



Research Paper

Baroque Art History

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The paper analysis the evolution of Baroque art and its development.

The artistic style popularized as Baroque had different stylistic variations and sub-phases of development and diffusion. The movement/ style, according to many, began in Rome, but thrived in its various forms in different parts of Europe (Spanish Baroque, Northern Baroque, French Baroque etc.) at different time periods between the late 16th to early 18th centuries CE (1580-1720).

The style has often been divided into 3 phases. (It is important to remember that such chronological boundaries are usually arbitrary but nevertheless useful in examining the evolution in Western art).

The Phases of Baroque Art-

1. Early Baroque (1580s-1620s) – Many art historians believe that Baroque developed from the Mannerist style that emphasized exaggerated and ornate design and form. The early phase of Baroque developed under papal and religious patronage. Italian artists such as Annibale Carracci (d.1609) and Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (d. 1610) were amongst the earliest pioneers of the style. Their work was characteristic of Early Baroque, which was relatively less grandiose and ornate. Early Baroque paintings and architecture was more realistic and natural, but still evoked intense feelings in the audience, especially piety. It was also somber.

2. High Baroque (1620's-1670's)- This period saw the development of theatricality and techniques like trompe l'oeil (trick of the eye) etc. The High Baroque period saw the emergence of more dramatic, ornate and even sensuous art. Italian sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini (d. 16810) and Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens (d. 1640) were important artists whose work reflected the aesthetics of high Baroque. Their works emphasized intense emotion, dramatic realism and movement.

3.LateBaroque(1670's-1720's)-ThecenterofB.artisticstylehadshiftedfrom Italy to France by this period. (Many consider the Rococo style of France to be the last phase of Baroque art.) The art in this period was less intense and dramatic, more subdued and restrained. The subtle style seen in the work of Rembrandt (d.1669), Nicholas Poussin (d. 1665), Diego Velasquez (d. 1660) is an example of this phase of Baroque.

Baroque was not a monolithic style; it had a lot of variations and differences.

Main Features/ Aesthetic of Baroque Art-

There were many regional variations found in the art of this period. Italian Baroque was very different than Spanish and so on and so forth. For our clearer understanding of this style, we can identify certain stylistic qualities that characterize Baroque, which will also help us to differentiate it from other artistic styles like Renaissance and Rococo etc.

a. Grandeur and extravagance-

It relied on decorative surfaces and an ornate aesthetic. The art and architecture were very elaborate and flamboyant. The paintings had a rich and radiant color palette, elaborate iconography and glossy finish. Similarly, the architecture of baroque was embellished, with gilded interiors and added fixtures.

b. Emotional and sentimental appeal-

Baroque art was direct, to-the-point, obvious and dramatic. It was meant to evoke emotions like piety and awe; it was aimed at the heart and not the mind. Baroque paintings, unlike Renaissance paintings which had a serene and tranquil quality, had themes and figures where intense passion and emotions were clearly depicted. It was also rich in allegory and symbolism.

c. Movement and dynamism-

Baroque art and compositions showcased movement, drama and action. Baroque paintings and sculptures created this movement using slanting figures, twisting limbs, swirling clothes and draperies. In architecture, this movement was showcased through curving walls, dramatic angles, distortions and other visual elements.

d. Use of light and shade

It was dark to evoke drama and intensity. This technique, called 'chiaroscuro' (light and dark) had developed during the Renaissance period, was further developed during the baroque era. The use of light and dark was exaggerated to create tenebrism (dark) which was a reference to a style of painting characterized by deep shadows and darkness all over and one harsh source of light. This style was especially popularized by Caravaggio who used it to create a violently dramatic effect. Tenebrism was also seen in architecture where one small window would let in light in an otherwise gloomy interior.

e. Realism and naturalism-

Baroque art was also realistic, and not always dramatic and intense. Baroque paintings had themes from daily life- still life of fruits and flowers, market and household scenes etc. Many painters focused on ordinary themes and used a very realistic style (not stylized or symbolic). There was attention given to detail but not the kind of scientific precision and accuracy of details seen in Renaissance art. Another important difference from Renaissance period was seen in the landscape paintings- Baroque landscape did not emphasize human figures, instead nature was given primacy in the composition(was it due to the new scientific knowledge available and the discovery of the New World which challenged classical knowledge and the unique position occupied by Man in the universe?). Even the religious art of baroque was more realistic and less idealized as compared to that of the Renaissance, for example, in Caravaggio's paintings, religious figures appear with their natural flaws, unlike their ideal depiction in Renaissance paintings. We can also compare Carracci's famous sculpture *Pieta* (1600), depicting Christ's body in the arms of Mary, with Michelangelo's *Pieta*(1499)- the former shows emotions and pain on Mary's face, while the latter had a more serene and idealized Mary.

f. Illusion and trompe l'oeil (trick of the eye)-

Baroque art often used visual illusions to deceive the viewer into thinking that a painting or fresco is three-dimensional. The optical illusion of depth/space or height was created by quadratura paintings (illusionistic ceiling paintings) creating the illusion of open sky and height on a flat surface. Another style of illusion paintings was quadri riportati (transported paintings) which created the illusion of looking into an open window, which lead the audience to see the painted scenes at eye level. Illusion to create space and height was also used in architecture with the help of grand columns, high ceilings and richly ornamented surfaces.

g. Baroque themes-

Baroque paintings were religious in nature and depicted a variety of spiritual themes. But Baroque art could also be sensuous and ordinary. The Counter Reformation Baroque art used religious iconography, while artists like Rubens worked on sensual themes, considered erotic and scandalous by some (the paintings of Rubens which depicted curvaceous women in classical settings gave origin to the term 'Rubenesque', a reference to Rubens' drawings of voluptuous women or female nudes). In the North, art was realistic- made on a smaller scale, to be

bought and sold in the marketplace by the middle classes, reflecting bourgeois values and taste. Themes from everyday life, portraits, historical paintings, still-life paintings of fruits, flowers were all quite popular.

*Baroque art is often misunderstood. The term has negative connotations, meaning an artistic style which is deformed, bizarre, outrageous, provocative and vulgar. This understanding largely rests on the late 18th and 19th century artistic criticism of the style. Because of the growing popularity of the classical themes in the 18-19th centuries, Baroque was seen as a style of 'dramatic disharmony', being overtly sensual and extravagant.

Based on the above discussion, we can say that Baroque art was a much more complex and sophisticated art style which arose out of the wider socio-cultural, political and economic developments of late 16th and 17th centuries. We should be careful of a narrow classification of Baroque and study it as a dynamic and varied style.

A. Baroque Paintings-

Earliest forms of Baroque art were seen on murals and frescoes in Rome (part of Catholic Reformation, a continuation of Renaissance art to a large extent). Apart from Italy, Spain, France and Netherlands were other centres of B. art. B. paintings were dynamic, dramatic, with brilliant use of bold colours and intense 'tenebrism' (dark background and careful depiction of light to create a contrast). All this, and the brilliant techniques of masters like Van Dyck, Ruben's, led B. paintings to have a varnish and gloss which added to their appeal. B. art often had heavy, bold brushstrokes, conveying movement and energy and complex and elaborate decorative elements. There was also the use of perspective to create a sense of space.

Realism was another concern for these artists, and paintings showed expressions, facial features of persons and details of natural background as much as possible. Monumental ceiling frescoes, with illusionist art, were also an important feature of this period. Most importantly, B. paintings had great variation; they could depict the commonplace and everyday (e.g. the work of Dutch painters) or could be dramatic and theatrical, gloomy and somber (e.g. the art of Italian masters).

Important Baroque painters:- Michelangelo Caravaggio (d.1610, Italian), Annibale Carracci (d. 1609, Italian), Artemisia Gentileschi (d. 1656, Italian), Diego Velasquez (d. 1660, Spain), Peter Paul Rubens (d. 1640, Flemish), Anthony Van Dyck (d. 1641, Flemish), Rembrandt (d. 1669, Dutch), Johannes Vermeer (d. 1675, Dutch), Nicholas Poussin (d.1665, French), George La Tour (d. 1652, French)

B. Baroque Sculpture-

Sculpture and relief work in this period was also influenced by the Baroque spirit. It had immense dynamism and vitality and vivid movement. It is often said that the baroque period removed the barriers between paintings, sculpture, architecture- all were seen as part of the whole/ all of these visual arts were fused together to make Art. B. sculpture had strong curves, moving figures, distorted and twisting bodies swirling around an empty space/ vortex, swirling draperies, intense emotions and pathos, trick-of-eye illusions and gilded decoration. There were two kinds of sculpture in Baroque art -architectural/ relief sculpture (relief work here means giving the impression that sculpted material is raised above the background. Such sculptures were a part of a building, adding extra decorative elements to a structure like sculpted friezes or pillars,) and traditional sculpture (standalone sculpture, an artistic piece in itself, like sculpted fountains placed in large open spaces, piazzas or gardens). The sculpture was meant to be viewed from all angles and sides, rather than from the front or centre. GianLorenzoBernini(d.1680,Italian),AnnibaleCarracci (d. 1609, Italian), Andre de Notre (d. 1700, French), Nicholas Coustou (d. 1733, French), Pedro de Mena (d. 1688, Spanish)

C. Baroque Architecture-

The buildings were complex designs and were planned as a 'continuous whole', meaning the entire structure (building, gardens, open spaces etc.) were seen as a whole. Complex plan and oval design, dynamic and irregular shapes, slightly curving walls, dramatic/ projecting façade, gilded interiors, use of curling/twisting motifs like scrolls, ribbons, careful use of light and space are some features of architecture of the Baroque period. Other features included- illusionist/ vividly painted ceilings, domes and high ceilings, grand stairways, high windows to let in light alternating with depressions/alcoves which were dark, rich embellishments, etc. Some of the best specimens of Baroque architecture are the ecclesiastical buildings and the churches of Rome and other Catholic regions of Europe (in contrast to the austere and modest style of Protestant Churches of England etc.).

As the Art was seen as an important instrument to gain popular support for the Roman Catholic Church after the Protestant Reformation, the churches of this period were exquisite and grand, showcasing the power and influence of the Church. Their architecture drew on Catholic symbolism and piety. These churches often had oval plans, grand altars, curving walls, high ceiling, ornate exterior and interiors, use of gold and gilded material,

Main Baroque architects:- Gian Lorenzo Bernini (d. 1680, Italian), Francesco Borromini (d. 1667, Italian), Churriguera family (17th-18th c., Spain), Francois Mansart (d. 1666, France), Jules Mansart(d. 1708, French).

D. Baroque Music-

Music was also affected by the cultural-artistic movement of Baroque in 17th c. Music became more elaborate, dramatic and polyphonic (multiple independent melodies performed simultaneously), with new instruments and styles (like opera, cantata) gaining popularity. Chamber music and choir performances became more elaborate and theatrical. Music was seen as a powerful tool for communicating emotions and evoking passion. Polyphonic music, different harmonies, public concerts were popular in this period, the emerging middle class becoming active patrons and audience for such music.

Main Baroque Musicians-Claudio Monteverdi (d. 1643, Italian), Antonio Vivaldi (d. 1741, Italian), Johann Sebastian Bach (d. 1750, German), Jean Baptiste Lully (d. 1687 Italian-French)

E. Baroque Dance-

Dance of this period was linked to the developments in music, art, theatre etc. New dance styles were evolved like the ballet which was a style developed for court performances. Dancing was now seen as a social activity and the upper classes often took part in the dances arranged at the royal court etc. Academies of Dance (established for training dancers) were established for the first time. Baroque Dance reached new heights under Louis XIV's patronage in France.

Baroque Theatre – Theatre also reflected growing complexity, exaggerated motion and dramatic style of this period. 5-act plays, extravagant staging, complex stories, elaborate costumes, opera, ballet were popular in theatre. Huge public theatres (horse- shoe design, many balconies and a Royal Box) were established in this period

G. Baroque Fashion –

Baroque features also influenced the style of clothing, hair, interior design in this period. Rich and luxurious materials like silk and velvet were preferred by the upper classes and the middle classes who tried to emulate them. Clothing became elaborate along with the wigs and jewellery.

Baroque Art- Regional Variations and Main Artists

The Baroque movement encompassed many variations within itself. The Art (Visual, Fine) of different parts of Europe reflected different artistic styles, themes, features and techniques. Each region produced a Baroque art which was unique and distinctive.

Given below are the important features and main artists from some of these different iterations of Baroque-

Italy

The art style is said to have developed and begun in Italy. Italian Baroque was ornate, rich, powerful and largely religious in form. It emerged as a result of the Counter-Reformation and as a reaction against the Mannerist style, which was seen as unrealistic, formulaic and unemotional. Rome was an important centre of B. – the style was embodied in its lavish, ornate Churches and other forms of architecture, dynamic, colossal sculptures and fountains, and in the dramatic paintings of late 16th c and 17th c. Naples, Milan, Venice also saw a triumphant display of baroque.

Leading Italian Artists-

- M. Caravaggio (d. 1610)- one of the most influential artists of 16th and early 17th c., known for his powerful religious paintings, use of shadowy colours, bold realism intense use of tenebrism (the term Caravaggism came to refer to his dramatic use of the technique of tenebrism and chiaroscuro) His style influenced many other artists. His paintings had a strong emotional effect. He worked for some of the biggest patrons of the period, including Pope Clement VIII. His art was commissioned for some of the biggest churches and chapels of Italy. (Most Famous painting- The Calling of St. Matthew, a masterpiece of B. art, showcasing his naturalistic style presented in dramatic form, Christ bathed in light symbolizing his holiness)
- A. Caracci (d. 1609)- not as naturalistic as Caravaggio, his art was more ideal. His palette was also less stark than Caravaggio, he used glimmering, bold colours giving his paintings a new vitality and energy. His art was eclectic- religious themes, portraits, landscapes etc. He made his paintings on walls (frescoes) and also created sculptures (Most famous paintings- Assumption of the Virgin and The Pieta)
- Artemisia Gentileschi (d.1656)- one of the most famous female artists, known for her dramatic tenebrism and violently intense paintings. She was assaulted by her art tutor and the attack and its trauma was reflected in her work- her paintings had a violent intensity, stark realism, strong women protagonist. (Most famous painting- Judith Slaying Holofernes)
- Gian Lorenzo Bernini (d. 1680)- dominating figure in Baroque sculpture and art. He was one of the most well-regarded architects and sculptors of the period, known for his lavish churches and grand buildings, expressive and dynamic sculptures and fountains. His art was representative of a triumphal and glorious Counter Reformation carried on by the Catholic Church. (Most famous sculpture- David and the Ecstasy of St. Theresa)
- Francesco Borromini (d. 1667)- Famous sculptor and architect. He designed the San Carlo Fontane, a monastic building and Santo Alla Sapienza, Rome.

Spain

Spain had witnessed a 'Golden Age' (Siglo de Oro) in the 16th c. during the period of the Spanish Habsburg rule. Spain was also a centre of a resurgent Catholicism. 17th c. was a period of economic, political decline and instability, but Spanish art, literature and culture continued to flourish and develop. In fact, art in this period became more complex, lavish and elaborate.

Spanish Artists-

- Diego Velasquez (d.1660)- one of the greatest painters of the Baroque period. His paintings were well-regarded for their 'optical realism' where the boundary between reality and representation/illusion became blurred. He was commissioned by royalty, nobility, the Church to produce religious paintings, portraits and 'bodegones' (scenes from everyday life). (Most famous painting- Las Meninas, a complex painting which makes the viewer question representation, imagination and reality)
- Churriguera family- A family of famous architects and sculptors from Salamanca, known for intricate, exaggerated buildings and ornate surface decoration.

Northern Europe (Flanders/ Flemish and Dutch region)

These regions of Northern Europe, especially Holland, were very prosperous and had well to do bourgeois and middle classes. This region had largely a Protestant population, and a civic society marked by republican values.

The art produced in this region reflected the socio-economic, political and cultural milieu. It was more realistic, restrained, sober, less ornate or grand but very detailed and life-like. Northern Baroque Art was characterized by genre paintings, still-life, portraits and historical paintings which were brought by merchants, middle classes etc. The paintings were produced on a mass scale and became a lucrative business. There were many academies of art in cities like Amsterdam, Utrecht, Haarlem etc.

Leading Northern Artists-

- Peter Paul Rubens (d.1640)- Known for his dramatic and sensuous paintings, especially his portrayal of women ('Rubenesque'-a term popularized by his paintings of voluptuous and curvaceous women). His art had bright colours, realistic details and exuberance (most famous painting-Venus and Adonis).
- Rembrandt (d. 1669)-Dutch master known for his realistic portraits, self-portraits, strong use of tenebrism and dark and sombre paintings. His paintings melded the spiritual with the earthly and had deep emotional tone. (Most famous painting- Philosopher in Meditation).
- Johannes Vermeer (d.1675)- Dutch artist known for his realistic genre paintings, 3-dimensional effect and use of bright pigments for his colour palette. (Most famous painting- Girl with the Pearl Earring)

France

If there was a 'Baroque' movement in France, it was more classically oriented than other parts of Europe. Baroque was a permutation of the Classical style here. French Baroque adhered to the rule of restraint, symmetrical proportion and classical elements popularized during the Renaissance period. Art was an important instrument utilized by the Bourbon kings Louis XIII and Louis XIV, to enhance the grandeur and power of their absolute monarchy. The court and aristocracy patronized many artists, sculptors, architects and a distinctly French-Baroque style was developed in this period, different from the ornate and gilded Baroque of Italy, Spain etc.

Leading Artists-

- George la Tour (d. 1652)- French painter who was a proponent of 'Caravaggism', his religious and genre paintings showcased strong and intense use of light and shadow, realism. (Most famous painting- St. Jerome Reading)
- Nicholas Poussin (d. 1665)- French Classical-Baroque artist, briefly worked as a royal painter in Louis XIII's court, leaned more towards Classical forms and themes (straight, geometrical and restrained style, cerebral themes from Classical Greco-Roman mythology, carefully composed and realistic landscapes with brilliant use of colours in his distinctive 'Poussin Sky') (Most famous painting-)
- Charles le Brun (d.1690)- court painter (Pintre du Roi- First Painter to the King) to Louis XIV, made great 'battle scenes' and portraits to adorn the walls of Versailles. His regal, Classical inspired style matched with the French king's political-artistic intentions and their collaboration produced many masterpieces. He was also the Director of the French Academy of Art and Sculpture, Paris and the Head of the Gobelins Tapestry, the leading workshop in the country producing tapestries, art to supply to the aristocratic classes. (most famous painting-The Fall of the Angels)
- Jules Mansart, Robert de Cotte, Charles le Brun, Andre le Notre- architects, interior designers and painters involved with the transformation of a hunting lodge at Versailles into a grand and extravagant palace-complex during the period of Louis XIV between 1660-1710. The sprawling palace and its equally extensive open ground and gardens were built in a Classical-Baroque style, with an elaborate layout, grand arches and pavilions, lavish interiors, symmetrical gardens. The design and form of Versailles was not based on purely aesthetic reasons, but it was an expression of the strong, ordered and all-encompassing reign of Louis XIV. It was a symbol of his absolutist monarchical rule and became an inspiration for other rulers across the continent.

Rococo Art

A distinctive artistic style from the mid-18th c. (1720's-1760's), which is often seen as the last phase of Baroque by many and a transitional phase by others. It might have many similar features to Baroque and may be almost indistinguishable with it according to many, but both had differences and distinctive features . Rococo flourished in France where it was first developed and mastered, then spread to Italy, Central Europe. Over the course of its evolution, its 'Baroque' features became more decorative and ornate, and also more distinctive from the previous art style from which it had evolved.' Rococo comes from the French word 'Rocaille', a term referring to the method of decoration which used shells, pebbles, small decorative stones etc. to decorate sculptures, fountains.

Rococo style was a highly ornamental style, more playful, less sombre than Baroque. It was a reaction against the formal, heavy intensity of Baroque. Rococo art was not meant to be used as a tool of the Church or the Absolutist State or meant to further their interests and have a larger, symbolic meaning. It had a carefree exuberance and was meant to appeal to the aesthetic sense of the audience.

This artistic style was seen not just in paintings and sculptures, but architecture, porcelain, furniture and interior design, music etc.

Origins/ Factors responsible for its development

Many scholars argue that the origins of this ornate style can be seen in the larger political- social, intellectual developments of the period. 18th c. saw a decline in the power and status of the Church and the Absolutist monarchies all over Europe, the two institutions which had supported and patronized the Baroque movement. These institutions of authority were now under scrutiny. People in 18th c. Europe were more prone to question their blind faith in such traditional institutions and there was a growing atmosphere of critical inquiry and independent thinking.

The Enlightenment also popularized such ideas of Reason, individualism, critical thought, and belief in the ability of Man. Early 18th c is seen as a period of optimism, economic and political reforms, prosperity and stability (unlike the turbulent 17th c.) The style developed in France before becoming popular in other parts of Europe. In France, the early 18th c was the period of Regency (1715- early 1720's)- Philippe d' Orleans was the Regent ruling on behalf of the minor Louis XV . This period in French history was seen as one of great artistic and cultural developments, courtly patronage, flamboyance and frivolity by some.

This period is seen as distinctively different from the equally grand, but more official, rigid and formal period dominated by the powerful Louis XIV. Thus, Rococo was not meant to be a didactic or religious/ devotional style

In France, its emergence is largely seen as a reaction against the rigid formalism of Louis XIV's period. After his death, French nobles felt freer from the control of the centre , built their own chateaus, salons and workshops where they patronized artists and painters of their preference. This led to the development of an art style which was less formal, livelier and more playful. Rococo represented the age of aristocratic prosperity in France and other parts of Europe (before the period of French Revolution).

There was a demarcation between the public and private space, and the nobles required a different kind of art to decorate their palaces, chateaus which was more subtle, decorative and less formal. It was popularized by the salonnières and noble women like Madame Pompadour whose patronage set the taste for others to follow. It was the art of the *le monde*, the fashionable and elegant French aristocratic classes.

After the French Revolution, there was a criticism of this style for being too frivolous and trivial. It came to represent the decay and moral laxity of the French aristocratic classes who had no inkling of the real economic and social problems besetting the country.

Features of Rococo

1. Exuberant and highly decorative style- Rococo was marked by a lightness of form (as seen in the delicate brushstrokes and use of pastel colours) but it was a highly ornate and detailed art. There was use of gilded elements in sculptures and buildings, the paintings were very detailed and theatrical. It was an optimistic, lively and aesthetically pleasing style. It did not have the vitality, drama and intensity of Baroque.

2. Pastel colours and curving decorative features- Most Rococo paintings used pearlescent/ opalescent colours (imitating colours of natural gemstones- ivory, gold, light blue, pastel pink) and light but pleasing pastel tones. The colours and pigments were used in such a way as to create a layered, soft, blurred effect which was very pleasing to the eye. There was an abundance of delicate, s-shaped, serpentine, curved patterns in Rococo buildings and sculptures (interlocking S, scrolls, curving branches, twisting leaves etc.) which made them appear to be more delicate, whimsy, gentle, lighter and feminine. For e.g.- rounded ceilings with curved, decorative features, oval or curved rooms, twisting leaves as a decorative pattern etc.

3. Smaller in scale than Baroque- Rococo buildings, fountains, sculptures etc. were made on a smaller scale. They were more intimate and personal, used in the private homes of the European nobility, rather than palaces,

state buildings and churches. Despite being made on a less grand scale, there was a careful use of open space in Rococo buildings. Outdoors and open, green spaces were also an important theme of Rococo paintings, with genres like the *Fete galantes* becoming popular.

4. Rococo paintings employed various illusionist measures like the *Quadratura* ceilings, but their art was naturalistic and close to the real subject. Rococo architecture was also more fluid, asymmetrical than Baroque. As the dominant aesthetic amongst European nobility, it also influenced furniture, porcelain, fashion and dressing style of the period. Architecture was flamboyant, decorative, S-shaped design elements were incorporated in the walls, ceilings. Tables, chairs were lacquered, delicate, gilded and had S-shaped legs and handles. Porcelain was also light and delicate, with small, decorative figurines taking precedence over grand statues. Dresses became even frillier, with many ruffles, bows and details.

5. Themes- The content of Rococo paintings and sculptures was also light-hearted and secular in nature. The art was seen as playful and optimistic, with paintings depicting scenes of romantic courtships, gaiety and leisure, scenes from nature, outdoor settings, young subjects engaged in different forms of light entertainment, romance etc. *Fete galantes* was a category/ genre of Rococo paintings which were set in gardens and outdoors, showing young, extravagantly dressed couples engaged in courtship in amorous, romantic, lush outdoor settings.

Criticism of Rococo

In the eyes of its 18th c and early 19th c. critics, Rococo was an extravagant, decadent, trivial and morally worthless art. Enlightenment thinkers and philosophes like Diderot, Voltaire were criticized as being too superficial (and feminine!). They wanted a 'nobler art' which would embody the Enlightenment principles of Reason and Progress. Art, for them, was supposed to elevate the human mind. Rococo was condemned for showcasing a lack of virility and overtly feminine style. The period after the French Revolution saw the emergence of a subtle and serious style- Neoclassicism which was more suited to the late 18th- 19th c. intellectual and political developments. Rococo was seen as the emblem of the frivolous upper classes, pretty but serving no greater purpose.

Thus, in art history, Rococo often suffered due to this kind of negative estimation. Recent history of Rococo period by Melissa Lee Hyde, Mary Sheriff focuses on how the movement was discredited by such views and makes us rethink this artistic style as the embodiment of the political and cultural currents of the period.

Rococo Paintings and Main Artists

There were many centres of Rococo across Europe- it emerged in France and spread to Italian cities like Rome, Germany and Austria. Given below are some of the distinctive features of Rococo paintings and its leading practitioners across Europe.

Rococo paintings were characterized by the use of pastel shades, delicate brushstrokes and blurry effect, light-hearted/romantic/ pastoral themes, gilded frames, etc. A category of Rococo paintings were called the *Fete galante*, depicting scenes of leisure and gaiety, couples and groups in lush outdoor settings, pastoral and picnic scenes, romantic courtship scenes. Such paintings (by Jean Antoine Watteau, Jean Honore Fragonard, Francois Boucher) represented elegantly dressed young men and women engaged in flirtatious or amorous activities in open settings. Lush greenery, opulent dresses, flowers, beautiful cupid statues and swings were common in such paintings. The garden was seen as the site of a romantic, aristocratic life of leisure.

- Jean Antoine Watteau (d.1721) – French artist credited with introducing the *fete galantes* style of paintings. He transformed some of the elements of Baroque into a less severe, more naturalistic Rococo. He did not have royal/aristocratic patrons, he was mostly commissioned by rich bourgeois bankers, merchants who wanted to emulate the aristocracy in amassing and displaying art. He came from an obscure provincial background and even the most frivolous and theatrical of his paintings had a tinge of wistfulness and sadness. He knew how to appeal to the fantasy and longings of the bourgeois class. Many see his art as being characterized by the sense of the transience of earthly riches and worldly pleasures, as seen in the happy scenes and dream-like quality depicted. (Most famous painting- *Embarkation of Cythera*)

- Jean Honore Fragonard (d.1806)- French painter, known for the sensuousness and veiled eroticism in his genre paintings. He made these for the rich and aristocratic paintings, in delicate colour palette and depicting light-hearted, playful interactions between aristocratic men and women. (Most famous painting- *The Swing*, depicting

a young girl on a swing in a beautiful garden, with a man hiding in the bushes. It was a somewhat risqué painting as it was apparently based on a courtier and his mistress. Many suggest that the swing was a well-known sexual metaphor in 18th c. and the painting alluded to the erotic affair between the two.

- Francois Boucher (d.1770)- French royal court painter (Peintre du Roi) and Director of the Royal Academy of Art, known for his idyllic and tranquil genre scenes and portraits of famous French noblemen and women. He was a celebrated artist and counted Louis XV, Madame Pompadour amongst his patrons. His style and design (painting, tapestries, furniture, porcelain) represented the mature Rococo and influenced other artists across Europe. (Most famous painting- The Triumph of Venus)
- Thomas Gainsborough (d.1788, England), Francesco Guardi (d.1793, Spain), Gianbattista Tiepolo (d.1770, Italian) were some other important Rococo painters

Rococo Architecture

Rococo buildings had complex (often oval) plan, intricate details, employed stucco (fine plaster used to create wall mouldings and decorations) and marble, pastel and gold embellishments, curved decorative features, gilded mirror details etc. While Baroque buildings were massive, grand and awe-inducing, Rococo architecture was delicate and elegant.

Examples of Rococo architecture- Hotel de Soubise (the manor house of Prince and Princess Sunrise in Paris with extravagant and expensive decorations), Ca Rezzonico (a palazzo in Venice with paintings by Rococo artists like Guardi, Tiepolo in its lavish interiors), Amalienborg Palace (royal place of the Danish King in Copenhagen), Catherine Palace (Catherine I of Russia's royal residence near St. Petersburg)

Rococo Sculpture

Rococo sculptures were ornamental, with a smooth and pearly finish, rounded curves, use of intertwined leaves and vines. Most sculptures were small in scale, delicate and showcased amorous couples or mythological figures like Venus, etc. Porcelain figurines were also very popular in this period. There were several porcelain making factories and workshops in France, Germany, Austria which made glazed, delicate porcelain figurines. Etienne Maurice Falconet was a well-known French sculptor and porcelain maker, known for his bronze statue of Peter the Great in St. Petersburg, marble statue of Pygmalion and Galatea.