

Essential Characteristics of Baroque art

1. Stresses naturalism or verisimilitude: attempts to be “like the truth” in what is portrayed.

Compare with Mannerism:

El Greco, *Christ Driving the Money Changers from the Temple*, about 1570-75

Visual qualities of Mannerist painting:

- **Elegant, artificial poses.** Late Mannerism is associated with aristocratic refinement and artifice: elongated, stylized gestures and poses.
- **Spatial ambiguities.** What is woman in left foreground sitting on? Bodies are pressed into small space on one side, stacked, contorted.
- **Confused composition.** Our eye travels through this tangle of bodies arranged around the figure of Christ and doesn't know what to settle upon.
- **Strident and fluorescent colors.** Vivid pink, acid yellow, use of white for high contrast. Do these colors seem true to what people at this time and place would be wearing?
- **Indeterminate light source.** There seems to be an overall source that emphasizes the central characters. But our eye also moves around and picks up on patches of light and cast shadows on fabrics and faces that seem to have multiple sources.

Here's a question to think about:

What role do we play as a viewer in what's happening here? Is this a part of our world, or is it so otherworldly that we cannot identify with it?

Now let's look at the changes that occur in the development of the Baroque:

Honthorst, *The Denial of St. Peter*, about 1623 (greatly influenced by Caravaggio)

Visual qualities of Baroque painting:

- **Realistic poses.** We can envision this type of scene taking place; we can determine a story.
- **Deliberate spatial arrangement.** Our eye starts at the reflected light and travels around the circle of figures, stopping at each to notice what is happening, how they are reacting.
- **Ordered composition** that helps lead the eye through the image. These bodies are all stable and standing on the same surface.
- **Naturalistic colors.** Notice brown, gold, blue, and colors muted by shadows. There is an immediacy of *contemporary dress*; the armor and clothing are of the time. The people are real and the event is taking place in the *here and now*.
- **Evident light source** that emphasizes the central characters.

Question: How is the role we play as a viewer different in this image?

Notice how the story plays out right next to the picture plane; we are almost a part of this circle.

In looking at the two images, we can see how Honthorst aimed for naturalism—to put this event in his own time and place, so people could identify with it—while El Greco created an artificial, mannered, otherworldly scene.

Caravaggio said the task of the competent painter is “to imitate natural things well.” This new emphasis on visual realism makes for art in which we, lowly humans, can participate.

2. Invites us to participate in the mysteries of the infinite and the eternal.

Rubens, *The Union of England and Scotland (Charles I as the Prince of Wales)*, 1633–34
Vouet, *Angels with Attributes of the Passion, the Superscription from the Cross*, 1627

Use of art to create an intense personal/religious experience; observers become active participants (physically, emotionally, and intellectually) in the space and psychology of the work:

- Trompe-l’oeil (“fool the eye”) devices dissolve the barrier of the picture plane, helping the viewer to enter the scene.
- Imagery is not confined within boundaries. Statues transcend the limits of the niche; figures extend beyond the picture frame.
- Illusionism is not trickery; it transfers the mind from the material to the eternal – the eternal extends into our world; brings us in.

3. Allows landscape, genre, and still life to emerge as legitimate categories of art.

ter Brugghen, *The Gamblers*, 1623

Claesz, *Still Life*, 1643

17th century Dutch landscapes (various)

- Have been considered categories of lesser importance up to this time, after history painting and portraiture.
- New patterns of patronage supported artists who specialized in these categories.
- A landscape no longer needs to contain a mythological, religious, or historical event; it can document pride in one’s country (Dutch Republic).

Caravaggisti: artists of the 17th century who were influenced by or worked in the style of Caravaggio.

4. Uses dramatic contrasts between light and dark; uses light to depict rich, textured surfaces.

Caravaggio, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, about 1599

Honthorst, *The Denial of St. Peter*, about 1623

Rembrandt, *Lucretia*, 1666

Caravaggio's influence in his use of light to add drama and expression:

- Use of *chiaroscuro* (which literally means "light-dark"). We saw this technique of modeling in light and shadow in the Renaissance, but look at how extreme the contrast is here. This sharp contrast is a technique called tenebrism, or, in a "dark manner." It was much imitated by Caravaggio's admirers and followers.
- Both realistic and divine illumination are handled naturalistically – for Caravaggio, light is both physical and supernatural. The light is real, but also represents divine intervention, entering into our world as a spiritual force.
- Caravaggio's use of light also enhances the richness of the colors and creates convincing textural surfaces. See how faces, fabrics and other textures come alive in highlighted areas.
- Light is enlightenment, reason, truth. Adds to the psychological impact of the figure (Rembrandt is a master of this).

5. Uses asymmetrical composition, diagonals and recession.

Van Dyck, *The Betrayal of Christ*, 1618-20

Various paintings in the Baroque Rotunda

- Balance is not of primary importance: Baroque rejects the controlled linear perspective of the Renaissance, and exchanges it for movement and recession.
- Asymmetrical composition is created by sharp angles and diagonals, which in turn provide a more dynamic visual experience.
- Similar to point 2, asymmetrical composition may create an *open composition*, where the boundaries of the picture plane are broken. Figures and action fall outside the picture plane and there is a deep recession into space.

Now that you know this characteristic, how do you see artists applying it within various paintings in the Baroque Rotunda?

6. Incorporates classical influence and allegory.

Gaulli, *Diana the Huntress*, about 1690

- A second prominent strain develops called **Classical Baroque**—promulgated by the Carracci/Bolognese School, which revives canons of classical art and traditions of the Renaissance.

- Many artists draw on the tradition of classical mythology, as well as Renaissance ideals and principles of composition, but infuse the classical figure or order with new sensuality and energized form.
- Catholic church establishes an iconographic program for religious art that restricts depiction of the nude to the realm of antique mythology.
- Influence of Mannerism can be seen in the gestures and pose of the figure.
- Catholic church embraces idealized, classical illusionism; prefers beautiful, uplifting images of saints and angels seated on clouds.
- Churches/residences are embellished with images that celebrate triumphs of the Catholic Reformation. Cardinal Ottoboni commissions painting for private use; purity of virginal goddess Diana becomes conflated with Virgin Mary.

7. Evokes emotionalism and preoccupation with the passions of the soul.

Castiglione, *The Immaculate Conception with Saints Francis of Assisi and Anthony of Padua*, 1649-50

Tristan, *Holy Family*, 1613

- Emotional and energetic: the work expands or even breaks the boundaries of the space. In the heavenly plane, draperies flutter in the wind, a heavenly choir adores the Virgin Mary and sings her praises.
- The Saints, on the earthly plane of suffering and sin, are in awe of this ecstatic moment.
- Mary's drapery accentuates her sensuous body. She and the angels float on billowing clouds and divine light surrounds them. The work combines a taste for expression of inner emotion with mysticism.
- Stimulates interest in extreme states of feeling that leads to profound changes in how artists represent the visionary experience: visions are sensuous and ecstatic! And we are there caught up in the emotionalism and passion.
- Spanish Baroque artists evoke emotionalism by making the divine more human, allowing the faithful viewer to connect more deeply and empathetically to the story and figures depicted. Notice how Joseph, Mary, and the Christ child lack any overt signs of their divine status (haloes, rich garments) and are focused on a very mundane and private familial moment.

And the influence of Baroque art continues today. What Baroque characteristics can we find in Kehinde Wiley's work?

Kehinde Wiley, Santos Dumont - The Father of Aviation II, 2009