

Seventeenth-century Italian Painting

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The Griffin Gallery

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European Art
from the Fourteenth to
Eighteenth Century

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English translation by Susan Schneider

Caravaggio, the Carracci and the Emergence of Baroque

In the seventeenth century only the Church States and the Serenissima "Most Serene" Republic of Venice retained relative autonomy in an Italy controlled by foreign powers. Since the sack of Rome in 1527, Milan, the kingdoms of Naples and Sicily had been under Spanish domination. The grand duchy of Tuscany received Iberian garrisons and the Republic of Genoa accommodated the invincible Armada. Independent duchies such as Mantua-Montferrat, Parma-Plaisance and Modena-Reggio were under French supervision. Yet the Italian peninsula continued to pursue its cultural influence, and the richness of its various regional centres provided a real artistic proliferation.

At the turn of the century, there were two dominant tendencies : in Bologna, followed by Rome, the Carracci formed a movement styled on classicism, while from Genoa to Naples Caravaggio introduced tenebrism and realism.

Caravaggism

Michelangelo Merisi known as Caravaggio (1571-1610) exerted a fascination rarely equalled in the history of painting. His singular work gave rise to numerous copies and interpretations that retained the contrasting treatment of light, the realism of the figures, the immediacy of the scene, the tight framing and the dramatic import of the gestures.

Rutilio Manetti (1571-1639), for instance, contributed to the spread in Tuscany of Caravaggesque naturalism, which he had learned while in Rome. Likewise, Lodovico Cardi known as Il Cigoli (1559-1613) progressively moved away from the sophisticated Mannerism (see Room 10) dominant in Florence, which he had learned from Alessandro Allori (1535-1607) (see Room 10), to espouse the spirit of the Lombard painter. Today there exist several versions of his highly acclaimed *Ecce Homo** painted in Rome around 1607. Cardinal Massimo Massini wished to compare him with two of his brilliant peers from whom he commissioned the same subject : Caravaggio (fig.1) and Domenico Passignano (1559-1638). Cigoli won the contest. His *Ecce Homo* owes much to Caravaggio in the treatment of the light violently illuminating the three figures set brutally in the foreground. Yet although Cigoli provides a non-idealised depiction of Christ's suffering and the coarseness of his executioner, he fails to take the realism as far as Caravaggio who does not hesitate to dress Pilate as a notable of his day, thus raising the question to the viewer of who was responsible for the sentence.

On two occasions Caravaggio stayed in Naples, where – more than anywhere else in Europe – he was to leave his mark on artists and patrons. Throughout the first half of the century, his was hailed as the official style. This is apparent in the *Ecce Homo** by a painter who today remains anonymous.



fig.1- Michelangelo Merisi
dit le Caravage
Ecce Homo
Genoa, Palazzo Rosso
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* An asterisk indicates that the work mentioned is displayed in the room

After a stay in Rome where he encountered Caravaggio's painting, Jusepe de Ribera (1591-1652) arrived in Naples in 1616. His *St. Mary of Egypt** is presented bluntly before the viewer. The chiaroscuro carried over from Caravaggio imbues it with a surprising presence. The painter makes no concessions in faithfully reconstructing the elderly woman's features, prematurely aged through fasting and deprivation. He thus demonstrates his extraordinary ability to convey an intense spiritual life without the realism of certain details appearing irreverent.

Classicism

Bologna was a rich and powerful city that benefited from the political success of the Church States to which it belonged. The history of its painting merges with the 1590 founding by Annibale, Ludovico and Agostino Carracci of a teaching academy known as "Accademia degli Incamminati" (Academy of the Progressives) that developed a stylistic and ideological reaction to Mannerism by advocating harmonious compositions and idealised figures (fig.2). Its influence was to become more widespread when Annibale Carracci and his star pupils (Guido Reni, Albani and Domenichino), left for Rome. Domenico Zampieri, known as Domenichino (1581-1641) was trained by Ludovic Carracci and would join Annibale Carracci in Rome in 1602 to work on the decoration of the Palazzo Farnese. The fact that portraits are few and far between in Domenichino's oeuvre make his portrayal of the Cardinal de Bonsy, with its remarkable pictorial fullness and psychological finesse, even more exceptional.

The style of Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, known as Guercino (1591-1666) followed Ludovic Carracci with whom he went to Bologna in 1617, before succumbing to the Venetian tradition. Within a few years, Guercino developed a naturalistic style and was soon to acquire great notoriety. He directed a large studio and received commissions from Italy and abroad. On the death of Guido Reni, the painter settled in Bologna where he took over his mantle as school head. The *Saint John the Baptist** is a particularly noteworthy example of this singular quality that forged his reputation : the simple and sincere combination of idealisation and naturalism.



fig.2- Annibale Carracci
Domine Quo Vadis
London, Nationale Gallery
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Baroque

The term primarily refers to the architectural style created in Rome in the seventeenth century and which rapidly spread throughout many countries. It is also applied to sculpture, painting and music to designate the cultural movement that succeeded Mannerism in the sixteenth century and was to end with Rococo in the eighteenth century. Closely linked to the Catholic Counter-Reformation, painters developed a triumphant art based on compositions that favoured illusion and wonderment, as well as novel iconographical themes (such as martyrdom, visions and ecstasy).

The Baroque

Around 1620, preferring colour and movement to rigour and moderation, some painters moved away from classicism. In architecture, as well as in sculpture and painting, Lanfranco, Bernini and Pietro da Cortona created works that introduced elements of artifice and illusion, the foundations of Baroque art. From 1630, both tendencies would co-exist throughout Italy, with some cities being drawn more to one or the other of these styles : Naples with Luca Giordano (1632-1705) and Venice with Bernardo Strozzi (1581-1644) appeared more open to the Baroque, while Bologna seemed more receptive to the poetical classicism of Guido Reni. From the latter half of the century, several artists managed to combine both modes of expression. Around 1630, the count of Monterey, the new viceroy of Naples, extended an invitation to Domenichino and Lanfranco who introduced Bolognese classicism and Roman Baroque. The Neapolitan style then developed towards compositions full of movement in warm, colourful hues, as attested by the mellowness of the *Nativity** of Coppola (1597-1659) with its harmonious colours and whirling composition. In the latter half of the century, Mattia Preti (1613-1699) and Luca Giordano embodied Neapolitan Baroque. Mattia Preti was a follower of Caravaggio whose works he discovered in Rome around 1630. His *Moses on Mount Sinai** dates from this period and also bears witness to his attention to colour inspired by the Neo-Venetian movement.

Born in Naples, Luca Giordano trained with Ribera before travelling to Rome, Florence and Venice where he received his first commissions and espoused Venetian tradition as is borne out in the great tenderness of his *Holy Family**, which also bears traces of Pietro da Cortona's legacy. Giordano exerted a strong influence on contemporary painters from Naples, Florence and Venice during the various phases of his intense activity, which earned him the nickname "Luca fa presto".

Seventeenth-century French Painting

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European Art
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to Eighteenth Century

From the reign of Louis XIII to the start of the personal reign of Louis XIV

Two Major Figures from the Reign of Louis XIII : Nicolas Poussin and Simon Vouet

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Considered one of the greatest artists of all time, Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665) was a major seventeenth-century figure both in France and Italy where he spent most of his life. Trained in France, he was to return to his homeland only once (1640-42) at the request of Louis XIII. Soon winning the support of cultured patrons such as Cassiano del Pozzo who possessed *Venus and Adonis**, he was at complete liberty to paint, drawing thematic inspiration from ancient or biblical accounts (fig.1). He progressively became more withdrawn, an isolation conducive to the creation of an ever-purer form tinged with classical grandeur and inspired by the philosophical ideals of Stoicism. By the end of his career, Poussin had earned the respect of all artistic circles. Few artists emulated him in Italy, as the classical character of his painting went against the baroque movement advocated by Bernini or Pietro da Cortona. Yet in France everyone saw him as Raphael's equal and his influence was considerable.



fig.1- Nicolas Poussin
Eliezer and Rebecca
Paris, musée du Louvre
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While Poussin's reputation spread from Italy, Simon Vouet (1590-1649) dominated the Parisian artistic scene. His career began in Italy where he settled in 1614, taking the lead of a group of French painters who were followers of Caravaggism, as is borne out by the anonymous representation of *Herodiade**. As his reputation grew, Louis XIII summoned him back to France in 1627. He was inundated with commissions from the nobility, the Church and the aristocracy. He thus abandoned the sombre manner that had brought him fame in Rome in favour of a light-filled painting, generous in form. This style is, in a sense, the French answer to Italian baroque. It spread considerably, due to the appearance of prints and, particularly, because of the large number of pupils trained in the master's prosperous studio.

These two artists, the most remarkable of their generation, served as powerful models to their many pupils or disciples who, far from being mere epigones, would provide highly inspired representations of their work.

Inspiring their own generation – Blanchard, Dughet and Stella

Jacques Blanchard (1600-1638) spent many years in Italy before returning to Paris where he contributed to the spread of Italian influences. Highly sensitive to Venetian art, throughout his short career he remained attached to generous forms, light gold colours and sensuous rich brushwork. The *Penitent Mary Magdalene** is evocative of Titian's famous models, even if the sense of mystical rapture conveyed reflects baroque models.

The brother-in-law of Nicolas Poussin, Gaspard Dughet (1615-1675) applied himself with passion to landscape art. He had no hesitation in making faithful reproductions of specific sites, wavering between naturalism as a legacy of Venetian or Nordic painters and conforming to the rigorous framework of rational construction advocated by Poussin or Claude Lorrain. Widely imitated during the eighteenth century, particularly in England, his style was also to be as influential as that of the two great masters of landscape.

In the first three decades of the seventeenth century, a whole generation of French painters worked in Rome under Caravaggio's influence, including Vouet, Regnier, Vignon and Valentin de Boulogne. The as yet unidentified author of the fine figure of *Herodiade** was part of this naturalistic movement, which associated realism with the representation of powerful chiaroscuro effects.

Jacques Stella (1596-1657) lived in Italy for a long time, first in Florence where he worked for Cosimo II de' Medici, followed by Rome where he was influenced by classicism and, in particular, by the art of Nicolas Poussin who became a friend. The *Holy Family** was painted just before his return to France, where the refinement and precision of his art contributed to the birth of classicism (fig.2).

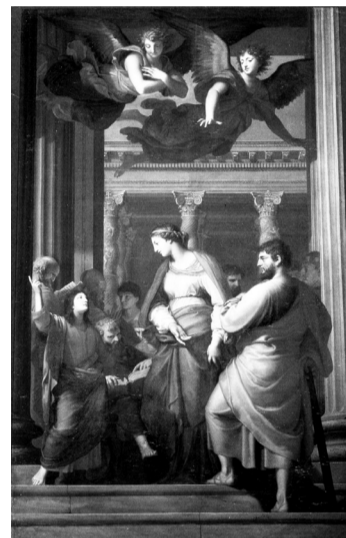


fig.2- Jacques Stella
*Jesus found by his Parents
in the Temple of Jerusalem*
Les Andelys, Church of Notre-Dame
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Atticism in Paris

The year 1648 saw the creation of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, which for several centuries was to provide a stringent codification of form, content and teaching. This marked a turning point in French art with Poussin's mastery (fig.1), references to antiquity and the supreme model of Raphael supplanting Vouet's generous lyricism. These years, clouded by a series of civil disturbances known as the Fronde, saw the naissance in Paris of an art form with particularly pure and elegant lines. This was atticism, which developed during the regency of Anne of Austria. Prime examples include works by La Hyre, Stella and Bourdon. From 1645, Laurent de La Hyre (1606-1656) devoted himself exclusively to landscape, and his love of nature was apparent in his light-filled canvases full of refinement. A mastery of powerful, balanced compositions adds to the limpid clarity of the atmosphere, conveyed by highly precise nuances. Such qualities make La Hyre one of the most sensitive and influential artists of his century.

A Montpellier man of the utmost importance : Sébastien Bourdon

A highly productive artist with a fiery temperament, Sébastien Bourdon (1616-1671) was interested in all genres. He brilliantly adopted all the trends of his times, adding his distinctive touch of a poetic manner and soft tonalities tinged with melancholy.

Two representations of the *Dead Christ** (Room 16), created respectively at the very beginning and very end of his career, provide an opportunity to reflect on the ground covered from his early talent to maturity. Trained in Italy (1634-36), he quickly made a name for himself in Paris with his paintings of rustic life such as *Bohemians and Soldiers at Rest** testifying to his understanding of volume and colour.

While religious commissions were the most prestigious, the portrait was an increasingly popular genre, no longer the prerogative of the aristocracy at this time. Bourdon painted a prince, the brother of Charles X of Sweden (Room 16) with the same attention and sensibility as he would a notable from the Montpellier region, the mysterious *Man Wearing Black Ribbons**. Bourdon painted this latter work during a brief visit to his native city (1657-58). The *Miracle of a Possessed Boy** is the work of an artist who had mastered the principles of classicism advocated by the Royal Academy of Painting, which Bourdon actively helped to found.

1. « classicism »

The term "classicism" takes on a variety of meanings, but in all cases refers to antiquity.

A source of absolute inspiration for both form and idea, antique art embodies an ideal of beauty, clarity and harmony that every age seeks to recover. For the seventeenth century, particularly in France, "classical" is used as the opposite of "baroque" and covers notions of rationalism, the taste for rules, science and order.

2. « baroque »

cf. the card to Room 11-
The Griffin Gallery.
Italian Painting