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Art Styles – Classical, Mannerist, Baroque

Classical compositions, according to characterizations first elaborated by Heinrich Wölfflin, seek the unchanging truth behind appearances, expressed with simplicity and clarity: each constituent element is complete in itself and shows its relationship to the other elements by establishing the size of the element vis-à-vis the absolute importance of other elements. These are the principles of composition and harmony in classic art, which was informed by the notion that nature is perfect since it is created by God. The visual elements are not placed in relation to the social world, which is inherently imperfect because it is the creation of civilisation, which is weak, or of Fallen Man (the Christian post-classical view), who is flawed.

Mannerism is the term applied to an artistic style (usually painting), which emerged after the Sack of Rome (1527) and in concept and time immediately followed the High Renaissance. Most scholars consider mannerism as a residual category, because it differs from the standards of the Renaissance and High Renaissance, but they have not been able to identify the common thread to these works except to suggest that they are different. Its first defining trait is the high degree of individualism that suffuses each work. Mannerism is actually a fusion of various highly individual styles that poses as an alternative to the neoclassical punctiliousness achieved in the Roman art and architecture of the High Renaissance. Mannerism is when artists were becoming aware of the importance of individual style as a result of the influence of Renaissance humanism, which after all placed the individual at the centre of the visual interpretative universe. Second, under mannerism, artists started breaking away from the rigid geometries of diminishing perspective by experimenting with light and contrast, establishing relative distance (and a spatial organisation) by the use of chiaroscuro and its earlier precursors. This allowed artists to stop using architectural elements as a background setting for their paintings, since there were no longer necessary to establish spatial relationships. Light and dark zones in a painting could now distinguish foreground and background. This freed space

within the canvas so artists could once again, like in the Middle Ages, incorporate allegorical figures. Mannerism is thus a precursor to the Baroque.

Manerist painters also played with size, thus continuing an old tradition of hierarchical scaling in which the size of the object corresponds to its relative importance in social or political terms (or, at the time, in religious terms). Thus, Renaissance painters, operating under the axiom of geometric perspective, could move important elements to the centre top of their paintings because, even if they appeared relatively small, their relative importance could be underlined by their central position rather than their relatively small size. Mannerists also exploited this, where the principal figures were often relegated to the background, creating a dynamic tension between what the public knew about their relative importance to the composition (or their social standing) and how small they appeared in a painting. Geometric perspective allowed the public to compensate for small relative size by invoking their knowledge that centrally framed the figures in a thematic field. The result was cognitive tension.

In the arts, Baroque is a period as well as the style that dominated it. The Baroque style used exaggerated motion and clear, easily interpreted detail to produce drama, tension, exuberance, and grandeur in sculpture, painting, literature, dance, and music. The style started around 1600 in Rome, Italy and spread to most of Europe. In music, the Baroque applies to the final period of dominance of imitative counterpoint, where different voices and instruments echo each other but at different pitches, sometimes inverting the echo, and even reversing thematic material. In painting, Baroque meant the use of contrast between near elements (as opposed to 'far' elements) to conjoin far and near. This could only be done by respecting once again the rules of geometric or diminishing perspective, so that the elements placed in contrast by the use of light and dark (really, light and shade) no longer acted as a spatial framework as in Mannerism. In other words, light and dark no longer define foreground and background, as in Mannerism, and so geometry must once again be used to establish spatial relationships. Light is now indicative of mood, and its use to establish the inherent contrast in contingent components meant that a new interpretative stance developed, since each element, now in a relation of contrast to

another, seem to stress the idea of unity based on inherent tension. This gave free rise to the notion of the individual imagination in interpretation.

The popularity and success of the "Baroque" was encouraged by the Roman Catholic Church which had decided at the time of the Council of Trent, which established its anti-Reformation stance till the fall of Rome in 1870, that the arts should communicate religious themes in direct and emotional involvement. The aristocracy also saw the dramatic style of Baroque architecture and art as a means of impressing visitors and expressing triumphant power and control. Baroque palaces are built around an entrance sequence of courts, anterooms, grand staircases, and reception rooms of sequentially increasing magnificence. In similar profusions of detail, art, music, architecture, and literature inspired each other in the "Baroque" cultural movement as artists explored what they could create from repeated and varied patterns. Visual representations of elements placed in a relation of contrast was also acceptable to the Church because the visual dialectic established by relations of contrast, which emphasised projections of the imagination, was largely confined to architecture and to paintings that often took standard religious and mythological subjects as their themes. The standardisation of the semantic dimension – 'baroque' churches and religious art – seemed to make acceptable Baroque's appeal to the imagination and its 'liberating' style. It is no wonder that Baroque developed in Rome at the same time that the human spirit was freeing itself in other venues from the social and political framework of Medieval thought that had survived in the individualism of Renaissance aesthetics – Reform Protestantism in Germany and the Enlightenment in France. Neither of these was to contaminate Rome and the Church. Nonetheless, Baroque was innovative, especially in architecture, and the combination of a free imagination (established by the use of contrast) and an integrated composition was a seductive combination that had echoes beyond Rome, but elsewhere the major subtext of Baroque – emotional involvement and a freed imagination – did not have quite the same impact as in Rome since Enlightenment and Protestant rhetorics were more than sufficient to fuel growing bourgeois individualism. There, Baroque came to imply a decadent and introspective vision, an aesthetic *orrore vacuo*, so that Baroque came to mean 'over

stylised', since it was confined to an aesthetic movement with few political and social undertones.