

Roman Baroque Drawings

The word 'Baroque' probably derives from a Portuguese term for a misshapen pearl and originally meant 'irregular or grotesque'. It has, however, come to signify the dominant artistic style of the seventeenth century, which originated in Rome in the 1620s and lasted until the end of the century. It is closely associated with the names of Bernini and Pietro da Cortona in painting and sculpture and with Borromini in architecture, and has been called 'one of the most creative periods of the whole history of Italian art'.



The influence of the Catholic Church, which had been eroded during the Protestant Reformation, was reaffirmed by a succession of powerful popes, notably Urban VIII Barberini, Innocent X Pamphili and Alexander VII Chigi. The popes and their entourage triumphantly celebrated the Catholic faith: new churches were built, old ones embellished, and recently canonized saints such as Francis Xavier, Teresa of Avila and Thomas of Villanueva glorified in paint and marble. An emphasis on mystical inner experience resulted in numerous representations of the martyrdom and religious ecstasy of saints.

Above: Pietro da Cortona (1597-1669), *Scene from Tasso's Jerusalem Liberated: Rinaldo Fleeing with Carlo and Ubaldo from the Seductress Armida*, c.1620, Pen and brown ink and wash over black chalk, 200 x 341 mm, 1963-4-20-3

The Baroque was also a time of worldly splendour, with enormous sums expended on lavish palace and theatre decorations, fountains and extensive urban planning. The interior of the Barberini Palace was decorated by Andrea Sacchi and Pietro da Cortona; Grimaldi designed stage sets for the adjacent theatre and countless noble families, among them the Pamphili, Chigi and Sacchetti, commissioned the building and embellishment of country villas. The prospect of such papal and aristocratic patronage attracted artists from all over Italy and Europe. The arrival in Rome of Domenichino and Lanfranco from Emilia, Gaulli from Genoa, the Cortese brothers from France, and Schor and Seiter from Austria helped make Rome the artistic capital of the time. Artists would meet at the homes of collectors and at the Accademia di San Luca, a type of painter's club, where lessons in life drawing and art-theoretical debates took place. Increasingly, painters began to specialise in particular genres, with Giacomo Cortese gaining renown for his battle scenes, Ottavio Leoni for drawn portraits, and Onofri for landscapes.

Much of Baroque painting and sculpture is characterised by drama, emotional expressiveness, explicit gestures and spiralling or diagonal compositions, such as one associates with the art of Bernini, Pietro da Cortona and Gaulli. The epitome of this exuberant style is Cortona's ceiling fresco in the great hall of the Barberini Palace, which glorifies the reign of Pope Urban VIII. There was always a more restrained current, often labelled 'classical', which harked back to the example of Raphael and the High Renaissance and favoured symmetry, subdued colours and fewer figures. This second trend is exemplified by the work of Domenichino, Sacchi and the latter's pupil Maratti.

The British Museum owns an excellent collection of drawings by more than forty different artists from this period, covering all the major as well as many of the lesser-known painters. There are print and medal designs by Bernini relating to his remodelling of the Square and Basilica of St Peter's (e.g. *Plan of Colonnade*, 1659; *Medal Commemorating the Cathedra Petri*, 1662) as well as portraits and drawings of catafalques - temporary structures erected in honour of the deceased (Catafalque to the Duc de Beaufort, 1669). Two further sculptors, Algardi and Cafà, are also represented. A strong group of drawings by Pietro da Cortona documents nearly all his major commissions, including the Villa Sacchetti at Castelfusano (*Vulcan's Forge*, 1628), the Palazzo Barberini (*Woman Carrying Fuses*, 1630s) and the Chiesa Nuova (*Prophets for the pendentives*, 1659-60). The painters who trained in Cortona's studio and flourished in the second half of the century are represented by such important works as Romanelli's tapestry design of *Dido and Aeneas* (late 1630s), Gimignani's *Battles* (1647), and Ferri's *Crucifixion* (1662). Sacchi's studies for *St Anthony raising a Man from the Dead* (1630s)

and the Mola's cartoon of a kneeling man and two further studies in the Department for the fresco *Joseph Greeting his Brethren* (1650s) relate to major commissions carried out by these artists. There are also several drawings by Gaulli, who worked in the tradition of Bernini, and by Maratti, the leading artist of the late 17th century (e.g. *Jael and Sisera* for the Presentation Chapel in St Peter's, 1670s/80s). Examples of the draughtsmanship of Maratti's followers dei Pietri and Passeri signal the final years of the great Baroque tradition.

The collection is particularly strong in finished compositional drawings. Numerous portraits (by Leoni, Maratti), landscapes (Cortona, Grimaldi), caricatures (Mola, Maratti), and designs for altarpieces, engravings (Canini, Testa), sculpture (Algardi) and the decorative arts (Schor) serve to illustrate the variety of the artistic production of the period. A more thorough study of certain aspects is provided by three albums containing, respectively, life drawings, most of which remain anonymous, and studies by Grimaldi and Cortese. For sheer virtuosity Pietro da Cortona's *Jason and the Golden Fleece* and his *River Landscape*, Domenichino's *Head of St Luke*, Gaulli's *Sanguis Christi (Resurrected Christ on Clouds with Angels)* and Ottavio Leoni's *Self-portrait* deserve a mention.

Other Collections

UK	Royal Library, Windsor Castle
France	Louvre, Paris
Germany	Kunstmuseum, Dusseldorf
Italy	Istituto Nazionale per la Grafica, Rome

Further Reading

*Turner, N. with the assistance of Eitel-Porter, R. *Roman Baroque Drawings c. 1620 to c. 1700*. 2 Vols. British Museum Press, 1999

Waterhouse, E. *Italian Baroque Painting*. Phaidon, 1962

Rudolf Wittkower, *Art and Architecture in Italy 1600-1750*. 3rd ed. Harmondsworth, 1973

*Available at The British Museum Bookshop or by ordering from The British Museum Press, 46 Bloomsbury Street, London, WC1B 3QQ. Tel +44 020 7323 1234