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History of Western Art
Part Three – Renaissance to Rococo

Assignment Three – Exercise 1

Notes on Chapter Thirteen – The Seventeenth Century in Europe

30 years war. Spain in decline. Dutch republic rises to power. Decline of Holy Roman Empire. More tolerance. Rule increasingly parliamentary/republican/autocratic. Papacy recovering from Protestant Reformation – Rome once again artistic centre as was France. (pp 567-8)

New beginnings in Rome

N Italy, Carracci (idealism) and Caravaggio (naturalism). Contrasting directly with 16th c art theory, naturalism rejects symbolism, draws directly from life (either from sketch to painting or directly from life). Boldly illuminated, unidealized figures against dark, mysterious backgrounds. Senses are means of attaining enlightenment not intellect. Subjects often 'rough/common'. (p568)

'16th c Mannerism' becomes negative term.

Carracci moves away from style of Michelangelo. Palazzo Farnese ceiling; decorative structure painted with clever use of perspective, foreshortening and light. Narrative scenes rendered like framed paintings, placed in front of decorative structure; in style of Raphael, even lighting, classical composition, evenly lit. Carracci sketched prolifically. Drew true to nature but excluding gross forms. Formed basis of art teaching for 2 centuries.

Formation of art 'academies'; study of artistic techniques, lectures, theory of art, debate, practice.

Alternative/addition to Guild training.

Art collecting and dealing became v popular. Increased popularity of portable (easel) art, fewer murals.

Many nobles and wealthy merchants had large collections.

Devotional art loses religious significance as sited alongside wide range of genres; becomes simply another artistic genre. Art becomes status symbol. (pp568-71)

Baroque art and architecture

Initially negative term from Italian 'barocco' (tortuous medieval pedantry) and Flemish 'barrocco' (a deformed pearl). Used in art to describe works that were impure/irrational. Now used to describe religious emotionalism, dynamic energy, exuberant decorative richness of art of certain European/European colonies in America, India. Immediacy, intimacy, pushing of subject to foreground by darkening background. Hard to differentiate from Naturalist/Classicist art. (pp571-72)

Rubens and van Dyck

High status background, classically educated diplomat. Became court painter in Netherlands; as highly esteemed in Europe in 17th c as Titian was in 16th. Extensively studied and copied Italian masters (Titian, Bruegel, Veronese) but combined with uniquely personal, baroque style. Subjects full of active movement, dynamism, emotion, life; composition uses diagonals, foreshortening, realism. Women are womanly, not girlish; paintings neither erotic nor religious even if subject matter implies otherwise. Preference was for large-scale works but small sketches equally exquisite. Extensive sketching meant much art delegated to studio staff (inc. van Dyck) tho' charged less where his own involvement less.

Became v wealthy. Bought landed estate and painted landscapes for own pleasure, still in Baroque style; swooping arcs, capturing a moment in time, use of light, immediacy, realism, passion.

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Van Dyck, student/follower of Rubens, became court painter to Charles I. Painted series of king in range of settings, enhancing his appearance to boost his kingly status. Charles also prolific art collector. (pp 575-78)

The Easel Painting in Italy

Italian artists most sought after. Artemisia Gentileschi first significant female artist since Sofonisba Anguissola. Painting in Naples, her paintings rich in Baroque style; use of chiaroscuro, 'unbalanced', dynamic composition, realism of figures and choice of subject, immediacy. Possibly influenced by being thumb-screwed to validate evidence of seduction, often painted women in dominant positions. Also, however, subjects would be response to requirements of patrons.

In Rome, small realism pictures – beggars/peasants. Idealism preferred for large religious and mythological works. Reni, initially adopting Caravaggio use of chiaroscuro, adopts Carracci's more idealistic style in composition and 16th century Renaissance view of beauty (eg Atalanta and Hippomenes) (p579)

Bernini

Gifted sculptor and artist but also architect, poet. Extrovert, witty, family-oriented, aristocratic. Heavily patronised by popes. Brought Baroque style to sculpture with use of opposing diagonals, asymmetry, realism, use of light and shade. Flesh, hair, drapery realistically represented. Far more than simple 'busts' of earlier periods. V prolific and driven, efficient. Significant contributor to character of city of Rome dominating artistic scene for over 50 years. Baldacchino in St Peter's, Rome; epitomises Counter-reformation, re-establishing Catholicism and its triumph over Protestantism; flamboyant, grandiose, dynamic, extravagant. Addition of colonnades enclosing oval piazza symbol of encircling arms of the Mother Church embracing Catholicism and uniting all in Catholic faith. Fountain of the Four Rivers; spectacular sculpture representing Catholic church's triumph over four corners of earth but also possibility of salvation only through Catholic Church (four rivers of Paradise on hill of Calvary). (pp580-83)

Borromini

Initially worked with Bernini – differences in temperament made work relationship short and difficult. Borromini took non-Vitruvian approach, adopting innovative solutions to structural architecture problems. Accomplished geometrician. Designs mathematically creative. Designing for University allowed freedom from Counter-Reformation design constraints. Creative use of hexagonal space, triangular intersections creating 'star of David', spatial unity, symbols of wisdom throughout, appropriate to place of learning as well as prayer. (pp 584-86)

Poussin and Claude

Two French artists working in Italy. Poussin paints intellectual, small pieces, bought by intelligentsia for their symbolic detail. No irrelevancies in his paintings; all parts have meaning. Intended to be viewed with detailed eye to appreciate nuances and symbolism. Colour, use of light, athletic figures recall Titian, composition carefully balanced.

Claude by contrast, pioneers landscape painting; more popular with aristocracy. Spends many hours sketching, different times, different lighting; pictures representing a Classical Golden Age, inspired by Roman campagna (countryside). Master of light, preferring golds of dusk to bright midday sun. (pp587-88)

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Velazquez

Initially interested in realism but moved on once joining Philip IV's court. Inspired by Titian (many examples in palace) but took painterly use of brushstrokes further. Most famous work, Las Meninas; a painting of painting. Artist is present in his own painting, standing before large canvas, painting picture of the family in his studio. Complex with 11 figures (plus artist), copies of Titian pictures in deep shadow in background, Margarita (the Infanta) the dominant figure, maids of honour, her parents, the king and queen reflected in a mirror, dwarves, palace officials and a large dog. Point of view is from outside painting, looking in. Has feeling of photograph, capturing an instant in an ordinary day; some figures look directly out at viewer. Naturalism, nonchalance of scene belies skill of artist in disguising skill in producing this photographic effect. Secondary purpose to elevate status of artist to that of poet, allowing promotion to nobility (happened later). (pp588-590)

Dutch Painting

Dutch provinces most liberal and tolerant of religions and peoples; Jewish immigrants from Spain and Portugal, Protestants, Catholics. Economy based on commerce. Art of all genres easel in form, collected by all, including merchant classes, shop-owners even craftsmen. Few religious/devotional commissions. Arguably high point in easel painting. (p591)

Hals

Regarded as founder of Dutch school. Painted lively portraits and figures; individuals, lifelike in realism and features. Artists valued on innovation and novelty; reputations rose and fell quickly as did financial fortunes. Hals fell out of favour as smoother style replaced his loose, free brushstrokes. Survived on modest commissions, retaining style, getting darker and more sombre. Rembrandt also victim of fickleness of tastes of patrons. (p592)

Rembrandt

Extensively inspired by other artists, inc non-European but assimilated not copied. Leading portrait painter. Night Watch commissioned by militia company (essentially men's drinking club by this time). Resolved issue of large number of subjects by painting exit from HQ for parade. Figures life-size, canvas large (later cut down, spoiling balance of composition). Rich in atmosphere, colour, chiaroscuro, tempo, poses and gestures. Figures individual; dynamic, many active figures. Prominence of subjects pro rata with contribution to cost. Declined in popularity, did many self-portraits in range of roles, old, young, statesmanlike, reveller, saint. Raised Calvinist, practicing Mennonite. Influenced Healing of the Sick (the hundred-guilder print). Baroque in composition (eye drawn on roving 3-d course) but spiritual not physical; lacks flamboyance and exotic nature of Counter-Reformation. Outcast poor and sick sensitively depicted. Healthy/well-dressed form balance of picture. Both sides pensive, sombre, spiritual. (pp 592-95)

Landscapes

Very popular, clearly of Dutch countryside, painted on spec for purchase by tradesmen, merchants. Aristocracy preferred Italianate scenes. No religious/symbolic/allegorical content, principally just décor.

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Not always identifiable, but clearly Dutch and contemporary (by vehicles, dress etc.). Sky and clouds predominate (often 2/3rd). Originally limited, quite drab palette, later little more colour/brightness. Artists played with reality of buildings/features etc. for composition. (pp 595-600)

Still Life and Genre

Very popular with merchants, tradesmen. Artists often had narrow focus (eg; fruit). Paintings often with moral message/symbolism (eg memento mori), inviting viewer to contemplate life of sin vs purity, live for the day etc. (p602)

Vermeer

Unique mastery of light, reflected light, use of narrow blue/yellow palette. Painted moral imagery. Not prolific, made living as innkeeper and art dealer. Fell out of popularity only to be re-discovered in 19th century. (p602)

England and France

Dutch artists brought art/architecture to England but religious building commissions rare. Wren an accomplished mathematician and astronomer, innovative and experimental designer, preferred Italianate style for rebuild of St Paul's and other churches destroyed by Great Fire of London. Often designs were ongoing, only finalised towards end of construction. Style was midway between Classical puritanism and Baroque exuberance. Lacked spirituality of Italian Baroque, imposing but practical. (p603)

French arts/architecture controlled under autocracy of Louis XIV. Set up Gobelins factory for production of tapestries, furniture. Created single greatest art academy; rigorously controlled very structured, strict, prescriptive. Louvre Classical in design with elements of 'modern' design in coupled columns and segment-headed windows. Palace of Versailles largest palace in world, set in huge, regal landscape. All changes to be approved by Louis XIV, mostly self-reflecting. Unusually cohesive despite involvement of many artisans over 50 plus years of build/development. Influenced Wren when designing enlargement of Hampton Court Palace. (pp603-606)