

# The spirit of Baroque Art

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## Abstract

The Baroque encompasses one of the most fruitful stages of artistic creation that humanity has ever seen and constitutes the first expression of transversal art in history since it manifested itself with common characteristics in different genres such as painting, sculpture, architecture, and even music. Baroque Art is a fundamental element in the study of cultural heritage and American identity, and it is therefore surprising that in this continent there is little dissemination of its legacy, and instead, a series of reductionist or erroneous concepts are spread that explain it only as a pictorial fashion or an exaggerated and strident architectural style. In this article, the characteristics of Baroque art are analyzed through the comparison of different artistic genres, trying to go beyond the appreciation of formal characteristics, to reach the appreciation of the conceptual aspects involved in its emergence and evolution.

**Keywords:** Baroque Art, Caravaggio, Cervantes, Vivaldi.

## Introduction

The Baroque is the name given to a cultural period between the 16th and 18th centuries, which, despite its differences, constitutes, together with the Renaissance of the 15th century, a unit that should be studied as a whole. Contrary to this idea, art history tends to establish an abrupt cut between the two periods, treating the Renaissance as a brilliant and inspiring period, and the Baroque as its extravagant decadence.

The term "baroque" comes from a Portuguese word used to refer to an irregular pearl, and initially had a pejorative character related to the overloaded and grotesque. This stigma has been maintained until today. For example, in the study of the history of architecture, some opinions qualify the Baroque as a decadent art, opposed to Renaissance perfection and surpassed by the classicism of the 19th century. But the Baroque goes beyond this elementary vision. The myth of the overloaded style can be easily dismantled since, in reality, Baroque

works can move from the simplest to the most complex without losing their essence. Maravall points out in this regard:

The baroque author can be carried away by exuberance or he can stick to a severe simplicity. One of the others may serve the same purpose. In general, the use of one or the other, to appear baroque, requires only one condition: that in both cases there be abundance or extreme simplicity (2012, p.335)

The Baroque, in its original stage, exhibits variety but presents common elements that give it a solid unity, even among different artistic genres such as painting and music.

To begin to describe the characteristics of Baroque Art, it should be said that in its origins it was an essentially Catholic and Italian expression (although Italy as such did not yet exist), which later spread throughout the world thanks to the Spanish and Portuguese Empires. However, in the history of art that is studied around the world, Spain and Portugal are practically not mentioned and Baroque Art is

treated tangentially, almost as a brief rarity. Some attention is paid to its birth in Italy, but its later Iberian development is ignored, passing fully to the study of the French Baroque. This has led to an incomplete understanding of the Baroque period since it is not possible to understand it without taking into account the works produced in Spain, Portugal, and Ibero-America.

A book widely used for studying arts will be taken as a reference. It is "The History of Art" by Gombrich (2015), one of the world's best-selling works on the subject. The 2015 edition has 688 pages and 28 chapters. Chapter 12 begins to deal with the Renaissance, chapter 16 takes an approach to 16th century Italy and then jumps in chapter 17 to Germany and the Netherlands. Only in chapter 19, the Italian Baroque is shown, touching briefly the Spanish, to pass in chapters 20 and 22 to the art of Holland, France, and Austria. Except for the mention of Velasquez, Spanish art is not taken into account, and therefore, neither is American art. Portugal is not even considered.

This phenomenon does not only occur in the Anglo-Saxon cultural sphere, but also to some extent in the Hispanic one, where it is not common for a Peruvian to be aware of the value, quality, and quantity of the baroque architecture existing in Mexico, Bolivia, and Ecuador, for example.

#### Content

To understand the Baroque, the Renaissance must first be analyzed, a phenomenon that arose in the Italic peninsula, divided into small independent medieval states but with many links in common: culture, language, religion, and the legacy of a glorious Roman past. About a thousand years had passed since the fall of the Roman Empire, and its memory was still present as an inescapable reference to civilization and greatness.

The Renaissance was nothing more than the search for the return of the Greco-Roman culture through philosophy and art. Thus, painting, sculpture, and architecture took up and reinterpreted the canons of classical art with a certain freedom. This period also marked the

rise of humanism, which meant a new look at the human and earthly world, which to a certain extent had been relegated during the Middle Ages, a period during which the attention of philosophy was focused on the transcendence of life beyond the material. But, contrary to what is commonly asserted, early humanism did not imply a weakening of the Christian conception of the world, but rather an integrative search, where the human was enhanced but understood as part of a totalizing spiritual reality.

One of the works that illustrate this integration is Michelangelo's David. A formally Greco-Roman sculpture that explores in detail the human anatomy through the nude, but also depicts a biblical scene: the young David tensely awaiting the onslaught of the giant Goliath.

The Renaissance is a very short period that suddenly encountered a great upheaval: the Protestant Reformation, a movement that not only broke with the doctrine of the Roman Church but also sought to do so with its art and culture. In response, the Catholic Counter-Reformation, which emerged at the Council of Trent in 1545, consolidated Roman doctrine and persevered in its way of making art. A fairly widespread view describes Counter-Reformation art as a kind of publicity campaign designed to impress the faithful, but this is also a biased view. The Counter-Reformation restructured the doctrine of the Roman Church to seek its diffusion, and art was precisely one of the main vehicles for this purpose.

Thus, Renaissance Art evolved to become the standard of the Counter-Reformation, making its appearance the Baroque as a style defined by the need to transmit different doctrinal aspects and differentiate itself from the Protestant Reformation. That is why, despite its variety, the Baroque has a transversal character in all artistic manifestations. In its origin, it is an art for spiritual teaching, but that nevertheless manages to go far beyond the communication of ideas, to become a way of understanding reality, and life and become a concept in itself.

Lambert analyzes Deleuze's position on the Baroque, who determines it as a "pure concept" by comparing it to a pure concept in philosophy,

that is, the consistency of the Baroque is not built from the collection of historical facts that attest to its existence, but from the persistence of the concept that gives it a sufficient reason to exist (Lambert, 2004, p.6)

Being a concept, Baroque Art acquired its behavior, and that is why it did not limit itself to the repetition of a canon (as the classicist currents promoted in France and England would later do), allowing the development of inspiration, variety, and adaptation to different cultural environments. Despite its diversity and unpredictable nuances, Baroque Art presents a clear homogeneity, not only among related arts but also among different ones.

The world of the Baroque is defined by contradictions. Not only those determined by the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, but also by another much more subtle and silent one: the opposition between faith and reason.

Humanism, the study of Greek philosophy, the creation of new universities, and the advancement of technology in the 16th century gave rise to the desire to explain the world, not only from the point of view of religious faith but also from that of reason. Leonardo da Vinci had investigated the interior of the human body, Copernicus had formulated the Heliocentric theory, and philosophy was beginning to develop what would later become a modern scientific theory.

But the humanism of the 16th century did not seek to separate the human from the divine, but rather to unite them. Rambla (2011) explains that in the "Spiritual Exercises" of St. Ignatius of Loyola "Man is the first word of the first exercise, thus underlining the primordial role of the human person as agent and object of the experience of the exercises" (p.5), an experience oriented, of course, to the encounter with the divinity.

The 17th century introduces Blaise Pascal, who served as a mathematician, physicist, and naturalist, and invented the first gear-based mechanical calculator, known today as the Pascalina, although it is often overlooked that Pascal was also a Catholic theologian. For Pascal, reason, and faith are not at odds, rather

they are part of the same whole since reason alone cannot exist without faith. But reason and wisdom constitute fundamental virtues already contemplated in biblical texts. Notable seventeenth-century scholars of nature, such as Isaac Newton, were first and foremost men of deep religiosity. The nascent rationalism, however, would make its way into the 19th century, and from there, consolidate the dominant current of Western thought that governs to this day. The Baroque, on the other hand, was a point of inflection and equilibrium. It was the exact moment in history when reason and faith were expressed as a contradiction, but at the same time as a unity in permanent tension and equilibrium. More than a transition to rationalism, the Baroque signifies an equidistant point between medieval and modern thought. This contradiction is reflected in art and can be misunderstood by today's viewers as an expression of violence. On this point, Maraval points out that the Baroque is about:

a culture of exaggeration, as such, violent, not because it advocated violence and dedicated itself to bear witness to it - although there was also much of this - but because, from the presentation of the world that the Baroque artist offers, he intends that we may feel admired, moved, by the cases of violent tension that occur and that he collects (2012, p.336)

Tension and contradiction are always present in Baroque Art, contributing to its richness. Antithesis can be mentioned in literature and counterpoint in music. In painting and architecture, chiaroscuro materializes this contradiction, where light is manifested and enhanced thanks to the existence of the penumbra.

The late 16th century Baroque was also a period of crisis and political instability. Artists found themselves faced with a world that was growing before their eyes and at the same time crumbling beneath their feet. They were caught between the desire to rationally explain the universe and the need to believe; and because of this, they found a unique place between the divine and the human, between faith and reason. It is in the midst of that confusion, that mixture of ideas and feelings, of doubts and certainties in tense and

unrepeatable balance, that beauty in art flourished.

While painting depicted religious scenes, the desire to understand the reality that surrounds the human being was one of the factors that originated a tendency towards the realistic representation of the world, also called naturalism.

Glissant argues in this regard as follows:

The baroque style appears in the West just at the moment when a certain idea of Nature is consolidated, which is now conceived as something homogeneous, harmonious, and knowable. Rationalism comes to accentuate this conception, in consonance with its ambition to dominate reality. And, consequently, nature will be conceived as something that can be reproduced through artifice: the imitation of the real goes hand in hand with its knowledge (1987, p.18)

Naturalism also fed the subsequent development of science, since it implied the observation and the search for the understanding of the physical properties of the world to try to reproduce and dominate them. Mumford (1945) finds that this fact also contains an inherent contradiction: "The great series of technical signs of progress that began to crystallize from the sixteenth century onwards had as their basis the dissociation of the animate and the mechanical" (p.77). Until then, the understanding of the physical world could not be separated from the existence of an immaterial, superior, and unknowable one. As indicated above, the origin of Baroque Art was essentially spiritual and therefore it is not possible to situate the artist outside the religious sentiment of the time. Our modern thinking, dominated by a rationalistic conception of nature, cannot fully penetrate the Baroque mind. Objects are simply "things" inanimate and lifeless matter, but in the 16th-century objects could possess spiritual qualities, not by necessarily enclosing an animistic type of power, but by allowing a link between the earthly and the divine. Thus, a work of art was not only dead matter but the form and image that determined its existence transcended the material realm to enable a connection with

spiritual reality. The image, rejected by the Protestant Reformation, became for Catholicism not only a means to teach or transmit the faith, but also an instrument that could lead people to a state of contemplation that would link them to the spiritual plane. From this perspective, the baroque artist had not only a technical and aesthetic commitment but also a mystical one. An example is the famous image of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary painted by Murillo, which is a work of art but has also become through time a religious icon.

If form and image were instruments of connection with the divine world, they had to adequately represent its qualities, and one of them is beauty. The aesthetic in Baroque Art does not start from a frivolous desire to please the senses but from the genuine search for contact with a suprasensible reality.

The idea of beauty as an inherent element of the divine is not born in the Baroque, but it is consolidated. Long ago, in his work "Confessions", St. Augustine asks himself "What are you, my God?" To then describe the nature of God as follows: "Most excellent, best, most powerful, most almighty, most merciful and just, most hidden and present, most beautiful and strong, stable and incomprehensible, immutable but changing everything, never new and never old, renewer of all things" (1986, p.3)

Uña (1996) points out in this regard that "Beauty is for Agustín a capital component of the world, inseparable from its very root and occurrence. It is a universal fact" (p.175)

St. Augustine highlights the unknowable character of a God who is "stable and incomprehensible" and at the same time kind and beautiful. This idea of goodness coupled with divine beauty was reaching its fullness during the sixteenth century, prodigal in the existence of saints and mystics.

Moliner (2013) when analyzing the literary work of St. John of the Cross, points out that for the Spanish religious, "Spiritual beauty is not relative, because the beauty of a soul consists in its goodness" (p. 125), "while infinite beauty is the essence of God, and therefore beatitude consists in seeing the beauty of God." (p.96)

For Baroque Art, goodness and beauty are qualities indistinguishable from each other and God. Divine things cannot be ugly, so the search for faith and virtue must be associated with good behavior and the contemplation of beauty.

Umberto Eco suggests that between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries this mystical or "suprasensible" beauty was understood as the true nature of beauty. Therefore artists, through the search for earthly beauty, actually aspired to find a beauty of a superior nature:

Beauty acquires a high symbolic value, which is opposed to the conception of beauty as proportion and harmony. It is not the beauty of the parts, but that suprasensible beauty that is contemplated in the sensible beauty (even being superior to it) that constitutes the authentic nature of beauty. Divine beauty is diffused not only in the human creature but also in nature" (Eco, 2007, p.184)

Baroque Art, as an instrument of faith, meant then a deliberate search for the beautiful. It could be said that the Baroque became corrupted and fell into decadence when it was taken out of its spiritual context to be adopted by the monarchies as a secular style, a symbol of power and luxury. Probably the highest example is the Palace of Versailles.

But the encounter with beauty can follow mysterious paths. Caravaggio was a genius painter, but also a violent, irascible, and tragic person. His works are characterized by the dramatism obtained thanks to the use of chiaroscuro, a technique through which the light rests softly on the images that the author wishes to highlight, while the rest of the composition remains in darkness. This dramatism would not be complete without the deep expressiveness of his characters, so contrary to Renaissance canons, nor without the heartbreaking humanity that emanates from them. To paint the protagonists of his paintings, Caravaggio was inspired by individuals from his daily environment. In this way, the biblical characters became everyday and imperfect. Such a fact could have been counterproductive at the time. As Gombrich (2015) points out, "Some consider that what he mainly intended was to horrify the

public; that he felt no respect for any kind of tradition or beauty" (p. 392)

One of the most representative paintings of this painter is "The Unbelief of St. Thomas". It shows the moment in which the Apostle Thomas introduces his hand into the wounds of the resurrected Christ. The scene possesses great realism and is striking. "The three apostles observing Christ, one of them inserting his finger into the side, seem quite unconventional. It is easy to imagine that such a picture would shock devout people as irreverent and almost outrageous" (Gombrich, 2015, p. 393). It is not known the exact motivations that Caravaggio had, but the final result is imbued with that suprasensitive beauty to which Umberto Eco refers and summarizes, perhaps in a single image, much of the spirit of Baroque Art.

If in the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo portrays the encounter between the human and the divine as an epic and unattainable moment, in "The Incredulity of St. Thomas", Caravaggio does the opposite, making it imperfect, close, intimate, and tangible; so much so that it can become our own. Caravaggio's greatness, intentional or not, consists in turning the divine into the human, and the human into the divine. Thomas is an earthly being, his face shows the passage of time, he wears torn clothes, he doubts, he is afraid, he wants to see to believe, and finally, he finds an answer that will mean his elevation. It is difficult to find a picture that can be so dramatic, profound, and at the same time moving. The confused Thomas is situated between reason and faith, between doubt and the desire to believe, between the tangible and the intangible. Caravaggio's image of Thomas embodies the whole Baroque dilemma.

If Caravaggio, immersed in this dilemma, finally finds the suprasensible beauty, Miguel de Cervantes finds the longed-for virtue. His novel "El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha" is one of the most important works in the history of literature, although it is almost always neglected to mention the fact that it belongs to the Baroque period.

Why has a satirical novel about a mentally unbalanced subject transcended time to become

universal? All kinds of interpretations have been written about it, but just like Caravaggio's Apostle Thomas, Don Quixote represents a refined expression of baroque contradiction as a character who stands between the real and the imaginary, between logic and belief, and of course between reason faith. Don Quixote goes mad, but it is in this way that he can escape from rationality. The journey of Don Quixote and Sancho is like the human life journey, where rational experience interacts with that of the spirit to shape the vision of the world. This couple is the same character struggling between two natures seeking balance and truth. One is not complete without the other.

Don Quixote, through madness, can once again believe and have faith in human virtue. His actions, though seemingly absurd, are guided by a sense of kindly action for the benefit of his fellow man, and the search for a nobility that gives meaning to existence. Just as the Baroque is vulgarly branded as "exaggerated", Quixote is often seen as simply alienated. In reality, Don Quixote portrays the human spirit, as fruitless, tragic, and tireless in search of lost goodness: "- Don Quixote I am -Don Quixote replied-: he who professes to succor and help the living and the dead in their needs" (Cervantes, 1986, Vol.1 p.458).

We also do not fully know Cervantes' creative motivations, and although the character of the work is not religious, Don Quixote is a Christian character who tries to find that balance between the divine and the human. It is perhaps in this passage of the work, in which Don Quixote advises Sancho, that this idea is very well expressed:

First of all, O son, you must fear God; for in fearing him is wisdom, and being wise you will not be able to err in anything. Secondly, you must set your eyes on who you are, trying to know yourself, which is the most difficult knowledge that can be imagined (Cervantes, 1986, Vol.1 p.357).

One of the most relevant characteristics of the Baroque is that, despite being defined by a very delimited and to a certain extent controlled

ideological context, it leaves a great space for inspiration, improvisation, and surprise.

Renaissance architects such as Palladio, Vignola, and Alberti bequeathed a series of treatises explaining the rules of classical architecture, which in the 19th century would be very useful for the development of neoclassical architecture. On the other hand, during the Baroque, it is very difficult to find stylistic manuals while observing that architecture unfolded with imagination and unusual creative freedom.

The architect Bruno Zevi, perhaps because he was Italian, is one of the scholars who understood the Baroque best because, moving away from the common explanation focused on the apparent formal "exaggeration", he analyzed the contribution of inspiration and freedom. Freedom was structured within the devout conceptual framework of the Counter-Reformation (Basso, 1987), which gave the architectural works a solid coherence. Zevi in his classic work "Knowing how to see architecture" explains:

The Baroque is spatial liberation, it is mental liberation from the norms of the treatises, from conventions, from elementary geometry, and everything static, it is also liberation from symmetry and the antitheses between internal and external space. Through this desire for liberation, the baroque attains a psychological significance, which transcends the architecture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, achieving a state of mind of freedom, a creative attitude freed from intellectual and formal prejudices (Zevi, 1958, p.75)

This freedom, however, also found itself submerged in a permanent contradiction between the application of classical canons, which did not disappear, and the desire to find new expressive forms. Gonzales (1998), highlights this opposition when studying the works of Bernini and Borromini, the architects par excellence of the Italian Baroque period:

In the 600s, that is, in the middle of the Baroque period, this antithesis is very clearly expressed: the antithesis between Bernini and Borromini. Bernini is a man who fully accepts the system,

and whose originality consists in finding new ways to fully express in form the ideal value of the system. With Borromini, on the other hand, begins the criticism and gradual elimination of the system, the search for a direct experience (González, 1998, p.52)

The freedom allowed in Hispanic America the creation of new pictorial representations by local artists who, within an already established structure, incorporated their elements to create a Baroque different and at the same time common to the European one. But probably, the art where inspiration as a driver reached its maximum expression was music. It is in this field where the Baroque made its most important and transcendent contribution to the history of world art with the invention of the polyphonic music used today, the orchestra, and the opera.

Basso points out that in the 17th century, "music underwent extraordinary transformations, inventing forms that were to last for centuries and organizing the harmonic language on bases destined to remain well beyond the era in which they were born" (1987, p.11)

Although secular music was also developed, it is in the religious sphere where music acquired a greater dimension. The Baroque had a constellation of universal composers such as Monteverdi, Corelli, Scarlatti, Vivaldi, and J.S. Bach (who, although a Protestant, was influenced by the Italian school, as was Handel). Swain believes that the baroque has left a treasure of sacred music. The aesthetics of opera exerted its influence on Baroque sacred music almost as persuasively as on secular music, and its effect was amplified by an event that preceded its invention, the Council of Trent (2013, p.38)

Baroque music in general also expresses a permanent contradiction: dramatism, instruments playing at the same time in confrontation and balance, speed changes and unexpected dynamic turns, tension at the limit, and vigorous movements. It can be severe and moving, complex and minimalist, logical and mathematical as well as unpredictable and improvised. Traditions of liturgical improvisation can be traced directly back to the

16th century. In Roman Catholic masses, the organist could replace simple chants with improvisations based on his melodies. Thus, many baroque scores of toccatas, preludes, and other genres derived from improvisational habits may be polished versions of creations made on the spot (Swain, 2013, p.146)

Bach, for example, was able to perform with solvency in a precise and almost mechanistic environment, but he was also able to improvise with equal mastery. It should be noted that nowadays, it is common to hear Bach's pieces interpreted in the Jazz genre, more than any other composer before the 20th century. Vivaldi, a Venetian priest, composed a Gloria of twelve pieces (RV 589) where contrasts prevail, unlike the music of previous periods, which was markedly uniform. One can appreciate for example the solemnity of *Et in terra pax hominibus* in contrast to the overflowing joy and dynamism of *Domine Fili Unigenite*. The variety and contrasts, the contradiction and balance of elements in harmony, result in a musical composition that not only achieves the task of conveying a specific message but also reaches the longed-for suprasensible beauty; that beauty whose search and encounter will determine the true spirit of Baroque Art.

## Conclusions

The Art of the Baroque cannot be understood only from a formal analysis, because its scope goes beyond the stylistic aspects, to merge into a single conceptual body with the philosophy and theology of the time.

It is an essentially spiritual art that aims at the transmission of the Christian faith, but also at the encounter of suprasensible beauty.

Baroque Art should also be studied considering a transversal approach to the different artistic genres, since they share common elements and feedback on each other, constituting a total art phenomenon.

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