8.12: 17th century: Baroque (I)

Baroque

While the Protestants criticized the cult of images, the Catholic Church ardently embraced them.

1600 - 1700

Beginner’s guide: Baroque art

Bernini, Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Ruben, Velázquez and more.

1600 - 1700

Though there are some commonalities, what we call "Baroque art" in Catholic Italy, Spain and Flanders is different from what we see in the Protestant Dutch republic.

Baroque art, an introduction

by DR. ESPERANÇA CAMARA
Rome: From the “Whore of Babylon” to the resplendent bride of Christ

When Martin Luther tacked his 95 theses to the doors of Wittenberg Cathedral in 1517 protesting the Catholic Church’s corruption, he initiated a movement that would transform the religious, political, and artistic landscape of Europe. For the next century, Europe would be in turmoil as new political and religious boundaries were determined, often through bloody military conflicts. Only in 1648, with the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia, did the conflicts between Protestants and Catholics subside in continental Europe.

Martin Luther focused his critique on what he saw as the Church’s greed and abuse of power. He called Rome, the seat of papal power, “the whore of Babylon” decked out in finery of expensive art, grand architecture, and sumptuous banquets. The Church responded to the crisis in two ways: by internally addressing issues of corruption and by defending the doctrines rejected by the Protestants. Thus, while the first two decades of the 16th century were a period of lavish spending for the Papacy, the middle decades were a period of austerity. As one visitor to Rome noted in the 1560s, the entire city had become a convent. Piety and asceticism ruled the day.
By the end of the 16th century, the Catholic Church was once again feeling optimistic, even triumphant. It had emerged from the crisis with renewed vigor and clarity of purpose. Shepherding the faithful—instructing them on Catholic doctrines and inspiring virtuous behavior—took center stage. Keen to rebuild Rome's reputation as a holy city, the Papacy embarked on extensive building and decoration campaigns aimed at highlighting its ancient origins, its beliefs, and its divinely-sanctioned authority. In the eyes of faithful Catholics, Rome was not an unfaithful whore, but a pure bride, beautifully adorned for her union with her divine spouse.

The art of persuasion: To instruct, to delight, to move

While the Protestants harshly criticized the cult of images, the Catholic Church ardently embraced the religious power of art. The visual arts, the Church argued, played a key role in guiding the faithful. They were certainly as important as the written and spoken word, and perhaps even more important, since they were accessible to the learned and the unlearned alike. In order to be effective in its pastoral role, religious art had to be clear, persuasive, and powerful. Not only did it have to instruct, it had to inspire. It had to move the faithful to feel the reality of Christ’s sacrifice, the suffering of the martyrs, the visions of the saints.
The Church’s emphasis on art’s pastoral role prompted artists to experiment with new and more direct means of engaging the viewer. Artists like Caravaggio turned to a powerful and dramatic realism, accentuated by bold contrasts of light and dark, and tightly-cropped compositions that enhance the physical and emotional immediacy of the depicted narrative.

Other artists, like Annibale Carracci (who also experimented with realism), ultimately settled on a more classical visual language, inspired by the vibrant palette, idealized forms, and balanced compositions of the High Renaissance (see image above). Still others, like Giovanni Battista Gaulli, turned to daring feats of illusionism that blurred not only the boundaries between painting, sculpture, and architecture, but also those between the real and depicted worlds. In so doing, the divine was made physically present and palpable. Whether through shocking realism, dynamic movement, or exuberant ornamentation, seventeenth-century art is meant to impress. It aims to convince the viewer of the truth of its message by impacting the senses, awakening the emotions, and activating, even sharing the viewer’s space.
The Catholic monarchs and their territories

The monarchs of Spain, Portugal, and France also embraced the more ornate elements of seventeenth century art to celebrate Catholicism. In Spain and its colonies, rulers invested vast resources on elaborate church facades, stunning, gold-covered chapels and tabernacles, and strikingly-realistic polychrome sculpture.

In the Spanish Netherlands, where sacred art had suffered terribly as a result of the Protestant iconoclasm (the destruction of art), civic and religious leaders prioritized the adornment of churches as the region reclaimed its Catholic identity. Refurnishing the altars of Antwerp’s churches kept Peter Paul Rubens’ workshop busy for many years. Europe’s monarchs also adopted this artistic vocabulary to proclaim their own power and status. Louis XIV, for example, commissioned the splendid buildings and gardens of Versailles as a visual expression of his divine right to rule.

![Peter Paul Rubens, Elevation of the Cross](image)

Figure 6: Peter Paul Rubens, *Elevation of the Cross*, 1610, oil on wood, 15’ 1-7/8” x 11’ 1-1/2” (originally for Saint Walpurgis, Antwerp (destroyed), now in Antwerp Cathedral)

The Protestant North

In the Protestant countries, and especially in the newly-independent Dutch Republic (modern-day Holland), the artistic climate changed radically in the aftermath of the Reformation. Two of the wealthiest sources of patronage—the monarchy and the Church—were now gone. In their stead arose an increasingly prosperous middle class eager to...
express its status, and its new sense of national pride, through the purchase of art.

By the middle of the 17th century a new market had emerged to meet the artistic tastes of this class. The demand was now for smaller scale paintings suitable for display in private homes. These paintings included religious subjects for private contemplation, as seen in Rembrandt’s poignant paintings and prints of biblical narratives, as well as portraits documenting individual likenesses.

Figure \( \PageIndex{8} \): Judith Leyster, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1630, oil on canvas, 651 x 746 cm (National Gallery of Art, Washington)

But, the greatest change in the market was the dramatic increase in the popularity of landscapes, still-lifes, and scenes of everyday life (known as genre painting). Indeed, the proliferation of these subjects as independent artistic genres was one of the 17th century’s most significant contributions to the history of Western art.

In all of these genres, artists revealed a keen interest in replicating observed reality—whether it be the light on the Dutch landscape, the momentary expression on a face, or the varied textures and materials of the objects the Dutch collected as they reaped the benefits of their expanding mercantile empire. These works demonstrated as much artistic virtuosity and physical immediacy as the grand decorations of the palaces and churches of Catholic Europe.

In the context of European history, the period from c. 1585 to c. 1700/1730 is often called the Baroque era. The word “baroque” derives from the Portuguese and Spanish words for a large, irregularly-shaped pearl (“barroco” and “barrueco,” respectively). Eighteenth century critics were the first to apply the term to the art of the 17th century. It was not a term of praise. To the eyes of these critics, who favored the restraint and order of Neoclassicism, the works of Bernini, Borromini, and Pietro da Cortona appeared bizarre, absurd, even diseased—in other words, misshapen, like an imperfect pearl.
"Baroque" – the word, the style, the period

By the middle of the 19th century, the word had lost its pejorative implications and was used to describe the ornate and complex qualities present in many examples of 17th-century art, music and literature. Eventually, the term came to designate the historical period as a whole.

In the context of the painting, for example, the stark realism of Zurbaran’s altarpieces, the quiet intimacy of Vermeer’s domestic interiors, and restrained classicism of Poussin’s landscapes are all “Baroque” (now with a capital “B” to indicate the historical period), regardless of the absence of the stylistic traits originally associated with the term.

Scholars continue to debate the validity of this label, admitting the usefulness of having a label for this distinct historical period, while also acknowledging its limitations in characterizing the variety of artistic styles present in the 17th century.
Additional resources:

Baroque Rome on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Annibale Carracci on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

For instructors: related lesson plan on Art History Teaching Resources

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
How to recognize Baroque art

by BETH HARRIS and STEVEN ZUCKER
How do we know that something is true?

The word science comes from the latin root *scientia*, meaning knowledge. But where does the knowledge that makes up science come from? How do you ever really know that something is true?

For instance, modern science tell us that some types of disease spread through tiny organisms. Medieval people believed instead that sickness arose from an imbalance of the body’s four humors. How do we know with certainty that modern science is correct? Microscopes enable us to see the germs that cause sickness, but when we look through microscopic lenses to examine microbes, how do we know our understanding of what they are and what they are doing is true? Of course, medieval philosophers did not have microscopic lenses—but if they did, they very likely would have
disagreed with our modern understanding of disease. Believing in the inaccuracy of the human senses, and moreover of the human mind’s inability to correctly judge anything, medieval knowledge instead privileged ancient texts as the best way of making sense of the world.

**Sir Francis Bacon**

In 1620, around the time that people first began to look through microscopes, an English politician named Sir Francis Bacon developed a method for philosophers to use in weighing the truthfulness of knowledge. While Bacon agreed with medieval thinkers that humans too often erred in interpreting what their five senses perceived, he also realized that people’s sensory experiences provided the best possible means of making sense of the world. Because humans could incorrectly interpret anything they saw, heard, smelled, tasted, or felt, Bacon insisted that they must doubt everything before assuming its truth.

**Testing hypotheses**

In order to test potential truths, or hypotheses, Bacon devised a method whereby scientists set up experiments to manipulate nature, and attempt to prove their hypotheses wrong. For example, in order to test the idea that sickness came from external causes, Bacon argued that scientists should expose healthy people to outside influences such as coldness, wetness, or other sick people to discover if any of these external variables resulted in more people getting sick. Knowing that many different causes for sickness might be missed by humans who are unable or unwilling to perceive them, Bacon insisted that experiments must be consistently repeated before truth can be known: a scientist must show that patients exposed to a specific variable more frequently got sick again, and again, and again.
Although modern scientists have revised many of the truths subsequently adopted by Bacon and his contemporaries, we still utilize the method of proving knowledge to be true via doubt and experimentation that Bacon laid out in 1620. Bacon’s philosophical work marks a very significant breakthrough for the study of the world around us, but it is important to stress that this method of investigation was not completed in a vacuum. Rather, Bacon’s work should be seen as a part of a widespread cultural revolution accelerated by the rise of the printing press in the fifteenth century.

**Importance of the printing press**

Advances in the ability to disseminate new ideas by making standardized letters, numbers, and diagrams repeatable allowed for an unprecedented level of cooperation among philosophers who could now build on each other’s ideas over long periods of time. It would be difficult to overstate the effect of the print revolution. Astronomers such as Copernicus and Galileo began to share and build upon their experiments, and religious reformers began to publicize new (and increasingly radical) Protestant ideas. In a mutually beneficial relationship the Protestant Reformation and the Scientific Revolution encouraged philosophers to discover all they could about nature as a way to learn more about God, an undertaking that promoted a break with past authorities.

**A direct engagement with nature**

Artisans and craftspeople soon began engaging in the new “natural philosophy,” exemplifying the fact that a
monumental shift in what constituted evidence for truth was under way. Not only did renaissance artisans create lenses to see, tools to measure, and artworks to replicate the natural world, but by the sixteenth century, they began to publish philosophical treatises asserting that through the imitation and reproduction of nature in their arts, they were able to achieve a state of direct engagement with nature. Rather than taking knowledge from ancient sources, they argued that true knowledge came from direct experience. Alchemists likewise prioritized direct engagement with nature. In using fire to divide elements into their “smallest” components (and discovering that there were more than four of them), alchemists promoted the revolutionary idea that observation of nature itself, rather than reliance on ancient authorities, provided the best foundation for knowledge.

Figure \( \PageIndex{14} \): Attributed to Bernard Palissy, *Oval Basin*, c. 1550, lead-glazed earthenware, 18 7/8 x 14 1/2” (The J. Paul Getty Museum)

**The Royal Society**

These new ideas crystallized with the work of Francis Bacon. In his work as a politician he called for the development of an institution that would promote and regulate the acquisition of knowledge derived from observation. After considerable delay, caused by a civil war and the execution of King Charles I, the Royal Society for Improving Natural Knowledge was founded in 1660. A gentleman’s club composed of tinkering aristocrats, the Royal Society promoted Bacon’s principles of exact observation and measurement of experiments in its periodical *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, generally credited as being the first scientific journal.
Figure \(\PageIndex{15}\): Frontispiece to Thomas Sprat, *The History of the Royal-Society of London*, etching by Wenceslaus Hollar, after John Evelyn, 1667. “The book was a manifesto of the Society’s aims and methods….primarily aimed at the king in the (unrealised) hope that he would fund their future activities. The frontispiece flatters Charles II by presenting him as a classical bust being wreathed by an allegorical figure of Fame. The Society President, Viscount Brouncker, points to the Latin inscription ‘Charles II founder and Patron of the Royal Society.’ Francis Bacon, gesturing towards an array of scientific instruments, is indentified as the ‘Renewer of Arts’.” (National Portrait Gallery, London)

Once Bacon’s philosophies regarding experimentation and observation came to be accepted, people began using them to harness nature for profit. The study of nature came to be less about changing traditional attitudes and beliefs, and more about stimulating the economy. By the end of the following century, the Scientific Revolution had given birth to an Industrial Revolution which dramatically transformed the daily lives of people around the world. Western society has been moving forward on Bacon’s model for the past three hundred years. Perhaps though, we are in danger of forgetting the vital role doubt played in Bacon’s philosophy. Even with powerful microscopes, there is still a lot that human senses miss.

**Additional resources:**

*In Our Time podcast on Baconian Science*

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**Baroque art in Italy**

Dramatic lighting, movement, art that activate the viewer's space.
1600 - 1700

Restoring ancient sculpture in Baroque Rome

by LAURIE PORSTNER

Figure \(\PageIndex{16}\): In this drawing, both the *Apollo Belvedere* (on the left) and the *Laocoön* on the right, are depicted with their 16th-century "restorations." Federico Zuccaro, *Taddeo in the Belvedere Court in the Vatican Drawing the Laocoön*, c. 1595, pen and brown ink, brush with brown wash, over black chalk and touches of red chalk, 17.5 x 42.5 cm (*The J. Paul Getty Museum*).

Early Modern fascination with the “Antique”

In this late 16th-century drawing by Federico Zuccaro, we see the artist’s older brother, Taddeo, surrounded by Greek and Roman sculptures in the Vatican’s Belvedere courtyard in Rome. Taddeo is seated on a cloth spread upon the ground, hunched slightly forward, with his sketchpad resting on his thighs, concentrating on drawing the famous ancient sculpture, the *Laocoön*. His back is to yet another very famous ancient sculpture, the *Apollo Belvedere*. Both of these sculptures were unearthed during the Renaissance, and of course, given that more than 1,000 years had passed, they were discovered buried and broken. Both were restored by Renaissance and Baroque artists. While today’s museums contain limbless torsos, solitary hands and feet, and disembodied heads, in the 16th and 17th centuries, it was fashionable to present sculptures with fully formed bodies, whether or not the work of art was actually preserved that way. Restoration was the process by which ancient Greek and Roman fragments of sculpture were provided with new components to make them “whole” once again.

The *Laocoön* is an interesting case in point. It was discovered early in the 16th century (according to one source, Michelangelo was called to be present for its excavation) and depicts the priest Laocoön and his sons being strangled by snakes. The sculpture—which was very important for Renaissance and Baroque artists—was found in pieces, and when reconstructed, the most important missing component was an arm belonging to the priest.
Pope Julius II, who brought the sculpture to the Vatican’s Belvedere courtyard, was not content to display the sculpture as it had been found. He first commissioned Jacopo Sansovino, followed by Giovanni Angelo Montorsoli (a student of Michelangelo), to create the missing arm. These additions (or restorations), to the Laocoön each consisted of a dramatically upraised arm, visible in many reproductions of the sculpture (and in the drawing by Zuccaro above). It was only in the beginning of the 20th century when the sculpture’s real missing arm was discovered. It turns out this arm was not upraised at all, but was bent backward. This proved that Montorsoli’s original restoration, as well as a later 18th-century restoration (also with an upraised arm), were incorrect. It is the original, bent arm that is visible on the Laocoön today.

Going back to Zuccaro’s drawing, we see the Apollo Belvedere holding a bow—yet another of Montorsoli’s reconstructions (you won’t see this when you visit the sculpture in the Vatican today). Restoration became a steady source of employment for sculptors, especially for those who could not always attract wealthy patrons. Even the greatest of Baroque sculptors, such as Gianlorenzo Bernini and Alessandro Algardi, received commissions for restorations,
although this was usually at earlier stages in their careers and with much less frequency than other, less successful sculptors. Restorations in the Renaissance and Baroque periods might not always have produced sculptures that were "correct" in terms of classical (Greco-Roman) iconography. But even when carried out correctly, restorations have added a new level of meaning to the works that was not present in antiquity.

Not every artist in Renaissance and Baroque Rome had access to ancient Greek and Roman statues. Drawings depicting artists with antiquities—like the one by Federico Zuccaro—are testaments to the status of a particular artist. It was a privilege to be allowed to view works of art in the papal or other princely collections face-to-face. In later periods, artists would come into contact with famous antiquities mainly through prints, or less commonly, plaster casts made in Rome and shipped throughout Europe. But these were poor replacements for the prestige of owning actual antiquities. While popes, cardinals, and princes had been the owners of collections of ancient statuary since the Renaissance, as more and more wealthy non-Italians came to Rome on the Grand Tour, they desired collections of their own. The allure of the classical, in sculptural fragments or architectural ruins, continued into the 18th century and helped give shape to the modern world. This passion for collecting encouraged the growth of the restoration industry, resulting in Rome, Florence, Paris, and London becoming centers for the buying and selling of ancient sculpture.

A treatise on restoration

The most complete primary source for restoration in the 17th century is Observations Concerning Ancient Sculpture by Orfeo Boselli. This treatise emphasized classical sculpture's place as the starting point in the education of a Baroque sculptor. According to Boselli, since many ancient sculptural figures were found lacking their identifying attributes (often the item that they carried; for example, Apollo often holds a lyre or a bow), it was important for restorers to learn the attributes of each pagan god in order to make correct restorations. Just as a sculpture lacking attributes sometimes made it difficult for a restorer to accurately determine the identity of some mythological figures, adding an incorrect attribute could change the identity of the figure in the sculpture. Baroque restorers also needed to study the proportions of the surviving ancient fragments so the new pieces they were making would match. Pins (sometimes made of lead) and clamps held blocks of marble together; these bits of hardware had to be concealed to keep up the illusion that the sculpture was anything less than "complete."

Figure \(\PageIndex{19}\): *Ludovisi Ares*, Pentelic marble, Roman copy after a Greek original from c. 320 B.C.E. with some restorations in Cararra marble by Gianlorenzo Bernini, 1622 (Museo Nazionale Romano di Palazzo Altemps; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)
Restoration was a serious subject according to Boselli, and it was not for second-rate artists. But Boselli’s ideal restorer was largely a fantasy—restoration was a way for Baroque sculptors to make ends meet, whether or not they had the talent to carry out the work as carefully as Boselli outlined.

Boselli’s praise for a restoration by Bernini, the *Ludovisi Ares*, is surprising. Boselli generally disliked the famous sculptor as well as the type of overtly Baroque elements that Bernini inserted in the *Ludovisi Ares*: the head and arm of the small Eros (Cupid) who playfully peeks out from behind Ares’ outstretched leg; and the hilt of the sword, with a human-like face with a wide open mouth that recalls Bernini’s bust of a Damned Soul, one of Bernini’s own self-portraits.

The ancient portions of the *Ludovisi Ares* were made from Pentelic marble from Greece, while Bernini’s restorations used Carrara marble from Italy. These marbles are different colors, which makes it easy to tell where repairs were made. Bernini was a highly skilled sculptor, and this was no accident. It was a choice.

Bernini brought an ancient work into his era with the clear intention of updating it for his own generation. He was quite capable of restoring in a conservative manner had he, or his patron, wished. Boselli’s praise for Bernini’s restoration of the *Ludovisi Ares* suggests that even a staunch advocate for more conservative restorations could be impressed with the fusion of both the classical and the Baroque. Although Boselli was in favor of authenticity, not all Baroque sculptors...
agreed.

A Return to Antiquity?

Some of the most dramatic restorations undertaken in the 17th century were made for Cardinal Scipione Borghese by Nicolas Cordier. Look closely at the *The Gypsy Girl (La Zingarella)*. The exotic elements—colored marbles and gilded bronze accessories—are restorations that hide a fragment of a draped woman (probably something like the *Roman Herculaneum Women*). *The Gypsy Girl (La Zingarella)* is clearly an early modern invention. Cordier’s restorations exhibit a taste that stands in opposition to Boselli’s view that restoration should complement the original sculpture.

In another restoration for Cardinal Borghese, Bernini added a pillow and mattress to the classical *Sleeping Hermaphrodite*, which depicts a figure with both masculine and feminine sexual characteristics reclining horizontally. Bernini’s restoration for Cardinal Borghese did not make drastic changes to the pose or figure. As seen in the *Ludovisi...*
Ares; Bernini’s restorations are something neither wholly classicizing nor wholly Baroque.

Figure \(\PageIndex{22}\): *Sleeping Hermaphroditos*, Roman copy of a Greek original from the 2nd century C.E. (Louvre) (photo: Dennis Jarvis, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Bernini’s restoration received mixed reviews in the following century. French writer Charles de Brosses noted that to “pass one’s hand over it [the mattress], it is no longer marble, it is a real mattress of white leather or of satin which has lost its sheen.” For de Brosses, the mattress was a positive addition, encouraging someone to want to reach out and touch it. Yet, Francesco Milizia was appalled; he thought the mattress looked as if it had been filled with rocks.
To De-Restore or Re-Restore?

In the early 20th century, many ancient sculptures that had been restored in early modern times (such as the *Apollo Belvedere*), had their restorations removed. Beginning in the late 20th century, there has been a growing awareness of the impact that restorations had upon the understanding of a particular work of art. In some cases, restorations that were removed in the early 20th century for the sake of greater “accuracy” have been returned.

One of the most interesting examples of de-restoration occurred early on: when the “real” ancient legs of the *Farnese Hercules* were discovered, and the replacement legs made by Guglielmo della Porta, a student of Michelangelo, were removed. Today, della Porta’s legs can still be seen in the National Archaeological Museum in Naples, no longer on the sculpture, but mounted in a case nearby.

While many 20th century art historians and conservators did not look fondly upon restoration efforts, the start of the 21st sees a renewed interest in the interactions between the early modern period and classical antiquity.
The British Museum’s *Rondanini Faun* consists of an antique torso and right thigh, while the remaining sculpture was created in the early 17th century by François Duquesnoy. The sculpture underwent conservation in 2004 and was then displayed as a product of the 18th century, rather than in the rooms allotted to the Greek and Roman collection. This acknowledges both the classical inspiration for the artwork, as well as the new meaning given by its restorer.

**Additional resources:**

*The Roman Forum: Part 2, Ruins in modern imagination (The Renaissance and after)*

*Biography of Jacopo Sansovino from The J. Paul Getty Museum*

*Essay about the Grand Tour from The Metropolitan Museum of Art*


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**Gian Lorenzo Bernini**

**Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Pluto and Proserpina* (or *The Rape of Proserpina*)**

*by DR. STEVEN ZUCKER and DR. BETH HARRIS*
Proserpina is the Latin variant of the mythic Greek Persephone.

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *David*

by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER

Video: Gianlorenzo Bernini, *David*, 1623, marble, 5 feet, 7 inches high (Galleria Borghese, Rome)
Empathy

Bernini’s David is like a major league pitcher winding up to throw a 95 miles an hour fastball. The pitcher gathers all of his strength for each pitch and puts everything he has into it.

Baroque art wants us to be able to relate to the image in our bodies, not just in our minds. Bernini’s David uses the space around it—reaching out into the space of the viewer. Bernini’s David is not content—the way Michelangelo’s David is—to remain separate from us. When looking at Bernini’s David, we immediately start to feel what David is feeling. This empathy is very important to Baroque art.

Diagonals

In the High Renaissance we saw the composition in the form of a pyramid—a very stable shape. But in the Baroque era we see compositions in the shape of diagonal lines, as in Bernini’s David. The diagonal line immediately suggests movement and energy and drama—very different from the immobility of the pyramid shape.
Three Davids

Donatello shows us an early moment in the Renaissance—the beginnings of Humanism when artists were first discovering contrapposto and the beauty of ancient Greek and Roman sculpture. His young figure of David symbolizes the Republic of Florence, which saw itself—like David—as blessed by God. Donatello shows David victorious standing on the head of Goliath.

Michelangelo’s *David* is ideally beautiful. David contemplates his upcoming fight with Goliath, staring at his foe. While Bernini shows us a less ideal, and more real David—one who, with God’s help, is actively fighting Goliath (perhaps the way the church itself felt as they were battling against Luther).

Figure \( \PageIndex{26} \): Left: Donatello, *David*, c. 1440s, bronze, 158 cm (Bargello, Florence) (photo: Patrick CC BY-SA 2.0); right: Michelangelo, *David*, 1501-04, marble, 518 cm (Galleria dell’Accademia, Florence) (photo: Rico Heil, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The path to God

Michelangelo seems to be asking us to contemplate the incredible beauty of David, and through contemplating beauty (the beauty of man, God’s greatest creation), we come to know God. On the other hand, there is no time for contemplation with Bernini’s *David*, there is only time for ducking out of the way—our reaction is in our bodies, not in our minds.
Figure (PageIndex{27})): Gian Lorenzo Bernini, three views of *David*, 1623-24, marble, 170 cm (Galleria Borghese, Rome)

The path to God in the Baroque era is more direct, more emotional, more bodily, and that of course relates to the embattled position of the Church, which wanted to appeal directly to the faithful.

Additional resources:

This sculpture at the Galleria Borghese

Bernini at The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Timeline of Art History

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Apollo and Daphne*

by **DR. BETH HARRIS** and **DR. STEVEN ZUCKER**

Video: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Apollo and Daphne*, 1622-25, Carrera marble, 243 cm high (Galleria Borghese, Rome) A conversation with Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Baldacchino, Saint Peter’s

by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
Video \(\PageIndex{5}\): Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Baldacchino, 1624-33, 100' high, gilded bronze (Saint Peter's Basilica, Vatican City, Rome)

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Bust of Medusa*

by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
Video \(\PageIndex{6}\): Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Bust of Medusa*, marble, c. 1644-48 (Capitoline Museum)
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*

by [DR. BETH HARRIS](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.12%3A_17th_c...) and [DR. STEVEN ZUCKER](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.12%3A_17th_c...)
Video \(\PageIndex{7}\): Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, 1647-52 (Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome)

This is Saint Teresa’s description of the event that Bernini depicts:

Beside me, on the left, appeared an angel in bodily form…. He was not tall but short, and very beautiful; and his face was so aflame that he appeared to be one of the highest rank of angels, who seem to be all on fire…. In his hands I saw a great golden spear, and at the iron tip there appeared to be a point of fire. This he plunged into my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he pulled it out I felt that he took them with it, and left me utterly consumed by the great love of God. The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans. The sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease, nor is one’s soul content with anything but God. This is not a physical but a spiritual pain, though the body has some share in it—even a considerable share.
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Cathedra Petri (Chair of St. Peter)

by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
Video \( \PageIndex{8} \): Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Cathedra Petri (or Chair of St. Peter), gilded bronze, gold, wood, stained glass, 1647-53 (apse of Saint Peter’s Basilica, Vatican City, Rome)

According to tradition, St. Peter himself, the founder of the institution of the Church and considered the first pope, sat on the ancient wooden chair that is encased within this larger bronze and gold chair.

Gian Lorenzo Bernini, St. Peter’s Square

by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Sant’Andrea al Quirinale, Rome

by DR. STEVEN ZUCKER and DR. BETH HARRIS
Video \PageIndex{10}): Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Sant’Andrea al Quirinale, 1658-70, Rome; commissioned by Cardinal Camillo Francesco Maria Pamphili for the nearby Jesuit seminary

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Francesco Borromini, San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, Rome

by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER

Figure \(\PageIndex{33}\): More Smarthistory images…
Geometry and motion in Borromini’s San Carlo

Video: Francesco Borromini, San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane (“Carlino”), Rome. Commissioned by Cardinal Francesco Barberini in 1634 for the Holy Order of the Trinity; construction began in 1638 and the church was consecrated in 1646.

San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane / Vault by Matthew Brennan on Sketchfab

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Annibale Carracci, *Christ Appearing to Saint Peter on the Appian Way*

by **DR. MELISA PALERMO**
Baroque beginnings and Renaissance ideals

The Carracci—Annibale, his brother Agostino, and their cousin Ludovico—are often credited with initiating the first phase of Baroque art. In reaction to the artificiality of Mannerism, the style that dominated central Italian art during the mid-sixteenth century, the Carracci advocated a return to greater naturalism. They founded a painting academy (Accademia degli Incamminati) in Bologna, Italy around 1580 that focused both on the study of the best artistic models of the Renaissance and on the direct study of nature.

The Carracci developed a new style that blended the rich color, soft chiaroscuro, and warm lighting seen in the art of Northern Italian artists, like Titian and Correggio with the balanced compositions, firm drawing, and idealized forms that characterize the art of central Italian artists like Raphael and Michelangelo. Annibale further developed this style in Rome, where, with Christ Appearing to Saint Peter on the Appian Way, he created a work whose emotional immediacy signals the emergence of Baroque art.

Domine, Quo Vadis? (Lord, where are you going?)

According to Catholic tradition, St. Peter and St. Paul were both executed in Rome around the year 67 C.E. during the
reign of the infamous emperor Nero. The story (found in early Christian writings but not in the New Testament), states that Peter was freed from prison in Rome after he and Paul converted their jailers. Peter was then persuaded by fellow Christians who were concerned for his safety, to flee Rome. As he left, Peter encountered the resurrected Jesus. Astonished, Peter asked “Domine quo vadis?” (Lord, where are you going?). Jesus replied “I go to Rome to be crucified anew.” When he heard these words, Peter understood that his actions were cowardly and that he must return to Rome. There, he was arrested and crucified upside down at his request because he did not feel worthy of dying as Jesus had.

**Drama and gesture**

In *Christ Appearing to Saint Peter on the Appian Way*, the two principle figures are set against the muted earth tones of the landscape, dotted with delicate trees and Roman architecture. Initially Peter stood more erect and closer to Jesus, but Annibale modified his pose in order to more dramatically express his emotional reaction. Jesus appears in his resurrected body; it is muscular but bears the wounds of the crucifixion. He wears a white loin cloth and a red mantle over his shoulder (red symbolizes his humanity and the blood shed at his Passion). Other references to the passion are the crown of thorns on his head and the cross that he carries over his left shoulder. Peter is identified by his traditional blue and yellow robes, gray hair and beard, and the keys that hang at his waist (see below on why keys are Peter’s attribute). He is taken aback by the muscular figure of Jesus. Peter’s hands are up in a protective mode as he recoils in astonishment.

![Detail, Annibale Carracci, Christ Appearing to Saint Peter on the Appian Way (also known as Domine quo vadis), 1601-02, oil on wood, 77.4 x 56.3 cm (The National Gallery)](image)

While the Carracci advocated a return to Renaissance ideals of clarity and the direct study of nature (which they felt the Mannerist artists had rejected), this work is distinguished from the Renaissance in its psychological involvement of the viewer. Although Jesus turns his head to address Peter, he steps boldly forward toward the viewer as he points to his destination, which lies implicitly in front of the picture. Even the placement of the cross is expressive; one arm of the cross pierces the clear blue sky while the lower part projects out to the viewer. In these ways Annibale places the viewer directly in Jesus’s path and breaks the boundary between the painting and viewer’s space—engaging the viewer with an immediacy typical of Baroque art.

*Christ Appearing to Saint Peter on the Appian Way* also depicts the most dramatic and expressive moment of the encounter. Peter is shocked and ashamed and Jesus’ physical strength reflects his moral strength as he strides forward.
confidently. The gestures and body language of the figures are posed at their most expressive—also anticipating the drama of Baroque art. The artistic renewal begun by the Carracci coincided with the spiritual renewal of the Catholic Church, known as the Counter-Reformation.

**Peter and the papacy**

![Image of Perugino's Christ Giving the Keys of the Kingdom to St. Peter](image)

*Figure (PageIndex(37)): Perugino, *Christ Giving the Keys of the Kingdom to St. Peter*, 1481-83, fresco, 10 feet 10 inches x 18 feet (Vatican, Rome)*

This depiction of Jesus and St. Peter would call to mind for contemporary viewers Jesus’s earlier conversations with Peter, in particular, the Gospel of John, 13:36-37, where Peter asks Jesus, “Lord, where art thou going?” and Jesus replies, “I am going where thou canst not follow me now, but shalt follow me afterwards.” Then Peter said to him, “Lord, why cannot I follow thee now? I am ready to lay down my life for thy sake.”

And in the Gospel of Matthew 16: 18-19, Jesus says to Peter,

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    thou art Peter, and it is upon this rock that I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it; and I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.
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With the metaphor of the keys, Jesus was understood to have bestowed upon Peter the office of the Papacy and the
authority to lead the Church. The Catholic Church considers St. Peter to be first bishop of Rome and, as such, the first pope.

Annibale's painting can be interpreted as a commentary on the authority of the papacy and the centrality of Rome as the headquarters of the Catholic Church. Many early Christians were martyred in Rome and St. Peter's basilica was itself built over a crypt believed to contain the tomb of St. Peter.

The painting was commissioned by Cardinal Pietro Aldobrandini (whose name saint was Saint Peter) when the Church was still heavily invested in affirming doctrines contested by the Protestants. With its emphasis on Jesus, Peter, and Rome, the painting reinforced the idea that Jesus himself had instituted the office of the Papacy (an idea refuted by Protestants) and that Peter was willing to die for the faith.

**Additional resources:**

- [Video on the history of the Church of Domine, Quo Vadis](#)
- [Mannerism: Bronzino (1503–1572) and his Contemporaries on The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History](#)
- [Annibale Carracci: on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History](#)
- [The Protestant Reformation](#)

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**Caravaggio**

**Caravaggio, Narcissus at the Source**

*by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER*
Video \(\PageIndex{11}\): Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Narcissus at the Source*, oil on canvas, 1597-99 (Palazzo Barbarini, Rome)
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:

Figure \(\PageIndex{38}\): More Smarthistory images…
Caravaggio, *Calling of St. Matthew*

by **DR. BETH HARRIS** and **DR. STEVEN ZUCKER**

Video \(\PageIndex{12}\): Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Calling of St. Matthew*, oil on canvas, c. 1599-1600

(Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome)

*Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:*

[Image of Caravaggio's *Calling of St. Matthew*]
Caravaggio, *The Conversion of St. Paul (or The Conversion of Saul)*

by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
Video \(\PageIndex{13}\): Caravaggio, *The Conversion of St. Paul* (also known as *The Conversion of Saul*), c. 1601, oil on canvas, 230 x 175 cm (Cerasi Chapel, Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome)

**Caravaggio, Crucifixion of St. Peter**

by [DR. BETH HARRIS](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.12%3A_17th_c...) and [DR. STEVEN ZUCKER](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.12%3A_17th_c...)
Video \(\PageIndex{14}\): Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Crucifixion of St. Peter*, 1601, oil on canvas (Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome)
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:

Figure \(\PageIndex{40}\): More Smarthistory images…

Caravaggio, *The Supper at Emmaus*

by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
Video \(\PageIndex{15}\): Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Supper at Emmaus*, 1601, oil on canvas, 55 x 77" / 141 x 196.2 cm (National Gallery, London)

**Caravaggio, Deposition (or Entombment)**

*by* [DR. BETH HARRIS](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.12%3A_17th_c...) and [DR. STEVEN ZUCKER](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.12%3A_17th_c...)
Figure \(\PageIndex{41}\): Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Deposition (or Entombment)*, c. 1600-04, oil on canvas, 300 x 203 cm (Pinacoteca Vaticana, Vatican City)

**A police record**

With most artists we know about their lives and personalities from biographies that friends or contemporaries wrote about them. In the case of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, however, we know about his life primarily from police records! From these accounts, we learn that he had a bad temper and could be violent, and that he was frequently arrested and imprisoned for assault. He appears on the police records for mild offenses like carrying weapons without permission, as well as more serious ones where he is involved in violent fights. He was even questioned once because he “gave offense” to a woman and her daughter—one wonders what that could mean! Ultimately, he killed a man over a bet and spent the last few years of his life on the run from the police.

**The subject**

After the crucifixion, some of Christ’s followers (Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Mary Magdalene) along with his Mother, remove Christ’s body from the cross and place it in the tomb.
The darkness (and the light)

One of the first things you might notice about Caravaggio’s style, and we see it here in his painting of *The Entombment*, is the darkness. There’s actually a word for it: tenebroso, which means dark or gloomy. Caravaggio painted this scene as though it was happening in the black of night with almost a spot-light effect on the figures (doesn’t it look like a dark stage that has been illuminated with a spotlight?).

There are several things that are important about this. There is no background—only darkness. No architecture, no landscape, and so as a result, we focus on the figures who are all located in the foreground of the painting. The spotlight effect of the lighting is very dramatic, and so we have very stark contrasts of light and dark. In other words, where modeling is usually a slow movement from light to dark, here we have very dark shadows *right next* to areas of bright illumination. The effect is very dramatic.

![Figure 42: Detail, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, Deposition (or Entombment), c. 1600-04, oil on canvas, 300 x 203 cm (Pinacoteca Vaticana, Vatican City)](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.12%3A_17th_c...)

The space

Everything is located very much in the foreground of the painting, very close to us in fact. Look at Christ’s body—it’s so close we feel like we can touch it. And look at the ledge of the tomb, it is foreshortened and so it juts out into our space. And look at the elbow of the figure in orange carrying Christ’s legs—it is foreshortened, too, and so it pops into our space. One of the main characteristics of Baroque art is the breaking down of the barrier between our space and the space of the painting, so we feel like we’re part of it. Baroque artists use foreshortening frequently.

The composition

Baroque artists were also interested in movement. Here we see the moment when Christ is being lowered into his tomb. It’s a process happening before our eyes—so we have a caught moment in time. We see that the figures form a diagonal line—another very common feature of Baroque art. In the High Renaissance, we saw compositions in the shape of a pyramid—a very stable shape. Here in Baroque art we see diagonals, or sometimes interlocking diagonals in the shape of an X.
Caravaggio organized the composition so that it looks like the body of Christ is being lowered right into our space, as though we were standing in the tomb. One of the most important goals of Baroque art is to involve the viewer.

**Realism**

Baroque art also tends to be very real—not only do the figures look “regular,” but the artist is giving us a very real sense of this moment. The body of Christ looks truly dead, the figures struggle to hold the dead weight of his body and ease him down gently into his tomb.

![Figure 43: Christ’s torso (detail), Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, Deposition (Entombment), c. 1600-04, oil on canvas, 300 x 203 cm (Pinacoteca Vaticana, Vatican City)](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.12%3A_17th_c...)

The figures are all very ordinary looking, they are not idealized at all, like the figures of the High Renaissance. Look at the figure holding Christ’s legs. He almost looks like a homeless person. Look at his feet and legs—they are so ordinary looking—you can almost imagine the bottom of his feet being dirty. Even Christ looks rather like an ordinary man. They are figures we can relate to more —unlike the perfect figures of the High Renaissance.

One of my favorite things about this painting is the figure who carries Christ’s shoulders. He has his arm under Christ’s torso and his fingers, as they reached around Christ, slipped into the wound that he received when he was on the cross (Christ was stabbed by a Roman soldier in the ribs). This may cause us to feel squeamish—but that’s the idea. Baroque art wants to get to you in your body—so you really feel it. When you know something in your mind it is one thing—but when you experience it with your body it is really different. Baroque art often wants you to have an experience that’s located in your body.

**Additional resources:**

This painting at the Vatican Museums
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Caravaggio, *Death of the Virgin*

by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
Video \(\PageIndex{16}\): Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Death of the Virgin*, 1605-06, oil on canvas, 12’ 10” x 8’ / 369 x 245 cm (Musée du Louvre, Paris)

This was painted for the altar of a family chapel in the church of Santa Maria della Scala del Trastevere, Rome.
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Caravaggio and Caravaggisti in 17th-century Europe

by OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS and DR. ERIN BENAY
One of the most widely imitated artists

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was famously sensitive when it came to matters of artistic originality: he threatened both the painter Guido Reni and artist and biographer Giovanni Baglione for copying his style. Despite his best efforts to protect his singular style, however, Caravaggio became one of the most widely imitated artists in the history of Western art.

After his untimely death in 1610, many Italian and non-Italian artists alike came to be considered his “followers,” even though they had never met the artist or worked alongside him. Unlike the typical Renaissance master-follower relationship, these artists could claim no direct descent from the studio of Caravaggio (since he did not have one), and in some cases they had not even seen his paintings first-hand. Some artists imitated Caravaggio for only a brief phase of their careers – Baglione, Carlo Saraceni, and Guercino for example – while others remained committed to Caravaggio’s stylistic model for the duration of their lives.

Nevertheless, these painters, often labeled Caravaggisti, emulated aspects of Caravaggio’s style, technique, and choice of subjects and were responsible for the dissemination of Caravaggism across the European continent.

A distinctive style

These followers, whether Italian, Spanish, French, or Netherlandish, were especially attracted to Caravaggio’s tenebrism—the use of dark shadows to obscure parts of the composition. Caravaggio’s employment of tenebrism and chiaroscuro, the strong contrast of light and dark, lends his paintings a dramatic effect that has been likened to a spotlit stage.

By combining this theatrical dynamism with careful observation from life, Caravaggio achieved a gritty naturalism in both genre and religious scenes. His subdued palette, half-length figures, and magnification of the picture-plane to create intimate, relatable compositions contributed to Caravaggio’s widespread appeal during the first three decades of the
seventeenth century in Europe.

The unusual darkness and life-like realism of Caravaggio’s paintings accounted in part for his popularity. On the other hand, the types of subject matter and revision of traditional iconographies popularized by Caravaggio had a significant impact on the development of international Caravaggism.

Figure \(\PageIndex{47}\): Georges de La Tour, *The Fortune Teller*, probably 1630s, oil on canvas, 101.9 x 123.5 cm (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

**New themes: Rogues and revelers**

During his early years in Rome, Caravaggio worked as an assistant in the illustrious workshop of the Cavaliere d’Arpino, but he also completed some of his best-known easel paintings (independent, portable canvases) and sold them on the open market. These paintings included depictions of themes that were uncommon in Roman art at the time and became ubiquitous with the help of the Caravaggisti.

These followers were particularly interested in Caravaggio’s renderings of the seedy underbelly of Roman street-life in the form of *The Cardsharps* and *The Fortune Teller*, two of Caravaggio’s most copied paintings, or in the artist’s depiction of music-making as in the *Musicians* (above) and *The Lute Player*. Italian artists like Bartolomeo Manfredi, and Antiveduto Grammatica, French painters such as Valentin de Boulogne, Georges de La Tour, Nicolas Régnier, and Simon Vouet and Dutchmen Hendrick Ter Brugghen and Gerrit van Honthorst all replicated these subjects or similar themes in obvious admiration of Caravaggio’s original paintings.
These followers were undoubtedly struck by Caravaggio’s ability to enliven such subjects with a dignity not necessarily befitting the lowly actions depicted. In *The Cardsharps*, for instance, a fresh-faced boy is tricked by two professional cheats. The viewer is privy to the deception—the figure at the far right of the composition exposes the stolen cards behind his back—and we are brought close to the ruse and the precariously balanced backgammon board, teetering on the edge of an ornate, brocade-covered table. In versions of the theme by Boulogne, Manfredi, or Nicholas Tournier, earthy scenes of revelry might replace cardplaying.

These sometimes-elaborate compositions do not seek to reproduce the quiet intimacy of Caravaggio’s paintings, but they succeed in transposing the artist’s tenebristic backgrounds and embolden the disenfranchised populations they depict. In Pietro Paolini’s rendering of drinkers and revelers in his *Allegory of the Senses*, he superimposes the dark, somber tonality of Caravaggio’s later religious paintings on the themes Caravaggio painted in his youth. The combination is striking: the levity of gambling or musical merriment is sobered by the reddish ground and stronger chiaroscuro common in the second half of Caravaggio’s career, when he had long since left such subjects behind.
Selective adoptions

Since followers of Caravaggio had no formal indoctrination by the master himself (unlike painters in the school of the Carracci for instance), they were free to take from Caravaggio whatever aspects of the painter's style and method they were most interested in. Painters like Cecco del Caravaggio, Orazio Gentileschi and his daughter, Artemisia Gentileschi, or Grammatica, who knew Caravaggio personally, did have the benefit of direct contact with the source of their inspiration, but their work retains a character all its own.

The Gentileschi—both father and daughter—produced more lyrical paintings than did Caravaggio. Incorporating the cold blues, yellows, and violets that were notably absent from Caravaggio's palette, their paintings, particularly those of Orazio, often reflected local influences. Nevertheless—and crucial to the discussion of Caravaggism in Europe—their work reveals an absorption not only of Caravaggio's tenebrism, but of his approach to religious iconography.

In his depictions of St. Francis in Ecstasy (painted in 1607 and again 1612–13), Orazio favors the intimate saint-angel relationship first struck by Caravaggio in his Hartford St. Francis. In her gory Judith Beheading Holofernes, Artemisia Gentileschi further highlights the violent struggle of decapitation emphasized in Caravaggio's painting of 1599. In both cases, the mixed horror and conviction apparent in Judith's face humanizes her violent yet selfless act, all while blood drips mercilessly into the viewer's space.
A new kind of religious imagery

Other Caravaggisti were also influenced by Caravaggio’s humanizing depictions of devotional subjects. In their representations of the Doubting Thomas, for instance, Ter Brugghen, Honthorst, and Mattias Stomer reproduced the extraordinary half-length figures in semi-circular groupings and visceral depiction of Thomas’s finger in Christ’s side from Caravaggio’s c. 1602 painting for Benedetto Giustiniani. In fact, these Northern artists were likely responsible for the sudden surge in popularity of *Doubting Thomas* imagery in the Netherlandish city of Utrecht during the first half of the seventeenth century.

Similarly, Jusepe de Ribera is credited with the spread of the Caravaggesque style to Spain, where it in turn may have influenced the work of Diego Velázquez. Ribera’s paintings of half-length saints, such as the *St. Jerome* and *Sts. Peter and Paul*, and large-scale devotional paintings such as the *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* reflect his years spent in Rome and Naples, where the art of Caravaggio fostered Ribera’s tenebrism and intimate portrayal of hallowed religious subjects.

![St Paul the Hermit](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.12%3A_17th_c…)

Figure `PageIndex(51)`: Jusepe de Ribera, *St Paul the Hermit*, c. 1638, oil on canvas, 132.7 x 106.7 cm (Walters Art Museum, Baltimore)

In 1612, two years after Caravaggio’s death, a young Ribera asked his Roman landlord for permission to cut a hole in his roof. Allowing natural light to illuminate models in Ribera’s studio, this makeshift skylight stands as unusual evidence of the lengths Caravaggisti might go to achieve the first-hand observation, dramatic lighting, and incisive realism that characterized this new approach to art.

This content was first developed for Oxford Art Online and appears courtesy of Oxford University Press.
Additional resources:

Caravaggio in the Google Art Project
Caravaggio and His Followers in The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History
Biography of the artist from the National Gallery
Caravaggisti in Wikipedia

Guido Reni, Aurora

by DR. SHANNON PRITCHARD

![Guido Reni, Aurora, 1613-14, ceiling fresco (Casino dell’Aurora, Rome)](image)

Paintings on ceilings

The period known as the Baroque (the 1600s) produced many new and innovative pictorial modes of expression and none more so than the painted ceiling. Patrons and artists began turning their eyes upward, and came up with inventive ways of decorating ceilings with a variety of motifs—from the classical gods and goddesses to the apotheosis of saints and the glorification of family lineage. Who says paintings are just for walls!
A painting for a summer house

One of the most beautiful and elegant of these ceilings is Guido Reni’s *Aurora*, painted in 1614 for the Roman Cardinal Scipione Borghese for the ceiling of his small summer house known as the Casino dell’Aurora. This casino (not the gambling sort) was part of the Cardinal’s larger palace residence located on the Quirinal Hill in Rome. The fresco represents Aurora (left), goddess of the dawn, bringing forth a new day as she leads the way for Apollo (below), god of light (among many other things), who follows behind in his golden quadriga (a four-horse chariot). That Aurora is bringing the dawn is evident through the change in the sky we see between the two gods: a darkish silvery gray before Aurora that turns into a bright, golden light filled sky before Apollo.

Below the edges of the clouds is a distant landscape slowly being illuminated by the dawn, with small sailboats barely visible out on the sea beyond. Aurora’s gauzy drapery flutters around her figure as she seems to be preparing to drop the sprays of flowers she carries in her hands onto the landscape below.

Apollo, clothed only in a light purple wrap, is enveloped in a warm, golden halo of light. Hovering between Aurora and Apollo is a torch bearing putto (a winged child similar in appearance to Cupid, but not Cupid), identified as Phosphorus, an ancient personification of the Morning Star (detail, below). Elegant female figures, known as Hours, dance alongside the chariot, representing the passage of time, with their diaphanous draperies blown gently by the wind.

The figures are represented in an ideal manner as their physiognomies and physiques are flawless and perfect in their beauty. They are timeless and ageless, never to be marred by old age and decrepitude. Moreover, Reni’s soft pastel color palette lends an idyllic, mythic quality to the scene.
Baroque classicism

As the *Aurora* is an exemplar of Baroque classicism, a style within the Baroque period that purposefully recalls art from ancient Greece and Rome, it is not surprising to find that Reni’s fresco makes many references to actual works of art from Classical Antiquity. For example, the figures of the Hours bear close resemblance to the female figures in a Roman relief known today as the *Borghese Dancers* (above), which was originally part of Cardinal Borghese’s collection of antiquities. Similarly, the figure of Phosphorus may have been influenced by a tondo (circular form) on the east side of the ancient Roman Arch of Constantine, which represents Sol, the sun god, similarly being led by a torch bearing putto (below).
Let us now consider the experience of viewing the Aurora in the Casino dell’Aurora. The fresco is a singular scene, isolated in the center of the ceiling, surrounded by a physical (not simply painted) frame of molded stucco that is decorated with gold leaf (a process known as gilding). Reni’s use of a frame around his fresco is a pictorial device known as quadro riportato, or “painting taken elsewhere.” The idea was to trick the viewer into thinking that an easel painting, a framed painting we would normally expect to find hanging on a wall, had actually been placed on the ceiling (keep in mind that Aurora is a fresco, painted right on the ceiling).

Reni was not the first to do this, as there was already another famous ceiling in Rome that also used quadro
riportato—the Farnese Gallery Ceiling painted by Annibale Carracci (above). In the case of the Farnese ceiling, however, the frames are not physical frames, but were painted illusions—a technique known as *trompe l’oeil* (literally to “trick the eye”). Thus, in comparison, we might say that Reni’s use of an actual frame was a very direct interpretation of _quadro riportato_!

Figure \(\PageIndex{59}\): Guercino, _Aurora_, c. 1621, fresco (Casino di Villa Boncompagni Ludovisi, Rome)

**Illusionism**

In addition to the “framing” of paintings on ceilings, artists used another illusionistic technique of visually breaking the ceiling so the image appears to be in the sky above, not inside the room. An example of this is another painting with the subject of _Aurora_, this one by the artist Guercino (above). Painted just a few years after Reni’s _Aurora_, Guercino extended the architecture of the room onto the vaulted ceiling and then “opened” it up so the viewer would see Aurora and her entourage racing by in the sky above. The painted illusionistic architecture, known as _quadratura_, was also a popular illusionistic pictorial device used in several other Roman ceilings in the seventeenth century (including Pozzo’s Glorification of Saint Ignatius—a ceiling fresco in the church of Sant'Ignazio in Rome).

Figure \(\PageIndex{60}\): Giorgio Vasanzio and Carlo Maderno, Casino dell’Aurora Pallavicini, the façade, 1611–16 (Rome)
The classical past

In the end, Guido Reni's fresco, classicizing in both style and subject, with its golden stucco frame, was a perfect choice for the Casino dell'Aurora. Set in the gardens of Cardinal Borghese's estate, the summer house was specifically intended to allude to, if not actually recreate, elements of the Classical past. Its façade was (and still is) decorated with ancient Roman sarcophagi and reliefs further enhancing its intended atmosphere. Perhaps we can imagine Cardinal Borghese looking up at Aurora bringing in the new day as he escaped the hot Roman summer sun in his own personal version of arcadia.

Additional resources:

Palazzo Pallavicini-Rospigliosi, Rome

Short biography of the artist from the Getty Museum

Reni at The National Gallery

Guido Reni on the Google Art Project

Artemisia Gentileschi, Judith Slaying Holofernes

by DR. ESPERANÇA CAMARA
Video (PageIndex{17}): Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 1620-21, oil on canvas, 162.5 x 199 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence). Speakers: Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris

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Lord God, to whom all strength belongs, prosper what my hands are now to do for the greater glory of Jerusalem; for now is the time to recover your heritage and to further my plans to crush the enemies arrayed against us.

— Judith’s prayer before beheading Holofernes (Judith 13:4-5)

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The story of Judith

Rivulets of blood run down the white sheets, as Judith, a pious young widow from the Jewish city of Bethulia, beheads Holofernes, general of the Assyrian army that had besieged her city. Moved by the plight of her people and filled with trust in God, Judith took matters into her own hands. She coiffed her hair, donned her finest garments and entered the enemy camp under the pretense of bringing Holofernes information that would ensure his victory. Struck by her beauty, he invited her to dine, planning later to seduce her. As the biblical text recounts, "Holofernes was so enchanted with her that he drank far more wine than he had drunk on any other day in his life" (Judith 12:20). Judith saw her opportunity; with a prayer on her lips and a sword in her hand, she saved her people from destruction.

The story of Judith and Holofernes is recounted in the Book of Judith, a 2nd century text deemed apocryphal by the Jewish and Protestant traditions, but included in Catholic editions of the Bible. Like the story of David and Goliath, it was a popular subject of art in the Renaissance and Baroque periods.

Artemisia and Caravaggio

This particular painting, executed by Artemisia Gentileschi in Florence c. 1620 and now in the Uffizi, is one of the bloodiest and most vivid depictions of the scene, surpassing the version by Caravaggio, arch-realist of Baroque Rome, in its immediacy and shocking realism. Artemisia was certainly familiar with Caravaggio’s painting of the subject; her father Orazio, who was responsible for her artistic training, was Caravaggio’s friend and artistic follower. Caravaggio’s
painting inspired, and perhaps even challenged, the young Artemisia.

A comparison between the two reveals not only her debt to the older artist, but also a series of pointed modifications that heighten the intensity of the physical struggle, the quantity of blood spilled, and the physical and psychological strength of Judith and her maidservant, Abra. In Artemisia’s painting (below, right) the bloody sheets are in the immediate foreground, close to the viewer’s space. Holofernes’s muscular body projects dynamically into the depicted space as bold areas of light and dark draw attention to his powerful limbs.

Figure \(\PageIndex{62}\): Left: Caravaggio, *Judith beheading Holofernes*, 1598-99, oil on canvas, 145 x 195 cm (Palazzo Barberini, Rome); and right: Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith and Holofernes*, 1620-21, oil on canvas, 162.5 x 199 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence)

And, most importantly, whereas Caravaggio (above, left) pairs his delicate Judith with a haggard attendant who merely looks on, her eyes wide with disbelief, Artemisia depicts two strong, young women working in unison, their sleeves rolled up, their gazes focused, their grips firm. Caravaggio’s Judith gracefully recoils from her gruesome task; Artemisia’s Judith does not flinch. Instead, she braces herself on the bed, as she presses Holofernes’s head down with one hand and pulls a large sword through his neck with the other. The creases at her wrists clearly show the physical strength required. Holofernes struggles in vain, the thrust of his arms countered by the more forceful movement of Abra, Judith’s accomplice in this grisly act.

**A composition perfected**

The Uffizi *Judith Slaying Holofernes* is Artemisia’s second telling of this narrative. The first, executed in Rome c. 1611-12 and now in the Capodimonte Museum in Naples (below, left), introduced the dynamic composition centered on the thrust and counter thrust of extended limbs. Artemisia refined the composition in the second (Uffizi) version. Small but significant adjustments reveal her growth in technical skill, her awareness of the local Florentine taste for sumptuous fabrics, and her thoughtful consideration of the expressive potential of each detail. Awkward passages of anatomy and proportion (such as Holofernes’ head) have been corrected, the colors and textures of the fabrics are now richer (notice the red velvet draped over Holofernes and the golden damask of Artemisia’s Judith’s dress), and Judith’s hair is more elaborately curled, in keeping with the biblical text’s emphasis on her self-adornment.
Most striking, however, is the portrayal of the blood. The Capodimonte version (above, left) omits the blood that violently spurts from the neck of Holofernes. Like Caravaggio’s, the Uffizi painting places particular emphasis on this detail, and does so with even greater realism.

Framed by Judith’s arms, jets of blood now arc and descend in droplets that bespeckle her arms and dress. The pattern described by the spurting blood suggests Artemisia may have been familiar with her friend Galileo Galilei’s research on parabolic trajectories. Artemisia also modified the sword in the Uffizi version. The sword, here longer and held more
vertically, prominently marks the painting’s central axis which extends from Abra’s arm to the blood that runs down the edge of the bed. This powerful visual axis reinforces the strength of the women and the violence of the deed. It is no accident that Judith’s sword-clenching fist is at the very center of the composition; imbued with divine strength, this widow’s hand is now the hand of God protecting the Israelites from their enemies.

Figure \(\PageIndex{66}\): Bracelet (detail), Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 1620-21, oil on canvas, 162.5 x 199 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence)

**Judith—Artemisia’s alter ego?**

Artemisia’s unique portrayal of Judith and Abra has prompted scholars to argue that Artemisia identified with the protagonist of the story in a way her male counterparts did not. This association stems not only from their shared gender, but also from Artemisia’s own traumatic experience. Artemisia was raped at the age of 17 by the artist Agostino Tassi, a close friend of her father. When Tassi failed to marry her, as the social dictates of the time demanded, her father sought recourse in court. During the trial, Artemisia describes her struggle against Tassi and her attempt to attack him with a knife. She also recalls the sense of betrayal she felt when she realized her female chaperone had colluded with Tassi and arranged to leave the two alone.

The first version of *Judith Slaying Holofernes* dates to this difficult period in the artist’s life. The memory of this event likely colored Artemisia’s engagement with the story of Judith. Especially significant is Artemisia’s portrayal of Abra as youthful, strong and fully engaged in the assisting Judith, in striking contrast to the chaperone who purposefully abandoned Artemisia in her hour of need. In the Uffizi painting Artemisia adds a small detail that supports her identification with Judith. One of the cameos on Judith’s bracelet appears to depict Artemis, the ancient goddess of both chastity and the hunt.

**Judith—A symbol of the Church Militant**

While the story of Judith likely held personal significance for Artemisia, it is important to note its broader cultural valence. The story of Judith was especially popular in the Baroque period, not only in the visual arts but also in literature, theater, and music. An example of the victory of virtue over vice, of God’s protection of his chosen people from their enemies, Judith was also seen as an Old Testament antetype of the Virgin Mary and, by extension, as a symbol of the Church. This association partly explains the increase in portrayals of Judith in late 16th through the 17th centuries, when the
Catholic Church was engaged in conflicts with both the Protestants and the Ottoman Turks, whose eastern origins facilitated their identification with Holofernes. Artemisia and her contemporaries capitalized on this popularity, frequently portraying not only the moment of the beheading itself, but also the moment right after it, when Judith and her maidservant escape from the enemy camp. The dramatic potential of the story made it as ideal subject for the powerful theatricality of Baroque art.

A horrifying masterpiece

The Uffizi Judith was likely either commissioned by or gifted to the Medici, Florence’s ruling family, the same family that commissioned Donatello’s famous bronze sculpture of Judith and Holofernes in the late 15th century (left).

Artemisia Gentileschi was clearly proud of the Uffizi Judith Slaying Holofernes, signing it in the lower right corner. In it she demonstrated her mastery of the language of Baroque realism, exploiting its emphasis on proximity to the picture plane, strong chiaroscuro, and realistic details to create an especially potent depiction of the story’s dramatic climax.

The bold immediacy of this finely-tuned composition succeeded all too well, for in the late 18th century, disgusted by the horror of the scene, the Medici duchess banished this masterpiece to a dark corner of the Uffizi, where it remained until the late twentieth century. To this day, it strikes its viewers with both revulsion and awe at the skill of the artist who so convincingly transformed paint into blood.
Additional resources:

Gentileschi’s Judith Slaying Holofernes (Uffizi) at the Google Art Project

Violence and Virtue: Artemisia Gentileschi’s Judith Slaying Holofernes (from the Art Institute of Chicago)

Guercino, St. Luke Displaying a Painting of the Virgin

by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. DAVID DROGIN

Video \(\PageIndex{18}\): Guercino, St. Luke Displaying a Painting of the Virgin, oil on canvas, 1652-53 (Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City)

Il Gesù, Rome

by FRANK DABELL, DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
Video `\(\PageIndex{19}\)`: Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola and Giacomo della Porta, Church of Il Gesù, Rome (consecrated 1584, ceiling fresco, *The Triumph of the Name of Jesus*, by Il Baciccio, also known as Giovanni Battista Gaulli, 1672-1685). This video was produced in cooperation with our partners at Context Travel.

**Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:**

![Image of ceiling fresco](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.12%3A_17th_c...)

*Updated: Thu, 19 Nov 2020 14:05:06 GMT*
Andrea Pozzo

Andrea Pozzo, *Glorification of Saint Ignatius*

by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER

Video: Fra Andrea Pozzo, *Glorification of Saint Ignatius*, ceiling fresco in the nave of Sant'Ignazio, Rome, 1691-94

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Andrea Pozzo, St. Ignatius Chapel, Il Gesù, Rome

by FRANK DABELL, DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER

Video: Andrea Pozzo, Saint Ignatius Chapel in the left transept of the church, Il Gesù, Rome (commissioned in 1695). Many artists contributed, including Alessandro Algardi, Pierre Legros, Bernardino Ludovisi, Il Lorenzone and Jean-Baptiste Théodon. Materials include bronze, gold, silver, and many semiprecious stones, most notably lapis lazuli. This video was produced in cooperation with our partners at Context Travel.
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Pierre Le Gros the Younger, *Stanislas Kostka on His Deathbed*

by FRANK DABELL, DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
Video \(\PageIndex{22}\): Pierre Le Gros the Younger, *Stanislas Kostka on His Deathbed*, 1703, upstairs at Bernini’s Sant’Andrea al Quirinale. Frank Dabell appears in this video courtesy of Context Travel.
Baroque art in Flanders

Rubens—a painter to Europe's most wealthy and powerful—is the star.

1600 - 1700

Peter Paul Rubens

Peter Paul Rubens, Elevation of the Cross

by DR. SHANNON PRITCHARD
An enormous triptych

The *Elevation of the Cross* altarpiece is a masterpiece of Baroque painting by the Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens. The work was originally installed on the high altar of the Church of St. Walburga in Antwerp (since destroyed), and is
now located in the Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp.

This triptych (a painting—usually an altarpiece—comprised of two outer “wings” and a central panel) is impressive in its size, measuring 15 feet in height and 21 feet wide when open. The original frame, unfortunately lost, would have made the painting even more impressive in size! Due to its very size, Rubens actually painted it on-site behind a curtain. Four saints associated with the church of St. Walburga can be found on the exterior of the wings (visible when the altarpiece is closed): Saints Amandus and Walburga on the left and Saints Catherine of Alexandria and Eligius on the right.

**Baroque dynamism**

Rubens was one of the most prolific and sought after painters of the Baroque period, generally (although not always) defined in painting and sculpture by the representation of action and emotion in ways meant to inspire the Catholic faithful (this triptych was painted less than a century after Martin Luther’s challenge to the authority of the Catholic Church).

In the central panel, we see the dramatic moment when the cross of Christ’s crucifixion is being raised to its upright position. Rubens created a strong diagonal emphasis by placing the base of the cross at the far lower right of the composition and the top of the cross in the upper left—making Christ’s body the focal point. This strong diagonal reinforces the notion that this is an event unfolding before the viewer, as the men struggle to lift the weight of their burden.

![Image](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.12%3A_17th_c…)

*Figure \(\PageIndex{73}\): Figures raising the cross (detail), Peter Paul Rubens, *Elevation of the Cross*, from Saint Walburga, 1610, oil on wood, center panel: 15 feet 1-7/8 inches x 11 feet 1-1/2 inches (now in Antwerp Cathedral)*

Adding to this dynamic tension is the visual sensation that the two men in the lower right are about to burst into the viewer’s space as they work to pull the cross upward (see image above). The viewer is caught in a moment of anxiety, waiting for the action to be complete.

In the left panel (below, left) are St. John the Evangelist and the Virgin Mary, who, standing in the shadow of the rocky
outcrop above them, look to their left at what unfolds before their eyes. Shown in quiet resignation and grief over the fate of Christ, the group of women below is a stark contrast of overwrought emotion. Here too Rubens uses a diagonal along the line of the women from the lower right to the mid-left, setting John and Mary apart, allowing the viewer to focus on their reaction.

![Image of Elevation of the Cross by Peter Paul Rubens](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.12%3A_17th_c...)

Figure (PageIndex{75})): Side panels, Peter Paul Rubens, *Elevation of the Cross*, from Saint Walburga, 1610, oil on wood, center panel: 15 feet 1-7/8 inches x 11 feet 1-1/2 inches (now in Antwerp Cathedral)

The right panel (above, right) continues the narrative event as Roman soldiers prepare the two thieves for their fate as they will be crucified alongside Christ. One thief—already being nailed to the cross on the ground—is foreshortened back into space, while the other—just behind him with his hands bound—is being forcefully led away by his hair. The diagonal Rubens created here runs the opposite direction as that in the left panel, moving from the lower left to the upper right along the line created by the leg and neck of the gray horse. These opposing diagonals further create tension across the composition, heightening the viewer’s sense of drama and chaotic action.

**A unified narrative and biblical accuracy**

In addition to the powerful figural composition, the three panels are visually unified through the landscape and sky. The left and central panels share a rocky outcropping covered with oak trees and vines (both of which have Christological
significance). Notice that St. John, the Virgin Mary and the Roman soldiers just to the left of the cross are standing on the same ground-line.

![Image of Peter Paul Rubens' Elevation of the Cross](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.12%3A_17th_c...

Figure \(\PageIndex{74}\): Peter Paul Rubens, *Elevation of the Cross*, from Saint Walburga, 1610, oil on wood, center panel: 15 feet 1-7/8 inches x 11 feet 1-1/2 inches (now in Antwerp Cathedral)

The unification of the central and right panels is accomplished through the sky, which begins to darken in the central panel, moving to the impending eclipse of the sun on the right, an event recounted in the Gospel of Matthew (27:45): “From noon on, darkness came over the whole land....” This attention to biblical accuracy is also seen in the text on the scroll at the top of the cross, which reads: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews,” written in Greek, Latin, and Aramaic, as told in the Gospel of John (19:19-21). In both cases, Rubens was adhering to one of the primary mandates of the Council of Trent (1545-63), which called for historical accuracy in the representation of sacred events (at the Council of Trent, church authorities essentially decided theological questions raised by Martin Luther and the Protestants, the period following the Council is known as the Counter-Reformation—the Catholic Church’s response to Martin Luther’s Protestant Reformation).
Rubens and a reflection of Italy

The *Elevation of the Cross* altarpiece was the first commission Rubens received after returning to Antwerp from his Italian sojourn from 1600 to 1608/9 where he worked in the cities of Mantua, Genoa, and Rome.

Given his extended time in Italy, it is not surprising that we see a number of Italian influences in this work. The richness of the coloration (notice the blues and reds throughout the composition) and Rubens’ painterly technique recalls that of the Venetian master Titian, while the dramatic contrasts of light and dark bring to mind Caravaggio’s tenebrism (darkness) in his Roman compositions, such as the *Crucifixion of St. Peter* (left). And indeed, we can clearly see Rubens’ interest in his Italian counterpart in the sense of physical exertion, the use of foreshortening—where figures push past the boundaries of the picture plane into the space of the viewer, and in the use of the diagonal.

In terms of the muscularity and physicality of Ruben’s male figures, a clear connection can be drawn to Michelangelo’s nude males (the ignudi) on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. In addition to looking at the works of past and contemporary masters, we know Rubens was also interested in the study of classical antiquity (ancient Greece and Rome). In fact, the figure of Christ seems to have been based on one of the most famous works of antiquity, the *Laocoön*, which Rubens made drawings of during his time in Rome.
Elevation: altarpiece and high altar

When the *Elevation of the Cross* altarpiece was placed on the high altar, there was a specific connection being forged between the subject of the painting and the function of the altar. The act of raising an object up is known in Latin as *elevatio*. During the Mass performed by the priest at the high altar, there is a moment when the Eucharistic wafer (miraculously transformed into the body of Christ) is elevated. Thus, when the congregation faced the high altar, they not only saw the *elevatio* of Christ’s cross but the elevation of the wafer, and thus the altarpiece and the ritual of the mass performed in front of it visually reinforced the message of Christ’s sacrifice on behalf of mankind.

Additional resources:

* Photographs of the triptych
* A study for the figure of Christ in the Harvard Art Museums
* Biography of the artist from The National Gallery
* Rubens on the Google Art Project
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:

https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.12%3A_17th_c...

Updated: Thu, 19 Nov 2020 14:05:06 GMT
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Peter Paul Rubens, *The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus*

by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER

Video Figure 23: Peter Paul Rubens, *The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus*, 1617-18, oil on canvas, 224 x 210.5 cm (Alte Pinakothek, Munich)
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Peter Paul Rubens, *The Presentation of the Portrait of Marie de’ Medici*

by DR. ESPERANÇA CAMARA

Video \(\PageIndex{24}\): Peter Paul Rubens, *The Presentation of the Portrait of Marie de’ Medici*, c. 1622-1625, oil on canvas, 394 x 295 cm (Musée du Louvre, Paris)
Cupid's arrow hits its mark

A young woman in a bejeweled dress with a stiff lace collar gazes confidently out of a simply-framed, bust-length portrait placed at the very center of a large canvas. Her name is Marie de’ Medici, daughter of the Grandduke of Tuscany.

The ancient gods of marriage and love—Hymen and Amor (Cupid), to the left and right, respectively—hover in midair as they present this portrait to Henry IV, the king of France. Hymen holds in his left hand a flaming torch, symbolizing the ardor of love, while Cupid extols the virtues of the Medici princess. Cupid’s arrow has hit its mark; the king is smitten. He gazes up in gratitude, his left hand extended as he expresses his delight in his bride-to-be.

From the heavens above, Jupiter and Juno, the king and queen of the Olympian gods, look down with approval, their own hands touching in a tender gesture of marital union. Jupiter’s fierce eagle, seen in the top left corner, looks away from the couple and clenches its lightening bolts in its talons. In contrast, Juno’s tamed peacock looks at the divine couple, while his mate cranes her neck to look at the portrait. A pink silk ribbon binds them together. The peahen perches on Juno’s chariot, directly above a golden relief of Cupid who balances a yoke-shaped garland (a symbol of marriage) on his shoulders as he playfully dances on the wings of a proud eagle. The message is clear: even the king of the gods can be subdued by love. Following Jupiter’s lead, Henry must also turn his attention to marriage.
Figure \(\PageIndex{79}\): Jupiter and Juno (detail), Peter Paul Rubens, *The Presentation of the Portrait of Marie de’ Medici*, c. 1622–1625, oil on canvas, 394 x 295 cm (Musée du Louvre)

However, this match is about politics as well as love. Behind Henry stands the personification of France, wearing a blue silk garment embroidered with gold fleur-de-lis (the coat of arms of the French monarchy) and an elaborate plumed helmet encircled by a gold crown. She gently touches Henry’s shoulder and whispers in his ear, assuring him that a match with the Medici princess is indeed good for the kingdom. France urges Henry to turn away from the field of battle, the aftermath of which is visible in the burning town in the background, and attend to hearth and home, for domestic matters are no less important to the survival of the monarchy than military exploits. Henry obliges; his helmet and shield—now the playthings of two tender cherubs—lie at his feet.

Figure \(\PageIndex{80}\): View of the Marie de Medici cycle by Peter Paul Rubens in the Louvre (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-SA 2.0)

This canvas is the sixth in a series of twenty-four paintings on the life of Marie de’ Medici commissioned by the queen herself from Peter Paul Rubens in 1622 to adorn one of the two galleries in the Luxembourg Palace, her newly-built home in Paris. In both scale and subject matter, this cycle is unprecedented. Not only is it unique in its dedication to the major life events of a queen, but it also includes events that were both quite recent and quite humiliating. After Henry was assassinated in 1610, Marie—acting as regent for their young son, Louis XIII—ruled the kingdom of France for seven years. The position suited her; but many French nobles begrudged her power. Divisions in the court, including tensions with her own son, led to Marie’s exile from the Paris in 1617. The commission of the biographical cycle marked her reconciliation with Louis and her return to the capital city in 1620. It vindicated her reign as the queen of France.
The cycle idealizes and allegorizes Marie’s life in light of the peace and prosperity she brought to the kingdom, not through military victories but through wisdom, devotion to her husband and her adopted country, and strategic marriage alliances—her own as well as the ones she brokered for her children. This, at least, is the message she wished to convey and she worked closely with her advisors and Rubens to ensure her story was told as she saw fit.

The *Presentation of the Portrait* forms part of this agenda; it is an idealized portrayal of the conclusion in April of 1600 of marriage negotiations that were two years in the making. The painting presents Henry’s betrothal to Marie de Medici as a union ordained by the gods, counseled by France, and inspired by Marie’s beauty and virtues. In reality, the merits of the union were extolled not by a soft-haired, fleshy Cupid but by the alliance’s French and Italian proponents, one of whom reported that the portrait presented by the Florentine negotiators “pleased His Majesty exceedingly.” Henry, for his part, was distracted from the negotiations by his new mistress, whom he had promised to marry. Nevertheless, he recognized the political and financial necessity of the Medici marriage. When his advisor announced the finalization of the marriage contract, Henry exclaimed: “By God, let it be; there is nothing to be done about it, because for the good of my kingdom and my peoples, you say that I must be married, so I simply must be.”

For Henry, a Protestant who had converted to Catholicism upon ascending to the throne in 1593, a Catholic wife would assuage any concerns about his loyalty to the Catholic Church in France. Additionally, Marie’s hefty dowry eased
Henry’s large debt to the Medici, major financial backers of his military activities. And, perhaps most importantly, Henry was nearing the age of 50 and had yet to father an heir, putting France’s future stability in danger. A fruitful union with Marie was key to this stability. In this matter, the 27-year old Marie did not disappoint, giving birth to a son one year after the wedding, and five additional children, four of whom survived to adulthood. Rubens asserts Marie’s successful role as wife and mother by establishing a dominant vertical axis through the center of the composition from Juno, with her exposed, full breasts, through Marie’s portrait to the chubby cherub directly below. Of all of the figures in the painting, Marie and the cherub are the only ones who look out at the viewer, pointedly reaffirming the centrality of Marie de’ Medici and of her royal progeny to the future of France.

The theme of peace, which runs throughout the cycle, was indeed furthered not only in France but in Europe by the marriage alliances brokered by Marie for her children: Louis XIII married a daughter of the Spanish king, her daughter Elisabeth married the heir to the Spanish throne (the future King Philip IV), and her daughter Henrietta married Charles I of England.

Figure \(\PageIndex{83}\): Luxembourg Palace (garden façade), Paris (France)

The pictorial cycle was installed in the Luxembourg Palace by 1625, in time for the Henrietta’s wedding festivities, thus enabling Marie to showcase her accomplishments to her many guests. Marie’s truce with her son Louis however was short lived and she died in exile in 1631. Despite the challenges of her life as she struggled to regain the power and influence she once had, Marie de’ Medici lived to hear herself proclaimed mother of three sovereigns, certainly an impressive legacy for the orphaned daughter of the Grandduke of Tuscany.

**Additional resources:**

- Key moment in the Medici cycle from the Louvre
- The paintings of Rubens and Van Dyck on the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History
- Smarthistory images of Rubens’s work
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:

![Image 1](image1)

![Image 2](image2)

![Image 3](image3)

![Image 4](image4)
Figure \(\PageIndex{84}\): More Smarthistory images…

Peter Paul Rubens, *Arrival (or Disembarkation) of Marie de Medici at Marseilles*

by **DR. BETH HARRIS** and **DR. STEVEN ZUCKER**
Video \(\PageIndex{25}\): Peter Paul Rubens, *Arrival (or Disembarkation) of Marie de Medici at Marseilles*, 1621-25, oil on canvas, 394 x 295 cm (Musée du Louvre, Paris)

**Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:**
Peter Paul Rubens, *The Apotheosis of Henry IV and the Proclamation of the Regency of Marie de’ Médici*

by **MATTHEW WILSON**

This is a painting about the events of a single day: May 14th, 1610. That date witnessed two seismic incidents in French history: a cold-blooded political assassination, and the investiture of one of the seventeenth century’s most powerful women. Rubens’s vast canvas turns the day’s news into an epic Baroque dramatization, and a persuasive piece of propaganda.
Death and destiny

On that fateful May morning in 1610, King Henry IV of France was murdered in broad daylight on the streets of Paris by a Catholic zealot named François Ravaillac. France was plunged into a dilemma of succession: Henry’s eldest son Louis was too young to take the throne, and his wife Marie de’ Medici couldn’t rule as Queen, since French Salic Law forbade women to be monarchs. The solution was decided within just two hours of the assassination: Marie was appointed regent and therefore de facto ruler of France. This positioned her in a seat of power previously only ever held by men.

Twelve years after these momentous affairs, Marie commissioned one of Europe’s most renowned artists, Peter Paul Rubens, to paint a series of 24 paintings about her life (today we refer to these as the Medici Cycle). These were designed to decorate the Luxembourg Palace—her enormous new residence in Paris. The Apotheosis of Henry IV and the Proclamation of the Regency of Marie de’ Médici is the middle image in the cycle. It is more than twice the width of the other paintings and it concerns the events of May 14th, 1610. But there’s no attempt to show either the murder or Marie’s royal promotion realistically. Instead the artist has translated them into a large-scale drama, radically simplifying and the events and turning them into a grand spectacle.

Figure \(\PageIndex{87}\): Salomon de Brosse, Luxembourg Palace, 1615–1645 (photo: Luis Miguel Bugallo Sánchez, CC BY-SA 4.0)

The power of allegory

One aspect of this non-realistic approach is the painting’s use of symbols. For example, a snake at the bottom left hand corner — synonymous with evil in Christian iconography—stands in for the murderer Ravaillac. Above it, Henry is shown rising to heaven flanked by the Roman deities Jupiter (with his attribute an eagle) and Saturn (who holds a sickle) and ascending towards other gods in the heavens above.
The center of the composition is filled with the Roman deities Victoria (goddess of Victory) in gold drapery who holds a palm leaf to symbolize martyrdom, and an unarmed and nude Bellona (goddess of war) who despairs at the death of the peace-bringing Henry. The dogs just behind Bellona are symbols of faithfulness in marriage.

On the right side of the composition Marie is shown in the black attire of a widow, with the nobility of France shown gathering around her dais, imploring her to accept the gifts being offered to her. These are being proffered by several allegorical and mythological characters such as a kneeling personification of France holding up an orb of leadership, and a flying allegory of Divine Providence giving her a ship’s rudder to signify her duty to steer the nation in a moment of crisis. Prudence stands beside Marie advising her to accept the symbols of authority, and behind the throne is the
Roman goddess of wisdom Minerva. Even the architecture is symbolic: the columns around Marie are twisting Solomonic columns that are reputed to have flanked the throne of the legendary King Solomon of the Bible. A triumphal arch (signifying success) in the background perfectly frames Marie’s body.

Rubens would have learned how to depict such allegories from textbooks on symbolism published at the time. The most famous was the recently released *Iconologia* by Cesare Ripa, but there were many other emblem books, or *emblemata*, available for consultation.

Figure \(\PageIndex{90}\): Left: Peter Paul Rubens, *The Apotheosis of Henry IV and the Proclamation of the Regency of Marie de’ Médici*, detail of Henry IV and Bellona, c. 1622–1625, oil on canvas, 394 x 727 cm (Musée du Louvre, Paris); Right: Athanadoros, Hagesandros, and Polydoros of Rhodes, *Laocoön and his Sons*, early first century C.E., marble, 7’10 1/2″ high (Vatican Museums)

As you may have also noticed the language of allegory and many of the figures that Rubens used are all connected with ancient Rome. By making such associations, Rubens was aiming to connect French royalty with what was considered to be the greatest civilization of the past. There are also sly stylistic references to classical art. The poses of Bellona and Henry, for example, recall *Laocoön and his sons*, perhaps the most famous and well-respected sculptural group from antiquity.
But the painting also betrays influence from more modern developments in art: the right-hand section, for example bears a very similar composition to Caravaggio’s *Madonna of the Rosary*. In commissioning Rubens, Marie de’ Medici was probably getting the most intellectual and artistically knowledgeable artist in Europe to enshrine her legacy.

The language of allegory and allusions to ancient Rome were characteristic tactics used by artists of the early seventeenth century. What makes the painting unusual for its time is the predominance of powerful women (real and allegorical) among the cast of characters.

**Propaganda**

As was previously mentioned, the real events of May 14, 1610 (from Henry’s undignified stabbing in a constricted carriage to Marie’s hasty inauguration as regent) were not the concern of Rubens, who shows us an ideal—a concept, rather than a reality. This fits the painting’s intentions perfectly. The Medici Cycle, after all, was conceived by Marie de’ Medici, and therefore designed to reassure her of her own right to rule, and to persuade others of it too. More than this—it was principally commissioned to compensate for Marie’s own flaws and unpopularity.
Marie suffered the hatred of the French aristocracy not only because she was a woman, but because she was Italian and surrounded herself with foreign advisers. She was no doubt the victim of inherent misogyny and jingoism, but she was also guilty of various intrigues and political misjudgments. Marie unscrupulously maintained political control in France even after her son Louis's coming of age in 1614. She mismanaged the nation's revenues and undermined aspects of her deceased husband's foreign policy. Louis eventually gained his rightful rule of France by force in 1617, exiling his mother from court and having her two favored advisers killed.

Thus, the whole Medici Cycle was an attempt to justify Marie's original right to rule and persuade us of her pure intentions. This may be why she is shown as a loyal, grieving wife who has to be implored by a chorus of supporters to take the regency, despite her reluctance. To put it simply, the painting is an overwhelming and learned piece of artistic propaganda.

Afterlife

The 24 paintings of the Medici Cycle are now in the Louvre in Paris, in a special gallery where The Apotheosis of Henry IV and the Proclamation of the Regency of Marie de’ Médici hold pride of place. It has influenced many later artists, most famously Eugène Delacroix who adapted Rubens’s Bellona for the central female figure in Liberty Leading the People (1830). Delacroix was clearly smitten by this vision of powerful, commanding and righteous femininity, albeit for entirely contrary political purpose. Paul Cézanne was also infatuated with the painting and repeatedly studied it in the Louvre, also re-using the pose and statuesque qualities of Bellona in his own nude studies. In the twentieth century, Rubens's epic allegorical approach to current affairs can even be seen as influencing works of art like Pablo Picasso's Guernica (1937).

Additional resources:

The Medici Cycle at the Louvre

Download a copy of Iconologia by Cesare Ripa

https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.12%3A_17th_c…

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Peter Paul Rubens, *Venus, Mars and Cupid*

by HELEN HILLYARD

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Figure \(\PageIndex{93}\): Peter Paul Rubens, *Venus, Mars and Cupid*, c.1630-1635, oil on canvas, 195.2 x 133 cm (Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, DPG285)

The defeat of war by love

The goddess Venus is shown in her boudoir feeding her son Cupid, who clings to his mother’s arm while clutching at her drapery. The pair is watched by Venus’s lover, Cupid’s father, Mars (the god of War). His expression is one of tenderness as he is quite literally disarmed, he has removed his helmet and his shield lies abandoned on the floor. Cupid’s own bow and arrows also lie on the ground. The painting can be interpreted symbolically as the defeat of war by love, a reading that is further underlined by the presence of the ghostly putti who play beside Mars’s head.

*Venus, Mars and Cupid* was painted in the early 1630s and the composition is closely related to Rubens’ large-
Peace and War (below). This is particularly evident in the figure of Peace who takes a similar pose and, like Venus, feeds milk to her child. The figures’ hair is also similarly dressed. Because of these broad similarities, it has been proposed that the histories of the two works might be interconnected.

Peace and War was executed in England in 1629-30, illustrating Rubens’s hopes for the peace he was trying to negotiate between England and Spain in his role as diplomatic envoy on behalf of Philip IV of Spain. Rubens eventually presented the finished work to Charles I of England as a gift.

Given these similarities as well as the theme of the subject matter—the triumph of love over war—it has been proposed that the Dulwich painting was likewise a diplomatic gift. In fact, a work fitting the description of the Dulwich painting is recorded in the inventory of Spanish nobleman Juan Gaspar de Cabrera, 10th Admiral of Castile; which might indicate the paintings were given to both England and Spain to commemorate the peace talks.

![Image of Minerva Protects Pax from Mars ("Peace and War")]()

What a technical analysis and an X-ray reveals

Recent technical analysis has shown that the materials used by Rubens were commonly found in Antwerp, indicating that the Dulwich painting was likely made after Peace and War, once the artist had returned from England, before being sent onward to Spain. Rubens frequently revised his works during the course of painting, and these changes are revealed in an X-ray of the work. X-rays can pass through most solid objects but are obstructed by certain materials, including lead-based pigments. This means that changes made by Rubens using lead white paint are made visible, allowing us to trace the development of the painting, and gain an invaluable insight into his thought processes and working methods. In the X-ray we can see that the position of Venus’s head was changed and the red curtain made larger, so as to cover more of the sky. Cupid’s left leg was bent so that his foot rested behind Venus’s knee; his right leg has also been altered slightly and his head raised. Venus’s left leg originally stretched out from the knee towards the right of the picture.
The X-ray also reveals that the drapery was once more taut, an effect now disguised by the degraded condition of the blue pigment. This would have counteracted the impression that Cupid was falling backwards and he would instead appear to be pulling himself upward.

**Rubens and his workshop**

Although the painting is today attributed to Rubens, it is unclear to what extent his studio was involved in its production. Rubens managed a large workshop with many assistants, which enabled the artist to meet the immense demand for his work. It is often difficult to decipher where the studio’s involvement ends and where the work of the master begins. For instance, Rubens would frequently retouch and “finish” studio versions of a painting in order to ensure that they were of a sufficiently high standard and works would certainly not leave the workshop without his approval. Such works are regarded as being “by Rubens” even if not entirely by his own hand. In the case of *Venus, Mars and Cupid*, it is tempting to think that the assistants might have sketched in the majority of the painting with Rubens himself applying those crucial finishing touches.

This essay was produced in conjunction with the “Making Discoveries” display series at Dulwich Picture Gallery, London. The displays coincide with the release of the Gallery’s Dutch and Flemish Schools Catalogue, to be published fall 2016, and aims to disseminate important findings from this major research project.

**Peter Paul Rubens, The Consequences of War**

*by DR. STEVEN ZUCKER and DR. BETH HARRIS*
The principal figure is Mars, who has left open the temple of Janus (which in time of peace, according to Roman custom, remained closed) and rushes forth with shield and blood-stained sword, threatening the people with great disaster. He pays little heed to Venus, his mistress, who, accompanied by Amors and Cupids, strives with caresses and embraces to hold him. From the other side, Mars is dragged forward by the Fury Alekto, with a torch in her hand. Near by are monsters personifying Pestilence and Famine, those inseparable partners of War. On the ground, turning her back, lies a woman with a broken lute, representing Harmony, which is incompatible with the discord of War. There is also a mother with her child in her arms, indicating that fecundity, procreation and charity are thwarted by War, which corrupts and destroys everything. In addition, one sees an architect thrown on his back, with his instruments in his hand, to show that which in time of peace is constructed for the use and ornamentation of the City, is hurled to the ground by the force of arms and falls to ruin. I believe, if I remember rightly, that you will find on the ground, under the feet of Mars, a book and a drawing on paper, to imply that he treads underfoot all the arts and letters. There ought also to be a bundle of darts or arrows, with the band which held them together undone; these when bound form the symbol of Concord. Beside them is the caduceus and an olive branch, attribute of Peace; these are also cast aside. That grief-stricken woman clothed in black, with torn veil, robbed of all her jewels and other ornaments, is the unfortunate Europe who, for so many years now, has suffered plunder, outrage, and misery, which are so injurious to everyone, that it is unnecessary to go into detail. Europe’s attribute is the globe, borne by a small angel or genius, and surmounted by the cross, to symbolize the Christian world.

Anthony van Dyck

Anthony van Dyck, Charles I at the Hunt

by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
Video \PageIndex{27})): Anthony van Dyck, *Charles I at the Hunt*, c. 1635, oil on canvas, 2.66 x 2.07 m (Musée du Louvre, Paris)


**Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:**
Anthony Van Dyck, *Samson and Delilah*

by **HELEN HILLYARD**

A calm before a storm

In his painting *Samson and Delilah*, Anthony van Dyck presents a moment filled with tension—a calm before a storm. Instead of depicting the climax of this Old Testament story, he represented the moment immediately before the action takes place. The heroic Samson is about to have his hair cut—removing the source of his superhuman strength. Lulled to sleep by his lover Delilah, the Philistine guards lie in wait ready to capture and imprison him as soon as the deed is done.
In Van Dyck’s scene, however, the focus is not the hero—Samson—but Delilah. The light within the painting is focused on her, while the edges of the canvas recede into darkness. She is shown bejewelled and in a state of undress, draped in luxurious silk and lounging on a bed covered with rich, brocaded fabric. Delilah’s soft and milky-white skin is in complete contrast to the swarthy Samson, who is covered with only a fur loincloth. All the action within the scene appears to rest on her as she raises a silencing finger, both to hush the guards and to command them into action.

The two women behind Delilah look on with interest and apprehension, waiting to see whether Samson will wake from his slumber. The guards, too, watch with anxiety, knowing that even their combined strength would be no match for the superhuman Samson. Van Dyck heightens the drama further by giving the barber what appear to be giant sheep shears, when normal scissors would do the same job.

**Van Dyck and Rubens**

*Samson and Delilah* was painted early in Van Dyck’s career, around 1618-21. During this time, Van Dyck was active in the Antwerp studio of the Flemish master Peter Paul Rubens, 22 years his senior. It is not known exactly when or under what terms Van Dyck entered Rubens’ studio, whether he was a pupil (or student) or rather an associate, contracted to work on specific commissions. In any case, Rubens had a definite impact upon Van Dyck’s work, revealed most clearly through *Samson and Delilah*. 
Samson and Delilah appears to be a response to Rubens earlier version of the same subject (above). Van Dyck takes a number of elements directly from Rubens—most notably the composition: the side-on-view, with the muscular Samson slumped in a heap on Delilah’s lap. However, Van Dyck reverses the grouping, perhaps indicating that he based his own painting on prints after the painting—where the composition is always reversed—rather than the original.

Van Dyck also borrows from Rubens in more stylistic terms, for example, in the portrayal of flesh and musculature. This
is particularly evident in Delilah’s décolletage and Samson’s muscled back. A fascination with textures and textiles is shared by both Rubens and Van Dyck, and the gold-brocaded fabric appears to have been a studio prop, appearing in other paintings by both Rubens and Van Dyck, including Rubens’ *St. Ambrose and the Emperor Theodosius* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) and Van Dyck’s *The Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine of Alexandria* (Museo del Prado, Madrid).

**Greater drama**

Yet, Van Dyck’s *Samson and Delilah* also departs from Rubens’ model in a number of important ways and, as such, can be considered a challenge to the master’s example with Van Dyck asserting his position as the foremost painter of his generation.

![Image](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.12%3A_17th_c…)

Rubens sets his version of the story in a bed chamber at night. In complete contrast, Van Dyck chooses to set his scene outside and in bright daylight. Van Dyck’s decision to depict the moment before Samson’s hair is cut is also an important divergence, since in Rubens’ painting the action is already underway. Van Dyck’s aim is seemingly to exploit this moment of tension to create a greater sense of drama within the picture. Van Dyck gives greater agency to the figure of Delilah who, with her raised finger, orchestrates the entire company of characters. Within this context, he is also able to include the exaggerated and theatrical reactions of the supporting cast—especially that of the younger woman who stands behind Delilah. This was evidently something Van Dyck gave considerable thought to and to which he returned at various stages during the course of painting, as evidenced by an X-ray of the work (below), which shows that Van Dyck adjusted the fingers of the woman, splaying them out further so as to create a more dramatic silhouette against the blue sky.
Provenance and attribution

Little is known about the early history of ownership of Samson and Delilah: either who owned it or where it was displayed. Yet, the position of the figures—peering down—might suggest that it was hung high. Moreover, the presence of a ledge at the bottom of a painting could have an architectural significance, indicating perhaps that the work was hung over a mantel. By the early 18th century the painting was recorded in Amsterdam, and was later bought by Noel Desenfans (the founder of Dulwich Picture Gallery) at a London sale in 1783. The painting formed part of the core collection of Dulwich Picture Gallery, when it opened in 1811. Yet, until 1880, it was considered to be the work of Peter Paul Rubens. Today, the painting’s attribution is restored to Van Dyck and stands as an important example of the artist’s early work and the influence of Rubens on his career.

Special thanks to the Dulwich Picture Gallery, London

This essay was produced in conjunction with the “Making Discoveries”(http://www.dulwichpicturegallery.org...veries-lineup/) display series at Dulwich Picture Gallery, London. The displays coincide with the release of the Gallery’s Dutch and Flemish Schools Catalogue, to be published fall 2016, and aims to disseminate important findings from this major research project.