**Baroque**

Baroque period, era in the history of the Western arts roughly coinciding with the 17th century. Its earliest manifestations, which occurred in Italy, date from the latter decades of the 16th century, while in some regions, notably Germany and colonial South America, certain of its culminating achievements did not occur until the 18th century. The work that distinguishes the Baroque period is stylistically complex, even contradictory. In general, however, the desire to evoke emotional states by appealing to the senses, often in dramatic ways, underlies its manifestations. Some of the qualities most frequently associated with the Baroque are grandeur, sensuous richness, drama, vitality, movement, tension, emotional exuberance, and a tendency to blur distinctions between the various arts.

A term used in the literature of the arts with both historical and critical meanings and as both an adjective and a noun. The word has a long, complex and controversial history (it possibly derived from a Portuguese word for a misshapen pearl, and until the late 19th century it was used mainly as a synonym for `absurd' or `grotesque'), but in English it is now current with three principal meanings.

Primarily, it designates the dominant style of European art between Mannerism and Rococo. This style originated in Rome and is associated with the Catholic Counter-Reformation, its salient characteristics--overt rhetoric and dynamic movement--being well suited to expressing the self-confidence and proselytizing spirit of the reinvigorated Catholic Church. It is by no means exclusively associated with religious art, however, and aspects of the Baroque can be seen even in works that have nothing to do with emotional display--for example in the dynamic lines of certain Dutch still-life paintings.

Secondly, it is used as a general label for the period when this style flourished, broadly speaking, the 17th century and in certain areas much of the 18th century. Hence thus phrases as `the age of Baroque', `Baroque politics', `Baroque science', and so on.

Thirdly, the term `Baroque' (often written without the initial capital) is applied to art of any time or place that shows the qualities of vigorous movement and emotional intensity associated with Baroque art in its primary meaning. Much Hellenistic sculpture could therefore be described as `baroque'.

The older meaning of the word, as a synonym for `capricious', `overwrought' or `florid', still has some currency, but not in serious criticism.

Caravaggio and Annibale Carracci are the two great figures who stand at the head of the Baroque tradition, bringing a new solidity and weightiness to Italian painting, which in the late 16th century has generally been artificial and often convoluted in style. In doing so they looked back to some extent to the dignified and harmonious art of the High Renaissance, but Annibale's work has an exuberance that is completely his own, and Caravaggio created figures with an unprecedented sense of sheer physical presence. From the Mannerist style the Baroque inherited movement and fervent emotion, and from the Renaissance style solidity and grandeur, fusing the two influences into a new and dynamic whole. The supreme genius of Baroque art was Gianlorenzo Bernini, an artist of boundless energy and the utmost virtuosity, whose work--imbued with total spiritual conviction--dominates the period sometimes called the `High Baroque' (c. 1625-75). Slightly later, Andrea Pozzo marks the culmination in Italy of the Baroque tendency towards overwhelmingly grandiose display.

In the 17th century, Rome was the artistic capital of Europe, and the baroque style soon spread outwards from it, undergoing modification in each of the countries to which it migrated, as it encountered different tastes and outlooks and merged with local traditions. In some areas it became more extravagant (notably in the fervent religious atmosphere of Spain and Latin America) and in others it was toned down to suit more conservative tastes. In Catholic Flanders it had one of its finest flowerings in the work of Rubens, but in neighbouring Holland, a predominantly Protestant country, the Baroque made comparatively slight inroads; nor did it ever take firm root in England. In France, the Baroque found its greatest expression in the service of the monarchy rather than the church. Louis XIV realized the importance of the arts as a propaganda medium in promoting the idea of his regal glory, and his palace at Versailles--with its grandiose combination of architecture, sculpture, painting, decoration, and (not least) the art of the gardener--represents one of the supreme examples of the Baroque fusion of the arts to create an overwhelmingly impressive whole. (The German term Gesamtkunstwerk--`total work of art'--has been applied to this ideal.) In France, as in other countries, the Baroque style merged imperceptibly with the Rococo style that followed it.