

Absolutism and baroque art in 17th century

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Europe in the 17th century was a continent in upheaval. Even this early on, it must be acknowledged that what was just said can be considered as an understatement. There is just not enough space and enough phraseology to describe the depth and sweeping changes occurring at that time. The transformation from Medieval Europe into Industrialized Europe can be likened to birth pangs - painful experiences that would result in something amazing if one can only go through the ordeal.

In this period of turbulence there are two ideas and concepts that until now has caught the imagination of historians and art connoisseurs: a) Absolutism (political/religious) and b) Baroque (art). The complexity of these two terms offers a glimpse into a Europe emerging from slumber and into a collection of states that will rule the world. This paper will look into the relationship of absolutism and Baroque art in the context of the events that shaped 17th century Europe.

At the end of the study the following questions will be answered:

1. What exactly is absolutism?
2. What is Baroque art?
3. What exactly is the relationship between absolutism and Baroque art?

Absolutism For a 21st century American, a simple understanding of absolutism may be a form of rule that is anti-democratic. The modern world is so used to freedom of speech, freedom to assemble/protest and finally ability to choose its own leaders. Thus, anything that displays the opposite is of course absolutism.

But an accurate definition of absolutism is problematic. First of all there is an extreme difficulty tracing its origins and how it developed. According to Peter Wilson, in his book, " Absolutism in Central Europe", " There seems little agreement as to when it emerged, what drove it forward, whether it progressed through distinct phases and when it came to an end" (2000, p. 10). But historians could not be denied. Many had pointed to the end of the Thirty Years War, as the beginning of the age of absolutism.

Wilson elaborated on this timeline when he wrote " The Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 [...] not only concluded the Thirty Years War in a major European peace settlement confirming France as a major power, but strengthened the German princes by weakening the authority of the Holy Roman Emperor" (2000, p. 12). Absolutism therefore is a transition phase between the Dark Ages and the coming capitalist society. And to simplify it much further, "... absolutism existed as a real form of monarchy", according to Wilson (2000, p. 11).

It is now easy to understand that this kind of rule which was exemplified by France, can find its origins in the past monarchical systems that ruled Europe and this include the display of absolute power by an infallible pope. Politics and Art The connection between Baroque art and absolutism is subtle. There is no proof that can show that Kings had a direct hand in developing this art form. Still, the force that propagated it and encouraged it to flourish comes from leadership soaked in absolute power.

This is because the line that connects absolutism and Baroque art is the term counter-reformation. It would be helpful to take one step backwards and see the development of counter-reformation and the subsequent use of an art

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form as a kind of information disseminating tool. It quickly developed into a fashionable thing for Kings to indulge in - collecting Baroque art and commissioning artists to create the same. Baroque Art The cultural product of the 17th century Europe was described as “ Baroque” (Kleiner & Mamiya, 2005, p. 569).

Kleiner and Mamiya then added that it is, “...a convenient blanket term. However, this term is problematic because the period encompasses a broad range of developments, both historical and artistic, across an expansive geographic area” (2005, p. 569). Since it is impossible to have an accurate description of Baroque art that will give justice to all artwork done in this period, then it would be better to console oneself with a basic understanding of Baroque through Mary Marien’s work.

In Fleming’s Arts and Ideas, Marien remarked that in this technique there is more emphasis on forceful striving and restless motion as opposed to calm and repose (2004, p. 359). Mariend added that, “ Grandeur and magnificence prevailed in the baroque arts. Emperors, kings, popes, and princes vied with one another to attract great artists to their courts by offering large commissions” (2004, p. 359). Counter-Reformation Themotivationand the directive to use baroque arts in the Counter-Reformation was traced by Klein and Zerner.

It emanated from the headquarters of the Roman Catholic Church and they wrote, “ In reaction to the Protestant’s attacks against images, the Council of Trent, restating the ideas of the 15th century ‘ Catholic Reformation,’ required art to regain dignity in its forms and coherence (Klein & Zerner, 1966, p. 119). But the effect of baroque arts was not merely to create icons

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that are proper and dignified. It was able to move people by the way the subjects are portrayed.

Reich and Cunningham elaborated on this and they wrote: Carvaggio's work is emotional and dominated by strong contrasts of light and darkness. Annibale Carracci painted scenes of movement and splendor [...] Rembrandt used strong contrast of light and dark to paint deeply felt religious scenes... (2005, p. 195). Conclusion Attempting to define both Baroque art and absolutism proved to be problematic for the proponent since the two terms were used to describe a wide range of developments in 17th century arts and politics.

Still, it was ascertained that absolutism is a form of monarchical rule that existed after Europe emerged from the Medieval Period. It was also a transition phase from the feudal type of governing the land to the more sophisticated nations states and unto the more recent capitalistic society of Europe. Around the same time that this kind of governance was used in Europe - of which France was the prime example of a more distinguishable absolutism - there were other events and movements that could be indirectly linked to said form of governance.

In reaction to an earlier kind of absolutism - of which the Holy Roman Emperor was the prime example - Protestantism was the result of the discontentment of such rule. The counter-reaction of the Roman Catholic Church to the act of splitting the church in two is a program called counter-reformation. In essence it was a method aimed at strengthening Roman Catholics remaining strongholds at the same time actively defending the Catholic Church from further incursions by the Protestants.

Baroque was one of the major tools used to display the superiority of the Roman Catholics, as opposed to the crudeness of the breakaway sect. But it was not only the Church who realized its importance, the rich and royalty spared no expense in collecting and commissioning artists to produce one. Thus, there were two ways that Baroque art became a utilitarian tool in relation to those wielding absolute power. With regards to the Catholic Church an explanation was already given earlier. Concerning royalty, the nobility and wealthy merchants, it was a way of displaying opulence and status.

References

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