sake of religion. The English seminarists spent impressionable years among pictures of Saint Edmund stuck with Danish arrows, Saint Edward the Martyr and Saint Thomas of Canterbury being stabbed, Saint Ebba and her nuns slashing off their noses and lips to make themselves unattractive to Scandinavian pirates, Fisher and More being beheaded, Campion on the rack. The anatomical science required for such drastic pictures became available with the publication of Vesalius’s great “Anatomy” two years before the Council of Trent convened. The engravings of the now lost frescoes in the English college are inscribed, “These struggles of martyrs were painted to arouse the faithful to a like firmness of soul.” From such paintings the Jesuits who were being trained in their presence to conduct the education of so large a part of Europe and the Americas must have learned how effectively pictures can mold opinion and must have formed a taste for art that was utterly unmedi-aveal and unrenaissance in its emotional violence.

The violence that marked the tone of the new times is striking when renaissance and baroque tombs are compared. Rossellino and Desiderio carved their monuments with children’s dimpled laughter, with gracious angels, with inscriptions that are as Roman in their lettering as in the serenity—even insufficiency—of their regret. But after about 1570 death springs out of the tomb like a yellowed skeleton with wings for suddenness, laurels for triumph, and a grin for derision, while the epitaph hurls an insult like Finis, cinis, vermis, lapsis, oblivio. The forebodings that trouble the countless baroque Magdalens and Saint Jeromes as they contemplate skulls are summed up in John Donne’s last sermon: “We must all passe this posthume death, this death after death, nay this death after buriall, this dissolution after dissolution, this death of corruption and putrefaction, of vermiculation and incineration, of dissolution and dispersion in and from the grave, when these bodies that have been the children

Since ’tis not to be had at home
She’ll travail to a Martyrdom.
She’ll to the Moorss; and trade with them,
For this unvalued Diadem.
She’ll offer them her dearest Breath,
With Christ’s Name in’t, in change for death.

town of Trent. The Council of Trent accomplished two great things—a definitive formulation of much Catholic doctrine in answer to the Protestants and the execution of a thorough re-form in the inner life of the Church by removing many abuses that had developed in it. While deliberating longer than any other church council—eighteen years, counting interruptions—it issued the largest number of dogmatic and reformatory decrees and produced the most beneficial results of any. Though it is impossible to give a rounded idea of so complicated an historical event, a few of its results can be touched upon in so far as they affect art.

The council influenced art indirectly, but to an unexpected extent, when it originated the modern system of seminary training for priests. This reorganization of education, which has been called the council’s most important reform, and one fruitful enough in itself to justify all the eighteen years of labor, was sketched in the council’s first months and proclaimed in its present shape at the last session in 1563. In the meantime Saint Ignatius Loyola helped to set the soldierly pattern of discipline for seminary education by founding the German college in Rome in 1553. Twenty-six years later an English college was founded.

The reward that the English seminarists expected for their attempt to bring England back to the old faith was eloquently expressed by Baronius: “Courage, noble English College! I bear you a holy envy. O candidates for execution and the purple of martyrdom! When I see you I cannot help crying: May I, too, die the death of the righteous, may my last moments be even as yours.” The chance to die for a belief was then as readily available as it had been to the early Christians and as it has been to many of our own contemporaries. The young men whom Saint Philip Neri saluted in the streets of Rome with “Salve, flores martyrum” were of the temper of the infant Saint Theresa:
Saint Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy, etching by Federigo Barocci, 1581. Dick Fund
of royall parents, & the parents of royall children, must say with Job, Corruption thou art my father, and to the Worne thou art my mother & my sister.” The sermon on Hell in Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man shows this baroque drama of death persisting into our own day.

In addition to its many indirect influences on art, the Council of Trent established at least one direct power through a decree promulgated in the last session to fix a standard for church art and the responsibility for maintaining that standard. “The Holy Council prohibits placing in churches any image inspired by false doctrine that might mislead the simple.... To eliminate all lures of impurity and lasciviousness, images must not be decked in shameless beauty.... To enforce this decision, the Holy Council prohibits setting up in any place or church, no matter what its exemptions, any irregular image unless authorized by the bishop.” How vigorously this decree was executed is shown by the
fact that Veronese was summoned before the Holy Office ten years later for including irrelevant and undignified objects in a religious painting; Caravaggio also had several pictures rejected by the churches that had ordered them. Gone were the charming, discursive mediaeval panoramas in which the eye wanders through woods and waters before meeting the Holy Family on their earnest but unhurried way. Gone were the temples of flamboyant Gothic, where one searches for a pleasant moment or two among accidents and anecdotes to discover the child Jesus in a corner confuting the doctors. A century after it was painted Titian's Madonna with a Rabbit was criticized for the ignoble bunny, the shepherd with his flock, the belfry against the sundown. The charm of irrelevance, like the prayers for local saints that had crept into the service here and there, hampered a church that had turned militant to reconquer. A baroque altar picture strikes with the impact of a poster because it embodies a deliberate program which required, as Guillet de Saint Georges pointed out, that a religious image "should contain nothing extraneous or fantastic to distract from meditation."

The revision of church art did more than sweep pictures bare of distracting detail; it often changed the actual subjects shown. The old homely scenes that disappeared were partly replaced by the epic of the heroes of the contemporary struggle—Saint Ignatius the soldier, Saint Francis Xavier the missionary, Saint Theresa the mystic. Here and there, old, half-forgotten saints suddenly became prominent for one reason or another. When auricular confession grew to be a cardinal point of difference between Catholic and Protestant, much began to be heard of Saint John of Nepomuk, who was thrown into the Moldau at Prague in 1383 for refusing to tell the king what the queen had confessed about her lover.

Baroque art might be said to have made its appearance when Greeks and Romans ceased to be painted in mediaeval or renaissance fancy dress and began to be shown in correct chitons and togas—in other words, when antiquity ceased to be a yesterday surviving, however scrappily and unconsciously, into today so as to retreat into a past for archaeology to reconstruct. The accompanying change established patterns that have lasted in part until our time. For one thing, the spirit of cleavage that split the mediaeval Church also established the modern opposition of the academician and the independent artist. The Carracci, who were the first artists since antiquity to make a point of rejecting their immediate predecessors in order to hark back to a remoter generation, were opposed by Caravaggio, the first painter loudly to abjure the past in toto. Almost as long-lived as this political division in art was the style established by Borromini, whose architectural sculpture is so often like Louis XVI decoration gone robust, and by Guido Reni, whose sweetness—the ideal of baroque pathetic eloquence—pervades commercial religious art to this day.

The baroque may be said to have lived as long as Rome continued to be thought of as the center of art, a length of time that varied with arts and countries—the United States, for instance, founded its Academy in Rome as late as 1807. Delacroix started the break in painting by swinging attention to Venice, though baroque habits of seeing persisted strongly enough to raise an outcry at Manet's Olympia in 1865 and at the Armory Show in 1913. In sculpture the baroque certainly lasted through the unveiling of MacMonnies' Civic Virtue in 1912. In architecture the classicism popularized by Vignola never lacked exponents until the revolt headed by Le Corbusier did more than merely substitute a different historical revival for the ideals of the Prix de Rome. Now that the break is more or less complete all along the line, the baroque begins to retreat into the past far enough to allow an over-all view of it as another of the serial forms that compose the museum of history.

Most of the facts in this article are drawn from the Catholic Encyclopedia, the Enciclopedia Espasa, Emile Male's L'Art religieux aprés le Concile de Trente, and Philippus Labbe's Sacrosancta Consilia.

An exhibition of prints of about 1560-1660, along with some precursors of the baroque movement, is now on view in Gallery A 22.