

What Is Baroque?

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The late-Scholastic logicians devised amusing helps to memory by which the many forms or figures of syllogism (conclusions from a major and minor premise) could be remembered. These mnemonic devices consisted of words of three syllables partly real and partly made up for the purpose. Each syllable stood for one of the three propositions, and the vowels therein signified the character of these propositions. The vowel *a*, for instance, denoted a general and positive statement; the vowel *o*, a partial and negative one. Thus the nice name *Barbara*, with its three *as*, designates a syllogism that consists of three general and positive propositions (for instance: “All men are mortal – all mortal beings need food – consequently all men need food”). And for a syllogism consisting of one general and positive proposition and two partial and negative ones (for instance: “All cats have whiskers – some animals have no whiskers – consequently some animals are not cats”), there was coined the word *Baroco*, containing one *a* and two *os*. Either the word, or the peculiarly roundabout fashion of the train of thought denoted by it, or both, must have struck later generations as particularly funny and characteristic of the pedantic formalism to which they objected in medieval thought; and when humanistic writers, including Montaigne, wished to ridicule an unworldly and sterile pedant, they reproached him with having his head full of “Barbara and Baroco,” etc. Thus it came about that the word *Baroco* (French and English *Baroque*) came to signify everything wildly abstruse, obscure, fanciful, and useless (much as the word *intellectual* in many circles today). (The other derivation of the term from Latin *veruca* and Spanish *barueca*, meaning, originally, a wart and by extension a pearl of irregular shape, is most improbable both for logical and purely linguistic reasons.)¹

The classicism of the eighteenth century applied this derogatory term especially to the type of architecture and ornament of which it disapproved, with special reference to the style of the great seventeenth-century architect Francesco Borromini. But in the nineteenth century, when Ranke said “every period is immediately under God,” this originally derogatory term – like the terms *Gothic*

and *Rococo* – came to be divested of its vituperative connotations and was converted into a *neutral* designation, denoting “the style that followed the Renaissance” – that is to say, the style of the seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries. This neutralization or, if you prefer, historicization of the old term of opprobrium led to several *extensions* of its use, some of which have their dangers, too. First of all, we have the harmless extension as to media within the visual arts: what had originally been limited to architecture and ornament was (again, by the way, just like “Gothic” and “Rococo”) applied to sculpture and painting. Second, we have the less harmless extension as to media *outside* the visual arts (but still within the period), so that we now speak of Baroque poetry, music, and even mathematics. Third, we have the still less harmless extension *beyond* the period, so that every style supposedly related to a preceding one as “Baroque,” properly speaking, is supposed to be related to the Renaissance, can be denoted by such composite appellations as “Hellenistic Baroque,” “Romanesque Baroque,” “Late Gothic Baroque,” etc.

All this has resulted in considerable confusion; and this confusion is aggravated by the fact that the term *Baroque*, in its neutralized form doubtless the property of *art* historians, was and is applied by non-art historians who cannot always keep step with the gradual correction of the art historians’ own errors. Even today, non-art historians and even a few misguided characters among the art historians themselves apply the term *Baroque* indiscriminately to Bernini and Tintoretto, Rubens, and El Greco because the book that seems to be accepted as a kind of Bible by the non-art historian, Wölfflin’s “Principles of Art History,” conceives of Baroque as a diametrical opposite to the so-called classic Renaissance. Wölfflin himself did not commit the sin of commission to call Tintoretto or El Greco “Baroque,” but he committed the sin of omission not to include them – and what they stood for – in his considerations at all. His book does not mention a single work of art executed between, roughly speaking, the death of Raphael in 1520 and the full-fledged seventeenth century. And when we thus simply eliminate what happened in the hundred years in between, we do receive the impression of a straight, diametrical contrast between Baroque and Renaissance where, in reality, a much more complex development had taken place.²

The first idea that comes to our mind when the word *Baroque* is heard is the idea of a lordly racket, so to speak: unbridled movement, overwhelming richness in color and composition, theatrical effects produced by a free play of light and shade, and indiscriminate mixture of materials and techniques, and so forth. It is perfectly true that a work such as Bernini’s *Cathedra Petri* shows all these qualities in the highest degree. Sculptures of bronze, marble, and stucco merge with each other and with the architecture of the choir into one almost visionary spectacle, and not only the borderline between the various units and media, but also the borderline between art and nature is thoroughly obliterated (rays of natural light coming through the stained-glass window seem to continue in bronze beams, and the natural clouds seem to have condensed into plastic ones).³

Thus Bernini's *Cathedra* appears in fact as a diametrical opposite to a High Renaissance work such as Andrea Sansovino's tomb of Cardinal Ascanio Sforza (1505–6); here we have a perfectly self-sufficient structure, consisting of a clear, flawlessly architectonic framework that keeps apart from the architecture of the church and provides "living rooms" – in the literal sense of the word – for the sculptures so that every figure exists and moves in its own compartment with self-sufficiency and freedom.

But we must bear in mind that a work like the *Cathedra Petri* (finished in 1661) represents a culminating phase of the Baroque development that marks a new and final step within the period as a whole. To understand the original direction of this development, we must compare it with what had immediately preceded it. What had immediately preceded it, and what is entirely eliminated from the calculations of Wölfflin and his followers, is a style that does include such phenomena as Tintoretto and El Greco – the style now generally referred to as mannerism (also, of course, originally a depreciatory term used by the seventeenth-century critics against late-sixteenth-century art much as the term *Baroque* was used by the eighteenth-century critics against seventeenth-century art). When we juxtapose Baroque art with pictures or sculptures executed by these mannerists, we cannot help realizing that the Baroque phenomenon amounted, at its inception, to a reaction against exaggeration and overcomplication, and that is due to a new tendency towards clarity, natural simplicity, and even equilibrium.

Giorgio Vasari's *Immaculate Conception* shows a complicated two-dimensional pattern without spatial economy, yet very plastic modeling of the individual units. A kind of unresolved and even unresolvable tension makes itself felt in the distorted proportions and twisted movements of the figures. This applies also to the subject matter, a very complicated allegory of the salvation of mankind by the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin.

Compared with this, a Baroque interpretation of a comparable subject appears almost akin to a Madonna of Raphael. There is, it is true, a pictorial breadth, a highly emotional character and a vivacious mixture of reality and imagination that we would never encounter in a High Renaissance composition, but the Baroque picture is certainly less constrained and more balanced in space than the Vasari altarpiece and free from those convulsive entanglements that were characteristic of mannerism. The subject, too, is simply human, or humanly simple, understandable without a learned commentary.

Thus the Baroque appears primarily as a liquidation of that mannerism to which Tintoretto and El Greco really belong; but mannerism, in turn, was far from being the result of a mere whim of some oversophisticated artists: it was the expression of a real problem, inherent in Renaissance art from the outset.

The Renaissance movement itself, based as it was on both a classical revival and a quite nonclassical naturalism, and enforcing these tendencies within the limits of an essentially Christian civilization, had given rise to a style that, with

all its merits, reveals a certain interior discrepancy. In early Renaissance pictures such as Ghirlandaio's *Adoration of the Shepherds* (1485), the conflicting qualities are not as yet fully reconciled and are therefore easily discernible. The picture teems with archaeology, so to speak; it exhibits a classical sarcophagus, classical pillars and capitals, and even a triumphal arch in the background; but the animals and the shepherds are taken over from a Flemish altarpiece that appealed strongly to the realistic tendencies of the period (the famous Portinari altarpiece by Hugo van der Goes, imported into Florence some years before). The master has a satisfactory command of perspective, the typical Renaissance method of suggesting three-dimensional space, but this spatial tendency is counteracted by the persistence of a Gothic spirit that makes the figures cling to the frontal plane and to each other, so that the landscape appears as a backdrop rather than as a comprehensive three-dimensional medium. Thus the Renaissance style is characterized by interior contradictions practically unknown to the Middle Ages. The High Renaissance style of Leonardo and Raphael is a wonderful reconciliation of these contradictory tendencies. In a picture such as Raphael's *Madonna di Foligno* (ca. 1513), pagan beauty and Christian spirituality, a well-balanced two-dimensional pattern and an equilibrated distribution of plastic bodies in three-dimensional space, the plastic value of the figures and the pictorial values of the landscape – all this is fused into a truly classic unity. But we can easily foresee that this reconciliation could not last. No sooner had it been achieved in Rome than it was opposed by an anticlassic tendency that first developed in Tuscany, where the Quattrocento tradition and even Gothic spirit had persisted, and came to the surface as an almost violent reaction against the classic harmony (Pontormo, Rosso in Florence, Beccafumi in Siena, Parmigianino in North Italy, the first generation of mannerists).

In Pontormo's murals in the Certosa di Val d'Ema (1522–3) we have almost no perspective at all, and in addition the plastic forms are dissolved by means of a curiously loose, oscillating technique. The movements do not show the classic contrapposto, but either shrill contrasts or rigid stiffness; the proportions are elongated in a deliberately unnatural way. The whole composition is compressed into a seemingly unearthly network of figures. It is a revival of preclassic tendencies, and it is not by accident that these frescoes are strongly influenced by northern art (Dürer), although even Dürer appears almost classic and harmonious when compared with his Italian follower. This new style means certainly both an enormous increase of spiritual intensity and emotional expression, and an enormous loss of harmony.

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[T]he mannerist style lingered until the very end of the sixteenth century and even further. But in Italy, there set in about 1590 the countermovement that was to lead to what we call Baroque; and here we must remember one thing that, if forgotten, also leads to considerable confusion, namely that Baroque – like Renaissance – is an *Italian* phenomenon, and that the other European countries, which had all remained Gothic, to some extent at least, beneath the veneer of

the imported Renaissance, thus tended to remain mannerist, to some extent at least, within the framework of the Baroque; it is this Baroque in partibus infidelium that fits the customary categories of wildness, obscurity, etc., much better and much more consistently than does the original, Italian version of the style.

In Italy, and in its earlier phases, Baroque means indeed a revolt against mannerism rather than against the “classic” Renaissance. It means, in fact, a deliberate reinstatement of classic principles and, at the same time, a reversion to nature, both stylistically and emotionally. In painting we can distinguish between two main forces that brought about this twofold change: the revolutionary effort of Caravaggio, who even by his contemporaries was called a “naturalist”; and the reformatory endeavor of the Bolognese Carracci school, which, like Ludovico Cigoli in Florence, tried to overcome the manneristic tendencies by obviously and purposely restoring the “good old traditions,” so to speak. These two trends are in reality not irreconcilable opposites, but may be compared to the right and left wings of the phalanx, and in fact the further development is based on both, although it is true that the starting point of Caravaggio on the one hand and of the Carracci on the other was really different.

Caravaggio wanted to get rid of the worn-out formulae of the mannerists. He began with still-life painting and gradually proceeded to rendering human figures of a realistic character. He shattered the artificial world of mannerism to build a new one out of its very elements: solid, three-dimensional bodies and light (*chiaroscuro*, first purely plastic, later spatial). He went into the quarry, so to speak, to get the blocks for a new structure entirely his own; but in putting these blocks together (so as to weave a coherent composition out of his realistic units) even he had to resume, to some extent, the devices of early sixteenth-century art: we can recognize in his pictures reminiscences of such High Renaissance masters as Lotto, Michelangelo, and even Raphael and the Antique.

Annibale Carracci, on the other hand, began with a deliberate effort to synthesize the plastic values of classical antiquity and classic High Renaissance art with such purely pictorial tendencies as had survived the manneristic intermezzo, namely the Venetian colorism and the Correggesque “*sfumato*.” A picture like his *Sleeping Venus*, inspired as it is by Titian on the one hand and classical statuary on the other, is certainly a little cool and academic in style, though admirable in its wonderful composure and in its combination of sheer design with the coloristic richness and a fine silvery tonality in the landscape.

A later work by the same master, the *Lamentation*, already announces the general loosening of the style and the new emotionality characteristic of the high Baroque attitude. The mourning figures seem already to revel in their own sorrow, a new decisive factor in the Baroque psychology, and all the elements are interwoven into a luminous unity. The intrinsic dualism of postmedieval art, clearly discernible in the Ghirlandaio, admirably reconciled or perhaps only concealed in Raphael and other classic masters, and sharpened to a painful

interior tension in the manneristic period, still subsists in a “Baroque” picture like this. But it is no longer a smoldering tension as in mannerism, but the conflicts and contrasts between plastic and spatial tendencies, ideal beauty and reality, neopagan humanism and Christian spiritualism, while still subsisting, begin to merge into a new sphere of highly subjective sensations, which manifest themselves in such subjective values as the picturesque play of light and shadow; the deep though definitely irrational space, and the soft, melting facial expressions. The Baroque attitude can be defined as being based on an objective conflict between antagonistic forces, which, however, merge into a subjective feeling of freedom and even pleasure: the paradise of the High Renaissance regained after the struggles and tensions of the manneristic period, though still haunted (and enlivened) by the intense consciousness of an underlying dualism.

Thus the Baroque gave rise to a type of architecture in which the conflict between the wall and the structural members – a conflict introduced but cleverly harmonized in Renaissance architecture – no longer fills the beholder with a feeling of either cancerous disintegration as is the case in ordinary manneristic architecture, or stifling oppression, as is the case with Michelangelo’s personal interpretation of mannerism (entrance-hall to the Laurentian Library, with its painfully incarcerated columns). For Baroque architecture breaks up, or even curves, the walls, so as to express a free dynamic interaction between mass and the energies of the structural members, and to display a quasi-theatrical scenery that integrates the conflicting elements into a spatial ensemble, enlivened by chiaroscuro values and even indicating a kind of osmotic interrelation between exterior and interior space.

Similarly Baroque art gave up the principle of manneristic sculpture of driving the spectator around the groups and figures by a rotating composition, without ever allowing him to acquiesce in one predominating view. “A good sculpture must have a hundred views,” says Benvenuto Cellini (and this is one of the major tenets of manneristic sculpture) in contradiction to Leonardo da Vinci who, as a true High Renaissance artist, had been of the opinion that a sculpture worked in the round was nothing but a combination of two reliefs, one displaying the figure in front view, the other from the back. Baroque statues and groups neither deny the conflict between a two-dimensional “view” and three-dimensional bodies, nor do they use this conflict to fill the beholder with a feeling of restlessness and dissatisfaction: they revert to the one-view principle, but this one view is no longer achieved by disciplining the composition to a kind of relief arrangement, but includes so many torsions, foreshortenings, and spatial values (intervals between the various plastic units) that the “one-view” assumes the character of an imaginary picture plane on which are projected both plastic and spatial elements.⁴ In point of fact, Baroque art liked to place sculptures in a picturesque or even stagelike setting.

Thus we can easily conceive that Baroque art came to abolish the borderline between the “three arts,” and even between art and nature, and also brought

forth the modern landscape in the full sense of the word, meaning a visualization of unlimited space captured in, and represented by, a section of it, so that human figures became debased to a mere “staffage” and finally could be dispensed with altogether. In the North, even the quasi-architectonic features of the scenery itself could be subdued or suppressed in favor of extensions as such, the picture showing nothing but the endless horizontal plain or ocean, and the sky occupying four-fifths or five-sixths of the area of the picture: In all these cases a tension between the two-dimensional surface and three-dimensional space is utilized as a means of subjective intensification. This is a fundamental attitude of Baroque art. A conflict of antagonistic forces merging into a subjective unity, and thus resolved, is also, or rather most particularly, to be observed in the realm of psychology. While in Annibale Carracci’s *Lamentation* sorrow becomes so strong that it almost transforms itself into pleasure, in the same way the unutterable bliss of a heavenly apparition – now within reach of a mortal being – can become so strong that it begins to hurt, which makes the pleasure all the more intense. Thus we can understand the supreme incarnation of the Baroque spirit, the *Ecstasy of St. Theresa* by Bernini, in S. Maria della Vittoria in Rome. In this work, again a half plastic group, half relief, half picture, the pain of the golden arrow piercing the heart of the saint actually fuses with the supreme happiness of her union with Christ, so that the spiritual bliss could melt with the spasms of a quasi-erotic ecstasy. This experience, characteristic as it is of the attitude of many mystics, has often been described in religious literature (particularly by St. Theresa herself), but it took the Baroque style to express it in visual form.

The very physiognomy of the human beings reflects the evolution that led from the classic High Renaissance to mannerism, and from mannerism to Baroque; and this physiognomical change is perhaps the most revealing symptom of the psychological processes that lie at the base of the stylistic phenomena.

Raphael, *Donna Velata*: pyramidal composition, principle of axuality. Perfect harmony also psychologically. Absolutely restricted to her own existence, regardless of the outer world but profoundly acquiescing in herself; a rounded-off microcosm, comparable to a star revolving around its own axis, symbolizing the short-lived equilibrium of the contradictory forces in postmedieval civilization. This calm and self-sufficient attitude was shattered very soon.

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A Baroque portrait, however, is free and open to the world again. The attitude of Bernini’s *Costanza Buonarelli* is sensuously cheerful, throbbing with unrepressed vitality, harmonious in spite of her susceptibility to every kind of impression and emotion. The Baroque (I am speaking only of Italy, where the style originated) had overcome the crisis of the Counter Reformation. A *modus vivendi* had been found in every field; scientists were no longer burnt like Giordano Bruno (whose death might be called an emphatically manneristic occurrence, while the release of Campanella by Urban VIII was a Baroque event); Roman sculptures were no longer hidden in cellars; the system of the church

was now so powerful and undisputed that it could afford to be comparatively tolerant towards any vital effort, and more than that: it would gradually assimilate and absorb these vital forces, and finally allow the very churches to be filled with that visual symphony of gay putti, glittering gold and theatrical sceneries as seen in the *Cathedra Petri*. In the field of portraits this gorgeous decoration has a parallel in that late bust by Bernini of *Louis XVI*, the triumphal outburst of the new freedom gradually conquered during the seventeenth century.

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In the plastic arts, the increase of emotional values resulting from a conflict of opposite impulses, which still merge into one overwhelming feeling of subjective excitement, was already observed in such works as Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Theresa*. But in addition, this tendency gave rise to the discovery of new iconographical subjects that conformed to the new trend of imagination and feeling. The *Wounded St. Sebastian Nursed by the Pious Irene* by Giovanni Domenico Cerrini: a new conception of martyr scenes, physical pain intensely felt (in contrast with medieval and Renaissance representations) but fusing into a blissful rapture. In this case the saint is still fettered to the tree, a drastic illustration of the conflict between physical pain and relief. The episode is not entirely unknown in pre-Baroque art, but was restricted to comprehensive series representing the whole life of Sebastian; now the episode is singled out, emotionally intensified, and becomes a favorite subject of Baroque art. *Hagar Starving in the Desert, but Comforted by an Angel*, Pier Francesco Mola (many other representations, e.g., Lanfranco, Pietro da Cortona): the somewhat pathetic figure of Hagar, a favorite character in Baroque art; also other incidents of her life (her return into Abraham's house before the birth of Ishmael) and other scenes of reconciliation after a painful conflict (return of the prodigal son). On the other hand, the triumphal feeling of *David after His Victory over Goliath* (Orazio Gentileschi) can mingle with what seems to be a deep compassion for the life destroyed, so that the very scene of triumph becomes transformed into a scene of melancholy brooding over the transience of human life. The contrast between Life and Death plays a formidable role in Baroque iconography, and one of the most characteristic innovations of the period is what we can term the blissful death – that is to say, a scene in which the agony of the dying human being and the mourning of the survivors merge with a feeling of supreme release: for example, Bernini's *Ludovica Albertoni*, Domenichino's *Last Communion of St. Jerome*.

It is true that in representations like these there appears a feeling that is commonly known as sentimentality. And the fact that Baroque art has been so emphatically disapproved of for almost two centuries is largely due to the impression that the feeling of Baroque figures lacked genuineness and sincerity. The beholder seemed to feel that these figures displayed theatrical poses, that they reveled in their own sensations, that they “did not mean it,” so to speak, whether they exhibit their half painful, half blissful raptures, like the St. Sebastians and St. Lawrences, or their patient devoutness, like the *Mary Magdalen* by Guido Reni.

Now it is true that the psychological attitude of the figures in Baroque art is less unbroken [sic; unspoken?] than that of the figures in Renaissance art, let alone medieval art. But it would be unjust to doubt the genuineness of their feelings. The feeling of Baroque people is (or at least can be in the works of great masters) perfectly genuine, only it does not fill the whole of their souls. They not only feel, but are also aware of their own feelings. While their hearts are quivering with emotion, their consciousness stands aloof and “knows.” Many a beholder may not like that. Only we should not forget that this psychological rift is the logical consequence of the historical situation, and at the same time the very foundation of what we call the “modern” form of imagination and thought. The experience of so many conflicts and dualisms between emotion and reflection, lust and pain, devoutness and voluptuousness had led to a kind of awakening, and thus endowed the European mind with a new consciousness. Now consciousness means, as the Bible has it, the loss of innocence, but on the other hand the possibility of being “like God,” that is to say, superior to one’s own reactions and sensations. Sentimentality is only a negative aspect of this new consciousness (when the individual not only becomes aware of his or her feelings but also consciously indulges in them), and another negative aspect – and the logical correlative of sentimentality – is frivolity (when the individual becomes aware of his or her feelings but belittles or even disintegrates them with a skeptical smile). There is a touch of frivolity, already realized by the contemporaries, even in the angel of Bernini’s *Ecstasy of St. Theresa*.

But while sentimentality and frivolity are negative aspects of the new consciousness, there are two emphatically positive ones. First, the new “critical” attitude and method of thinking as achieved by Descartes, for the famous *cogito, ergo sum* [I think, therefore I am] means no less than that the human mind no longer accepts any other premise than the consciousness of its own activity, and thus claims the right to build up a system of thought entirely independent of both brute matter of fact and dogmatic belief. It is quite interesting, though, that Descartes himself, for instance in a letter describing his situation in Amsterdam, could display both a slight frivolity and a slight sentimentality, both these elements transfigured by a wonderful reticence and self-irony. This leads us to the second positive aspect of that new consciousness that is the curse and the bliss of the new psychology developing in the Baroque era: the sense of humor in the true sense of the term. For the sense of humor, as it appears in Shakespeare and Cervantes – not to be confounded with wit or mere comicality – is based on the fact that a man realizes that the world is not quite what it should be, but does not get angry about it, nor think that he himself is free from ugliness and from the major and minor vices and stupidities that he observes.

It is the satirist, not the humorist, who considers himself to be cleverer and better than other people. The humorist, thanks to that consciousness that keeps him at a distance from reality as well as from himself, is capable of both: of noticing the objective shortcomings of life and human nature – that is to say, the discrepancies between reality and ethical or aesthetic postulates – and of

subjectively overcoming this discrepancy (therefore the sense of humor is really a Baroque quality) in that he understands it as the result of a universal, even metaphysical imperfection willed by the maker of the world. Thus the real humorist, in contrast with the satirist, not only excuses what he ridicules but deeply sympathizes with it; he even glorifies it, in a way, because he conceives it as a manifestation of the same power that shows itself in the things reputed to be grand and sublime, whereas they are, *sub specie aeternitatis*, just as far from perfection as the things reputed to be small and ridiculous.

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The really funny and relieving effect of a caricature in the true sense of the word is based on the fact that the author keenly observes and even exaggerates the shortcomings of his victims, but still, or rather for this very reason, profoundly likes them as human beings created by God. Falstaff may be a liar and a coward and practically devoid of any capital virtue, but still he remains as likable a human being as Percy Hotspur (who is himself slightly caricatured), let alone the serious characters of the play. A parallel can be found in some delightful drawings by Bernini: bust of *Cardinal Scipione Borghese*, in which we note the half-closed button, a small but significant symptom of the fact that in the Baroque era dignity was compatible with nonchalance.

To sum up, the Baroque is not the decline, let alone the end of what we call the Renaissance era. It is in reality the second great climax of this period and, at the same time, the beginning of a fourth era, which may be called "Modern" with a capital M. It is the only phase of Renaissance civilization in which this civilization overcame its inherent conflicts not by just smoothing them away (as did the classic Cinquecento), but by realizing them consciously and transforming them into subjective emotional energy with all the consequences of this subjectivization. The Renaissance, when conceived as one of the three main epochs of human history – the others being antiquity and the Middle Ages – and when defined with Morey as the "period which had made man and nature more interesting than God," lasted much longer than until the end of the sixteenth century.⁵ It lasted, roughly speaking, up to the time when Goethe died and the first railroads and industrial plants were built. For not until as late as that were man and nature (meaning man as a really human being and nature as the totality of natural things not tampered with by man) doomed to become less interesting and less important than those antihuman and antinatural forces that seem to determine our own period – the forces of masses and machines – and of which we don't yet know whether they are the manifestations of an unknown God or an unknown Devil. The rise of these new forces, not the Baroque movement, means the real end of the Renaissance, and at the same time the beginning of our own epoch of history, an epoch that is still struggling for an expression both in life and in art, and that will be named and judged by the generations to come – provided that it does not put an end to all generations to come.

Notes

- 1 A. Castro of L. Pfandi, *Historia de la literatura nacional española*, in *Revista de filología española* 21 (1934): 66–77. O. Kurz, “Barocco: storia di una parola,” *Lettere italiane* 12 (1960): 414–44, and B. Migliorini, “Etimologia e storia del termine ‘barocco,’” in *Manierismo, barocco, rococò: concetti e termini. Convegno internazionale, Roma 21–24 Aprile 1960* (Rome, 1962), 39–54 (Accademia nazionale dei lincei. Anno CCCLIX, 1962. Relazioni e discussioni).
- 2 Walter Friedlaender, *Mannerism and Anti-Mannerism in Italian Painting* (New York, 1957).
- 3 I. Lavin, *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts* (New York and Oxford, 1980).
- 4 R. Wittkower, “Le Bernin et le baroque romain,” *Gazette des beaux-arts* 11 (1934): 327–41.
- 5 C. R. Morey, *Mediaeval Art* (New York, 1942), 4.

Introduction (Irving Lavin)

Periodization is the underlying theme of the work, whose significance may be gauged by the remarkable fact that the standard history of seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century Italian art, Rudolf Wittkower’s *Art and Architecture in Italy 1600–1750*, first published in 1958, constantly refers to the Baroque but never seeks to define the term or describe the general characteristics of the period that justify its use. The book is a magnum opus of erudition and art-historical perspicuity; and this conceptual silence bespeaks a certain shyness in the field as a whole with regard to what might be called high synthesis. The truth, I fear, is that while our knowledge of the Baroque has increased exponentially in the last half century, our understanding has not kept pace. What is Baroque, anyway? Many of us – and especially the specialists among us – if pressed to respond to that challenging question, would probably sputter, gasp, and take refuge in the formulations provided by our heroic pioneer, Heinrich Wölfflin, in his *Principles of Art History* (1915). But Wölfflin was defining the first principles of a new discipline, whereas we are professional practitioners, too sophisticated, perhaps, to discuss first principles. Whatever the reason, I believe that one of the most important, and fundamentally new, contributions to the topic since Wölfflin is contained in the lecture by Panofsky entitled “What Is Baroque?,” which was written in 1934 and presented often for many years thereafter.¹ Panofsky never published the piece and ultimately came to regard it as obsolete.² I sometimes wonder, in fact, whether “What Is Baroque?” was one of those papers that, as I have heard, Panofsky deliberately withheld from publication in order to have something available for the flood of guest lecture invitations he received. A mimeographed text, evidently transcribed from Panofsky’s typescript by a student at Vassar, where he gave the lecture at the conference in 1935, has always been

available in various libraries, which is how I first encountered it when I was a graduate student at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts in the early 1950s.

I have long thought that the text should be published, despite its shortcomings, and the author's misgivings, partly because it documents a distinctly "transitional" phase in Panofsky's own development – elegant English even at that early date in the American half of his life, yet with traces of the long, complicated Germanic periods that, as he later astutely observed, the need to adapt to Anglo-Saxon usage expunged from his prose style. More important, however, Panofsky's way of considering a perennial and quintessentially art-historical problem from a broad, interdisciplinary point of view makes the essay particularly consonant with current attitudes in the discipline. Indeed, because of this method, the implications of Panofsky's response look well beyond the narrow purview of his question.

To comprehend the significance of the substance of Panofsky's argument, it should be recalled that Wölfflin's analysis is based on a fundamental dichotomy between two opposing formal systems, classic and Baroque. The essence of his concept lies not only in the five antinomic components of the contrasting systems, but also in the notion that they are not temporally fixed; they represent immanent, immutable poles of perception, between which all artistic vision inevitably oscillates – not for nothing did he call his book *Principles of Art History*.³ Panofsky also conceives of style and its development in dialectical terms, starting from an underlying dichotomy, an interior discrepancy he found embedded in the art of the early Renaissance. There was on the one hand a renewed interest in antiquity; and on the other hand a quite nonclassical interest in naturalism – epitomized by the importation to Florence and influence of Hugo van der Goes's Portinari altarpiece; there was on the one hand mathematical perspective, and on the other hand a persistent Gothicism evident in the tendency of forms to cling to the picture plane. The great masters of the High Renaissance managed briefly to reconcile this dichotomy into a harmonious balance, which then disintegrated in the battlefield of contradictory forces, the everlasting tension, that pervaded mannerist culture. The burning of Giordano Bruno, Panofsky said, was an emphatically mannerist occurrence. In the Baroque, there was again a reconciliation. The conflicts and contrasts between plastic and spatial tendencies, ideal beauty and reality, neopagan humanism and Christian spiritualism, while still subsisting, began to merge. The merger was now in a new sphere, however, not in the harmonious balance and classical unity of the High Renaissance, but in highly subjective feelings, a picturesque play of light and shadow, deep, irrational space, and melting expressions. Panofsky described the Baroque as the paradise of the High Renaissance regained, but haunted and enlivened by the intense consciousness of an underlying dualism. The essence and novelty of the Baroque lies precisely in this twofold reconciliation of forces – an overwhelming feeling of subjective excitement, and an awareness of that feeling. While the hearts of seventeenth-century people quiver with emotion, he says, their

consciousness stands part and “knows.” The experience of many conflicts led to a kind of awakening. The Baroque, therefore, is not the decline of the Renaissance – at the time he wrote the paper, Panofsky later recalled, “the word ‘Baroque’ was still employed as a term of opprobrium in the Anglo-Saxon countries” – but its climax: culture’s inherent conflicts were overcome, and not by smoothing them away but by realizing them consciously and transforming them into productive energy. (This definition of cultural progress in terms of psychological conflict recognition and resolution sounds remarkably like an art-historical transfiguration of Freud. I am aware of no evidence connecting Panofsky to Freud or psychoanalysis, however.)

On the phenomenological level, Panofsky had little that was new to say about the manifestations of the historical evolution. His readings of the ingredients of Renaissance art – classical revival, new naturalism, lingering medievalism, the anxiety of early mannerism, the formulaic quality of later mannerism (now called the *Maniera*), the return around 1600 to naturalism, classicism, and the High Renaissance – were “in the air” by 1934: indeed, I suspect that this element of “cooptation” may have been one of the reasons he never developed the talk for publication. Two such borrowings interest me particularly as a student of Bernini: Panofsky’s thoughts on the frontality of Baroque sculpture and the modernity of caricature reflect recent, pioneering studies by the then bright new star on the art-historical horizon, Rudolf Wittkower.

Panofsky’s contribution was to bring together these myriad, more or less isolated observations, reformulate them in his own image, and integrate them, via the process of contrast and reconciliation, into a coherent argument. The result was a comprehensive view that encompassed and gave focus to the entire development of European art from the Renaissance to the mid-nineteenth century (the death of Goethe, as he put it). Panofsky’s view of the Baroque as part of one continuous arc of Western development that ended only with the Industrial Revolution and the rise of mass culture, anticipated much recent historical thought. Contemporary thinkers also share this reference to economic and social forces as effecting historical change. But it is striking and symptomatic of the particular way in which he perceived the contemporary relevance of his own work that he ends his talk with an ironically brooding observation: that the unknown God or Devil who brought an end to the humanistic tradition of the Renaissance threatens the very existence of humankind in our own time.

On the level of principle, it is clear that Panofsky’s process of thesis versus antithesis followed by synthesis was a Hegelian transfiguration of the bipolar principles of Riegl and Wölfflin. But there are three essential differences. First, Panofsky’s principles were not purely formal modes, like Riegl’s tactile and optic values, or Wölfflin’s closed and open form; and they were certainly not aesthetic categories related to quality judgments or taste. Concepts like classical antiquity, Gothic and mannerism, balance and harmony versus tension and conflict, while they evoke or correspond to distinctive formal traits, are deeply embedded in the fabric of human society: war, religion, science, psychology, even – in the case

of the Baroque – that special form of wit to which Panofsky here accords the name “humor.” And unlike interpreters who sought to instrumentalize the Baroque in terms of such notions as theatricality, or the Jesuit Counter Reformation, Panofsky’s categories are ultimately inseparable from the entire gamut of apparently coincidental cultural values and social responses that used to be called the spirit of an age, the *zeitgeist*.⁴ Second, Panofsky’s polarities are not independent categories of perception and thought – timeless, built-in structures of the mind. Instead, they are specifically timebound, historical conditions whose manifestations are determined by, or are at least consonant with, other domains of contemporary meaning and experience. And third, whereas Wölfflin had focused on the polar extremes between which our modes of perception inevitably ebbed and flowed, Panofsky was concerned with an evolutionary process embodied in the interaction between antipodes to create a sequence of more or less complete syntheses that differed profoundly from one to the next.

However insightful and stimulating many of his individual observations about works of art may be, and however grand and compelling his reconstruction of the developmental and cultural forces at work during the period, the essential originality of the essay lies in what is, in the end, its main theme, the *psychological* interpretation of Baroque style. In Panofsky’s view, the Baroque left many valuable and lasting effects on Western civilization, but with this basic yet subtle thought he gave a positive cast even to the very “defects” of the style, such as sentimentality and frivolity. His definition was a penetrating extension into personal, even depth psychology of his notion of the Renaissance as the achievement of individual autonomy and historical distance. In this sense, the Baroque signaled the birth of modern European consciousness. In an unprecedented way, Baroque people were aware of their own feelings, including their own shortcomings, and were prepared to undertake uncompromising examinations of the self, whether through the critical philosophy of Descartes or a satirical portrait sketch by Bernini. Combining in one historical equation the concept of the Baroque with such disparate factors as the analysis of mind, swooning saints, frivolous angels, light and shade, deep space, frontally placed sculptures, and the invention of caricature drawing – all this becomes much more than a scintillating display of associations and ideas: the underlying theme of this “lordly racket,” as Panofsky called it, portends nothing less than a new phase in human history. To define an epoch of history in terms of its psychological state, to define the nature of that state as one of *emotional* self-awareness, and to define that emotional self-awareness as peculiarly modern – all this seems to me an unparalleled act of historical imagination and insight.

Notes

- 1 The lecture was evidently composed between November 7, 1934, and May 3, 1935.

- 2 Panofsky's reticence concerning the lecture, especially in later years, is evident from various references to it in his correspondence.
- 3 *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst* (Munich, 1915) (English edition, London, 1932; reprint, New York, 1950).
- 4 W. Weibel, *Jesuitismus und Barockskulptur* (Strasbourg, 1909); W. Weisbach, *Der Barock als Kunst der Gegenreformation* (Berlin, 1921; H. Tintelnot, *Barocktheater und barocke Kunst. Die Entwicklungsgeschichte der Fest- und Theaterdekoration in ihrem Verhältnis zur barocken Kunst* (Berlin, 1929). Other interpretations of the Baroque include relating the style to the emergence of the modern state (C. J. Friedrich, *The Age of the Baroque 1610–1660* [New York, 1952]) and the classical tradition of rhetoric (see *Rettorica e barocco. Atti del III congresso internazionale di studi umanistici* [Rome, 1955]).

For a helpful survey of literature on the Baroque generally, see D. A. Carozza, *European Baroque. A Selective Bibliography* (Norwood, PA, 1977).