

The enigma of the baroque

Tim Tower
24 August 2000

Critics during the Enlightenment coined the term “baroque” to denounce artistic forms that suggested movement, texture and disequilibrium, which they considered extravagant and confused, even bizarre, when compared to the symmetrical and stable elements of the prevailing classicist aesthetic. Despite the fact the new forms had first appeared as distortions, they seemed to fill a need and quickly spread throughout Europe. “The Triumph of the Baroque” is an exhibition of architectural models, on view at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC through October 9. As students of the art of the period look deeper into its essential character, they have tended to extend the influence of baroque elements, which are now recognized to have stretched from Rome to Amsterdam, and from 1600 to 1750.

In *The Social History of Art* Arnold Hauser suggests that before the baroque it was possible to say whether the aesthetic approach of an age was fundamentally naturalistic or anti-naturalistic, making for unity or differentiation, classicist or anti-classicist. But toward the end of the 1500s, art began to lose its uniform stylistic character, becoming naturalistic and classicist, analytical and synthetic, all at the same time.

Bourgeois society was breaking up human relationships into atoms and giving them an unprecedented flexibility and mobility. Man placed himself in the center of the universe and therefore in the center of art as well, imparting to it a certain sensuality and strength in the process. Classical forms, which, centuries earlier, had been slowly refined to a stable, finished character, had been resurrected in the Renaissance. These were now broken apart and turned inside out as the new society treated all that preceded it as material for its own disposal in achieving its own artistic aims. The 27 models on display in Washington, supplemented by paintings, drawings, sculpture and medallions, show the products of a rising social structure and new technique.

The baroque was born in Rome. The papacy had suffered at the hands of the Reformation and was only just regaining a sense of composure, having renounced its lost territories and recovered a sense of security in those that were preserved. The curia still conducted fierce persecution of heretics, but also required an art that spoke clearly to the faithful. They turned to a program for new chapels, churches and civic improvements. Images could not be so familiar as to demystify the faith but, while persuading the flock to follow the church, had to acknowledge the increasing significance of secular life.

Gian Lorenzo Bernini, who was born in 1598 the son of a successful sculptor, was singled out for his artistic talent from an early age. By the 1640s he was receiving commissions from all sides for the design of chapels and shrines. He took communion

twice a week and, following the Council of Ignatius, withdrew once a year into the solitude of a monastery, to devote himself to spiritual exercises.

His *Cornaro Chapel*, represented by a fine model and painting, is the curtain raiser for the show. An aging Venetian Cardinal Federico Cornaro commissioned the work to memorialize his family in the new church Maria della Vittoria of Discalced Carmelite brothers in Rome. The order, called barefoot to stress its vow of poverty, had been founded by Teresa of Avila, heroine of the Spanish Counter-Reformation, who had 60 monasteries to her credit by the time of her death in 1582. Bernini chose to fill the chapel altar, traditionally left empty to accommodate religious ceremonies, with a dramatic depiction of her principal mystical experience. The church had to acknowledge the pull of more affordable comforts and even human sensuality, but sought to redirect the emotions of its members back to religious objects.

Saint Teresa's account of her vision, in which she describes in explicitly (although unconsciously) sexual terms the visitation of an angel, would certainly have been familiar to Bernini. She wrote, “In his hands I saw a long golden spear and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he drew it out, I thought he was drawing them out with it and he left me completely afire with a great love for God.”

The artist may not have been able to explain it himself; but he achieved, in Teresa's image and its *mise en scène*, a powerful expression of the social cross-currents of the time. One senses a youthful struggle, such as that stimulated by the rising market economy, straining against the religious constraints which were rooted in ossified feudal forms. It is contradictory, but nonetheless a fact, that this depiction of the heroine of the struggle by the Catholic Church to restore its grip over humanity rises as a monument to the beauty of human sensuality. Perhaps the antagonism between his own religious convictions and his social position as a financial success in the rising capitalist economy stimulated Bernini's sensitivity in this work.

In his depiction of the saint the shift in aesthetic approach, from the Renaissance appeal to reason to the characteristic baroque evocation of passion, rose to a great height. Teresa's head rocks back, eyelids fluttering in ecstasy, as the angel hovers above. An elaborate painting decorating the vault, gilded rays and contrasting colored marbles glittered in an array of illumination. The stage is oval in plan, behind a proscenium arch, flanked by paired piers and columns that support a parted impediment. Convex center and concave flanks form a reverse curve, which became a baroque favorite. In this way, the artist intensified the dramatic impact of

the scene by allowing it to break through its surrounding framework.

Commenting on the chapel in 1682, Filippo Baldinucci wrote, "The opinion is widespread that Bernini was the first to attempt to unite architecture with sculpture and painting in such a manner that together they make a beautiful whole." Bernini's treatment echoes the contemporary work in northern Europe of Peter Paul Rubens, whose comparable mastery of motion and vitality can be taken as evidence of the universal impact of burgeoning social forces.

Where a typical Renaissance composition achieved unity by carefully combining distinct classical elements, the baroque reversed the approach in the following way. Now the artist began from an over-riding conception in which composite elements were often incomplete in themselves, but vital and powerful as parts of the whole. In Bernini's *Four Rivers Fountain* set in Rome's Piazza Navonna, for example, the rump of the lion appears in a gap in the rocks and its head and shoulders in one diagonally adjacent. The horse was divided in the same way. And the diagonal postures, gestures and glances of the muscular river gods knit together the composition as it, in turn, tends to tie to itself the piazza and its urban setting. The baroque master strove to unite the entire environment within a single, beautiful conception.

While Bernini was carving this fountain, Jacob van Campen began work on the *Amsterdam Town Hall*. The contrast to Bernini's complex, swirling composition is vivid. Here the baroque desire to subordinate everything to a single theme is achieved first of all with the great masses of the structure and then with a huge cupola towering over the structure and the town.

Amsterdam was the capital of the Dutch Republic which had only recently won independence from the Spanish Catholic monarchy. Marble interiors and sandstone facades gave notice of a new wealth and power in the rising class of burghers. Classical detail and ponderous symmetry combined in a ham fisted monument to the bourgeois desire for civic rectitude—a necessary means of reigning in the turmoil their system had unleashed.

The new center had the latest in everything from council chambers to torture chamber, and his model echoes the pride with which the architect employed the best technique that money could buy. A massive roof truss carefully displays let-in braces, beveled beam seats and mortised joints. But the building may still be better known for what it lacks than for its lush materials. Rembrandt's trenchant depiction of a group of local dignitaries, originally intended for its walls, may have cut too deep and was rejected.

Sebastien de Vauban (1633-1707) was the most important military engineer of Louis XIV, ruler of France from 1643 to 1715. Toward the end of his reign, the military displaced the palace at Versailles as the focus of the king's expenditure. Vauban's *Fortress at Neuf-Brisach* built in 1703-04 is shown in a detailed scale model, consisting of an eight-pointed star of earthworks, battlements and roads encircling a symmetrical grid of streets and buildings. This early town plan was dictated by the requirement of subjecting any attacking force to the cross-fire of artillery. In fact, the use of artillery for crowd control was the original motivation for the radiant boulevards whose transatlantic echo still dominates the city where the exhibition has been staged.

Villa Pisani in Stramada designed by Frigimelica in 1716, has all the classical elements popular in the Renaissance with the notable addition of massive scale. A few years later, James Gibbs built the *Church of Saint Martin-in-the-Fields* in London as the most costly building of its type. But here, innovation consisted of the placement of a towering steeple on top of a classical temple and stone walls filling between the columns along the perimeter.

The *Market Hall in Augsburg* by Georg Fink in 1754 is reminiscent of the structure for the Amsterdam Town Hall stripped of its stone cladding and classical details. Rafters were cut into mortised joints at the ridge, and braces buttress the walls in every direction. The spare, functional design strikes the familiar chord dictated by the bottom line. Fink built a sturdy, functional space for the best price. Such halls followed an expanding commerce throughout the continent.

The project for the *Church and Convent at Smol'ny* in Saint Petersburg constructed between 1748 and 1756 was never fully realized. But the magnificent model by Francesco Rastrelli well read those passions which motivated the Russian monarch. It combines baroque elements with traditional Russian ones in lavish excess. In the huge bell tower, columns are multiplied; and arched entries, stacked six high, penetrate the structure from all sides. Multiple domes and a polychrome finish top it off.

The show is well worth the trip to Washington. To understand the Baroque, however, one must look to the living knot of moods and ideas which it focused in concrete form and thus encouraged. The new forms had developed under the pressure of an inner need, a broad psychological demand which, like all human psychology, had its roots in society.

For the spectator these models hold more than historical interest. They, and the works they prepared, have gripped viewers over centuries. The clean lines and beautiful joinery of van Campen's trusses, as well as the marble abandon of Teresa's ecstasy, itself a miracle of human creation, still fascinate and move the hearts of audiences everywhere.

As mapping the human genome reveals the actual evolution of the organism, so the history of culture traces an essential source of human personality. No substitute, no synthetic hybrid, has been found which can nourish and enlarge the thoughts and feelings of human beings as art does. Behind the paucity of contemporary personality, lurks in part the ignorance of that heritage. Herein, lies the significance of the baroque.

After closing in Washington, the exhibition will be shipped to Marseilles where it can be seen at the Musée des Beaux-Arts from November 17 until March 4, 2001.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact