

I9

VISION AND VISIONS

Catholic Europe, first half of the seventeenth century

The history of art is sometimes described as the story of a succession of various styles. We hear how the Romanesque or Norman style of the twelfth century with its round arches was succeeded by the Gothic style with the pointed arch; how the Gothic style was supplanted by the Renaissance, which had its beginnings in Italy in the early fifteenth century and slowly gained ground in all the countries of Europe. The style which followed the Renaissance is usually called Baroque. But, while it is easy to identify the earlier styles by definite marks of recognition, this is not so simple in the case of Baroque. The fact is that from the Renaissance onwards, almost up to our own time, architects have used the same basic forms – columns, pilasters, cornices, entablatures and mouldings, all of which were originally borrowed from classical ruins. In a sense, therefore, it is true to say that the Renaissance style of building has continued from Brunelleschi's days to our own, and many books on architecture speak of this whole period as Renaissance. On the other hand, it is natural that within such a long period tastes and fashions in building should have varied considerably, and it is convenient to have different labels by which to distinguish these changing styles. It is a strange fact that many of these labels which to us are simply names of styles were originally words of abuse or derision. The word 'Gothic' was first used by the Italian art critics of the Renaissance to denote the style which they considered barbarous, and which they thought had been brought into Italy by the Goths who destroyed the Roman Empire and sacked its cities. The word 'Mannerism' still retains for many people its original connotation of affectation and shallow imitation, of which critics of the seventeenth century had accused the artists of the late sixteenth century. The word 'Baroque' was a term employed by critics of a later period who fought against the tendencies of the seventeenth century, and wanted to hold them up to ridicule. Baroque really means absurd or grotesque, and it was used by men who insisted that the forms of classical buildings should never have been used or combined except in the ways adopted by the Greeks and Romans. To disregard the strict rules of ancient architecture seemed to these critics a deplorable lapse of taste – whence they labelled the style Baroque. It is not altogether easy

for us to appreciate these distinctions. We have become too accustomed to seeing buildings in our cities which defy the rules of classical architecture or misunderstand them altogether. So we have become insensitive in these matters and the old quarrels seem very remote from the architectural questions which interest us. To us a church façade like that in *figure 250* may not seem very exciting, because we have seen so many good and bad imitations of this type of building that we hardly turn our heads to look at them; but when it was first built in Rome, in 1575, it was a most revolutionary building. It was not just one more church in Rome, where there are many churches. It was the church of the newly founded Order of the Jesuits, on which high hopes were set for combating the Reformation all over Europe. Its very shape was to be on a new and unusual plan; the Renaissance idea of round and symmetrical church building had been rejected as unsuited to divine service, and a new, simple and ingenious plan had been worked out which was to be accepted all over Europe. The church was to be in the form of a cross, topped by a high and stately cupola. In the one large, oblong space, known as the nave, the congregation could assemble without hindrance, and look towards the main altar. This stood at the end of the oblong, and behind it was the apse, which was similar in form to that of the early basilicas. To suit the requirements of private devotion and adoration of individual saints, a row of small chapels was distributed on either side of the nave each of which had an altar of its own, and there were two larger chapels at the ends of the arms of the cross. It is a simple and ingenious way of planning a church and has since been widely used. It combines the main features of medieval churches – their oblong shape, emphasizing the main altar – with the achievements of Renaissance planning, in which so much stress is laid on large and roomy interiors into which the light would stream through a majestic dome.

Looking closely at the façade of Il Gesù, which was built by the celebrated architect Giacomo della Porta (1541?–1602), we soon realize why it must have impressed contemporaries as being no less new and ingenious than the interior of the church. We see at once that it is composed of the elements of classical architecture – we find all the set pieces together: columns (or rather, half-columns and pilasters) carrying an ‘architrave’ crowned by a high ‘attic’ which, in turn, carries the upper storey. Even the distribution of these set pieces employs some features of classical architecture: the large middle entrance, framed by columns and flanked by two smaller entrances, recalls the scheme of triumphal arches, *page 119, figure 74*, which (to repeat) became as firmly implanted in the architects’ mind as the major chord in the mind of musicians. There is nothing in this simple and majestic façade to suggest deliberate defiance of the classical

250

Giacomo della Porta
Church of Il Gesù,
Rome, c. 1575–7
 An early Baroque church



rules for the sake of sophisticated caprice. But the way in which the classical elements are fused into a pattern shows that Roman and Greek and even Renaissance rules have been left behind. The most striking feature in this façade is the doubling of each column or pilaster, as if to give the whole structure greater richness, variety and solemnity. The second trait we notice is the care which the artist has taken to avoid repetition and monotony and to arrange the parts so as to form a climax in the centre, where the main entrance is emphasized by a double frame. If we turn back to earlier buildings composed of similar elements, we immediately see the great change in character. Brunelleschi's Cappella Pazzi, *page 226, figure 147*, looks infinitely light and graceful by comparison, in its wonderful simplicity, and Bramante's Tempietto, *page 290, figure 187*, almost austere in its clear and straightforward arrangement. Even the rich complexities of Sansovino's Library, *page 326, figure 207*, appear simple by comparison, because there the same pattern is repeated again and again. If you have seen a part of it, you have seen it all. In Della Porta's façade of the first Jesuit church everything depends on the effect given by the whole. It is all fused together into one large and complex pattern. Perhaps the most characteristic trait in this respect is the care the architect has taken to connect the upper and lower storeys. He uses a form of volute which has no place at all in classical architecture. We need only imagine a form of this kind somewhere on a Greek temple or a Roman theatre to realize how utterly out of place it would seem. In fact, it is these curves and scrolls that have been responsible for much of the censure showered on Baroque

builders by the upholders of pure classical tradition. But if we cover the offending ornaments with a piece of paper and try to visualize the building without them, we must admit that they are not merely ornamental. Without them the building would 'fall apart'. They help to give it that essential coherence and unity which was the aim of the artist. In the course of time, Baroque architects had to use ever more bold and unusual devices to achieve the essential unity of a large pattern. Seen in isolation these devices often look puzzling enough, but in all good buildings they are essential to the architect's purpose.

The development of painting out of the deadlock of Mannerism, into a style far richer in possibilities than that of the earlier great masters, was in some respects similar to that of Baroque architecture. In the great paintings of Tintoretto and of El Greco we have seen the growth of some ideas which gained increasing importance in the art of the seventeenth century: the emphasis on light and colour, the disregard of simple balance, and the preference for more complicated compositions. Nevertheless, seventeenth-century painting is not just a continuation of the Mannerist style. At least people at the time did not feel it to be so. They felt that art had got into a dangerous rut, and must be got out of it. People liked talking about art in those days. In Rome, in particular, there were cultured gentlemen who enjoyed discussions on the various 'movements' among the artists of their time, who liked to compare them with older masters, and to take sides in their quarrels and intrigues. Such discussions were in themselves something new in the world of art. They had begun in the sixteenth century with such questions as whether painting was better than sculpture, or whether design was more important than colour or vice versa (the Florentines backing design, the Venetians colour). Now their topic was different: they talked about two artists who had come to Rome from northern Italy and whose methods seemed to them utterly opposed. One was Annibale Carracci (1560–1609) from Bologna, the other Michelangelo da Caravaggio (1573–1610) from a little place near Milan. Both these artists seemed tired of Mannerism. But the ways in which they overcame its sophistications were very different. Annibale Carracci was a member of a family of painters who had studied the art of Venice and of Correggio. On his arrival in Rome, he fell under the spell of Raphael's works, which he greatly admired. He aimed at recapturing something of their simplicity and beauty instead of deliberately contradicting them, as the Mannerists had done. Later critics have attributed to him the intention of imitating the best in all the great painters of the past. It is unlikely that he ever formulated a programme of this kind (which is called 'eclectic'). That was done later, in the academies or art schools which took his work as a model. Carracci himself was too much of a real artist to adopt such a

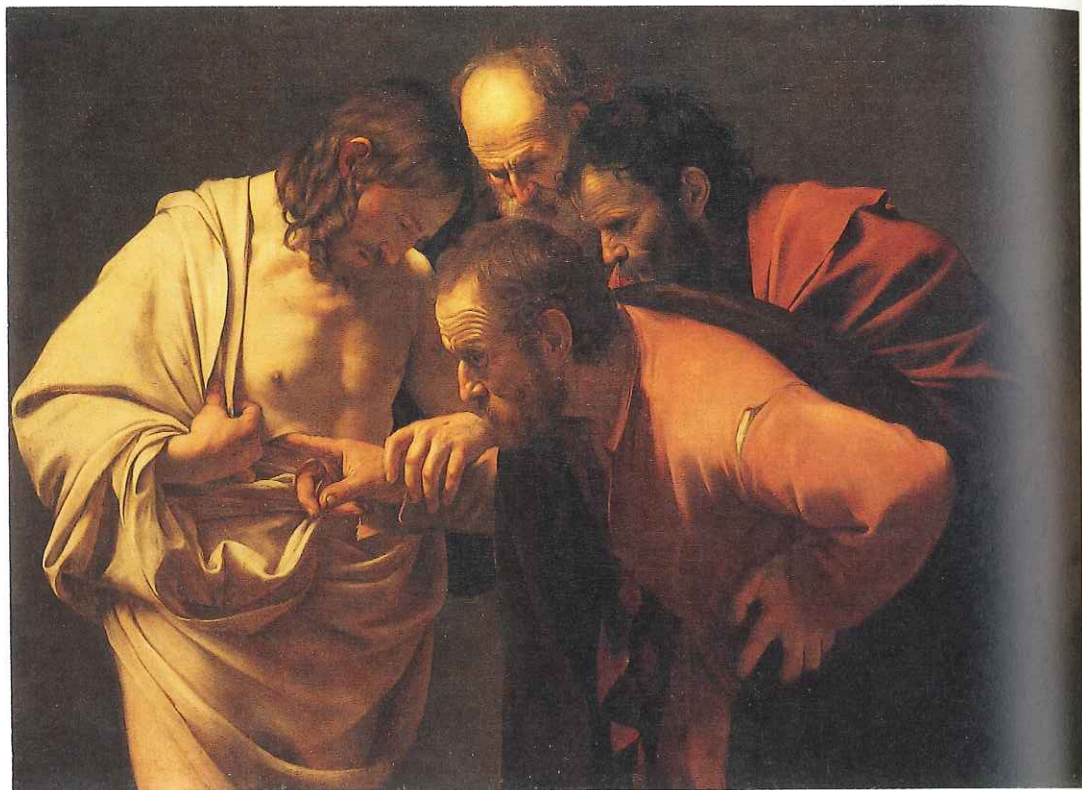


251

Annibale Carracci
*The Virgin mourning
 Christ*, 1599–1600

Altar-painting; oil
 on canvas, 156 × 149 cm,
 61½ × 58¾ in; Museo di
 Capodimonte, Naples

foolish idea. But the battle-cry of his party among the cliques of Rome was the cultivation of classical beauty. We can see his intention in the altar-picture of the Holy Virgin mourning over the dead body of Christ, *figure 251*. We need only think back to Grünewald's tormented body of Christ, *page 351, figure 224*, to realize how careful Annibale Carracci was not to remind us of the horrors of death and the agonies of pain. The picture itself is as simple and harmonious in arrangement as that of an early Renaissance painter. Nevertheless, we would not easily mistake it for a Renaissance painting. The way in which the light is made to play over the body of the Saviour, the whole appeal to our emotions, is quite different, is Baroque. It is easy to dismiss such a picture as sentimental, but we must not forget the purpose for which it was made. It is an altar-painting, meant to be contemplated in prayer and devotion with candles burning before it.



Whatever we may feel about Carracci's methods, Caravaggio and his partisans certainly did not think highly of them. The two painters, it is true, were on the best of terms – which was no easy matter in the case of Caravaggio, for he was of a wild and irascible temper, quick to take offence, and even to run a dagger through a man. But his work was on different lines from Carracci's. To be afraid of ugliness seemed to Caravaggio a contemptible weakness. What he wanted was truth. Truth as he saw it. He had no liking for classical models, nor any respect for 'ideal beauty'. He wanted to do away with convention and to think about art afresh, *pages 30–1, figures 15, 16*. Some people thought he was mainly out to shock the public; that he had no respect for any kind of beauty or tradition. He was one of the first painters at whom these accusations were levelled and the first whose outlook was summed up by his critics in a slogan: he was condemned as a 'naturalist'. In point of fact, Caravaggio was far too great and serious an artist to fritter away his time in trying to cause a sensation. While the critics argued, he was busy at work. And his work has lost nothing of its boldness in the three centuries and more since he did it. Consider his painting of

252

Caravaggio
Doubting Thomas,
 c. 1602–3

Oil on canvas, 107 × 146
 cm, 42¼ × 57½ in;
 Stiftung Schlösser und
 Gärten, Sanssouci,
 Potsdam

St Thomas, *figure 252*: the three apostles staring at Jesus, one of them poking his finger into the wound in His side, look unconventional enough. One can imagine that such a painting struck devout people as being irreverent and even outrageous. They were accustomed to seeing the apostles as dignified figures draped in beautiful folds – here they looked like common labourers, with weathered faces and wrinkled brows. But, Caravaggio would have answered, they *were* old labourers, common people – and as to the unseemly gesture of Doubting Thomas, the Bible is quite explicit about it. Jesus says to him: ‘Reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing’ (St John xx. 27).

Caravaggio’s ‘naturalism’, that is, his intention to copy nature faithfully, whether we think it ugly or beautiful, was perhaps more devout than Carracci’s emphasis on beauty. Caravaggio must have read the Bible again and again, and pondered its words. He was one of the great artists, like Giotto and Dürer before him, who wanted to see the holy events before his own eyes as if they had been happening in his neighbour’s house. And he did everything possible to make the figures of the ancient texts look more real and tangible. Even his way of handling light and shade helps to this end. His light does not make the body look graceful and soft: it is harsh and almost glaring in its contrast to the deep shadows. But it makes the whole strange scene stand out with an uncompromising honesty which few of his contemporaries could appreciate, but which had a decisive effect on later artists.

Annibale Carracci and Caravaggio fell out of fashion in the nineteenth century, but have come into their own again. But the impulse they both gave to the art of painting can hardly be imagined. Both of them worked in Rome, and Rome, at the time, was the centre of the civilized world. Artists from all parts of Europe came there, took part in the discussions on painting, took sides in the quarrels of the cliques, studied the old masters, and returned to their native countries with tales of the latest ‘movements’ – much as modern artists used to do with regard to Paris. According to their national traditions and temperaments, artists preferred one or other of the rival schools in Rome, and the greatest of them developed their own personal idiom from what they had learned of these foreign movements. Rome still remains the best vantage point from which to glance at the splendid panorama of painting in the countries adhering to Roman Catholicism. Of the many Italian masters who developed their style in Rome, the most famous was probably Guido Reni (1575–1642), a painter from Bologna who after a brief period of hesitation threw in his lot with the school of the Carracci. His fame, like that of his master, once stood immeasurably higher than it happens to stand just now, *page 22, figure 7*. There was a time when his name ranked with that of Raphael, and if we

look at *figure 253* we may realize why. Reni painted this fresco on the ceiling of a palace in Rome in 1614. It represents Aurora (the Dawn) and the youthful sun-god Apollo in his chariot, round which the fair maidens of the Hours (the Horae) dance their joyful measure preceded by a torch-bearing child, the Morning Star. Such are the grace and beauty of this picture of the radiant rising day that one can understand how it reminded people of Raphael and his frescoes in the Farnesina, *page 318, figure 204*. Indeed Reni wanted them to think of this great painter, whom he had set out to emulate. If modern critics have often thought less highly of Reni's achievement, this may be the reason. They feel, or fear, that this very emulation of another master has made Reni's work too self-conscious, too deliberate in its striving for pure beauty. We need not quarrel over these distinctions. It is no doubt true that Reni differed from Raphael in his whole approach. With Raphael, we feel that the sense of beauty and serenity flowed naturally from his whole nature and art; with Reni we feel that he chose to paint like this as a matter of principle, and that if perchance Caravaggio's disciples had convinced him that he was wrong, he could have adopted a different style. But it was not Reni's fault that these matters of principle had been brought up and had permeated the minds and the conversation of painters. In fact, it was no one's fault. Art had been developed to such a point that artists were inevitably conscious of the choice of methods before them. And once we accept this, we are free to admire the way in which Reni carried out his programme of beauty, how he deliberately discarded anything in nature that he considered low and ugly or unsuitable for his lofty ideas, and how his quest for forms more perfect and more ideal than reality was rewarded with success. It was Annibale Carracci, Reni and their followers who formulated the programme of idealizing, of 'beautifying' nature, according to the standards set by the classical statues. We call it the neo-classical or 'academic'

253

Guido Reni
Aurora, 1614Fresco, c. 280 × 700 cm,
110 × 276 in; Palazzo
Pallavicini-Rospigliosi,
Rome



254
 Nicolas Poussin
 'Et in Arcadia ego',
 1638-9
 Oil on canvas, 85 × 121
 cm, 33½ × 47¾ in;
 Louvre, Paris

programme as distinct from classical art, which is not bound up with any programme at all. The disputes over it are not likely to cease soon, but no one denies that among its champions have been great masters who gave us a glimpse of a world of purity and beauty without which we would be the poorer.

The greatest of the 'academic' masters was the Frenchman Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665), who made Rome his adopted home town. Poussin studied the classical statues with passionate zeal, because he wanted their beauty to help him convey his vision of bygone lands of innocence and dignity. *Figure 254* represents one of the most famous results of these unremitting studies. It shows a calm, sunny southern landscape. Beautiful young men and a fair and dignified young woman have gathered round a large tomb of stone. One of the shepherds - for shepherds they are, as we see by their wreaths and their shepherds' staffs - has knelt down to try to decipher the inscription on the tomb, and a second one points towards it while he looks at the fair shepherdess who, like her companion opposite, stands in silent melancholy. It is inscribed in Latin ET IN ARCADIA EGO (Even in Arcady I am): I, Death, reign even in the idyllic dreamland of the pastorals, in Arcady. Now we understand the wonderful gesture of awe and contemplation with which the framing figures gaze at the tomb, and we admire even more the beauty with which the reading figures answer each other's movements. The arrangement seems simple enough but it is simplicity born of immense artistic knowledge.



Only such knowledge could evoke this nostalgic vision of calm repose in which death has lost its terror.

It is for the same mood of nostalgic beauty that the works of another Italianized Frenchman became famous. He was Claude Lorraine (1600–82), some six years younger than Poussin. Claude studied the landscape of the Roman Campagna, the plains and hills round Rome with their lovely southern hues and their majestic reminders of a great past. Like Poussin, he showed in his sketches that he was a perfect master of the realistic representation of nature, and his studies of trees are a joy to look at. But for his finished pictures and etchings he selected only such motifs as he considered worthy of a place in a dreamlike vision of the past, and he dipped it all in a golden light or a silvery air which appear to transfigure the whole scene, *figure 255*. It was Claude who first opened people's eyes to the sublime beauty of nature, and for nearly a century after his death travellers used to judge a piece of real scenery according to his standards. If it reminded them of his visions, they called it lovely and sat down to

255

Claude Lorraine
*Landscape with sacrifice
to Apollo*, 1662–3

Oil on canvas, 174 ×
220 cm, 68½ × 86½ in;
Anglesey Abbey,
Cambridgeshire

picnic there. Rich Englishmen went even further and decided to model the pieces of nature they called their own, the gardens on their estates, on Claude's dreams of beauty. In this way, many a tract of the lovely English countryside should really bear the signature of the French painter who settled in Italy and made the programme of the Carracci his own.

The one northern artist to come most directly into contact with the Roman atmosphere of Carracci's and Caravaggio's days was a generation older than Poussin and Claude, and about as old as Guido Reni. He was the Fleming Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), who came to Rome in 1600 when he was twenty-three years old – perhaps the most impressionable age. He must have listened to many heated discussions on art, and studied a great number of new and older works, not only in Rome, but also in Genoa and Mantua (where he stayed for some time). He listened and learned with keen interest, but does not seem to have joined any of the 'movements' or groups. In his heart he remained a Flemish artist – an artist from the country where Van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden and Bruegel had worked. These painters from the Netherlands had always been most interested in the variegated surfaces of things: they had tried to use all artistic means known to them to express the texture of cloth and living flesh, in short to paint as faithfully as possible everything the eye could see. They had not troubled about the standards of beauty so sacred to their Italian colleagues, and they had not even always shown much concern for dignified subjects. It was in this tradition that Rubens had grown up, and all his admiration for the new art that was developing in Italy does not seem to have shaken his fundamental belief that a painter's business was to paint the world around him; to paint what he liked, to make us feel that he enjoyed the manifold living beauty of things. To such an approach there was nothing contradictory in Caravaggio's and Carracci's art. Rubens admired the way in which Carracci and his school revived the painting of classical stories and myths and arranged impressive altar-panels for the edification of the faithful; but he also admired the uncompromising sincerity with which Caravaggio studied nature.

When Rubens returned to Antwerp in 1608 he was a man of thirty-one, who had learned everything there was to be learned; he had acquired such facility in handling brush and paint, in representing nudes and drapery, armour and jewels, animals and landscapes, that he had no rival north of the Alps. His predecessors in Flanders had mostly painted on a small scale. He had brought from Italy the predilection for huge canvases to decorate churches and palaces, and this suited the taste of the dignitaries and princes. He had learned the art of arranging the figures on a vast scale, and of using light and colours to increase the general effect.

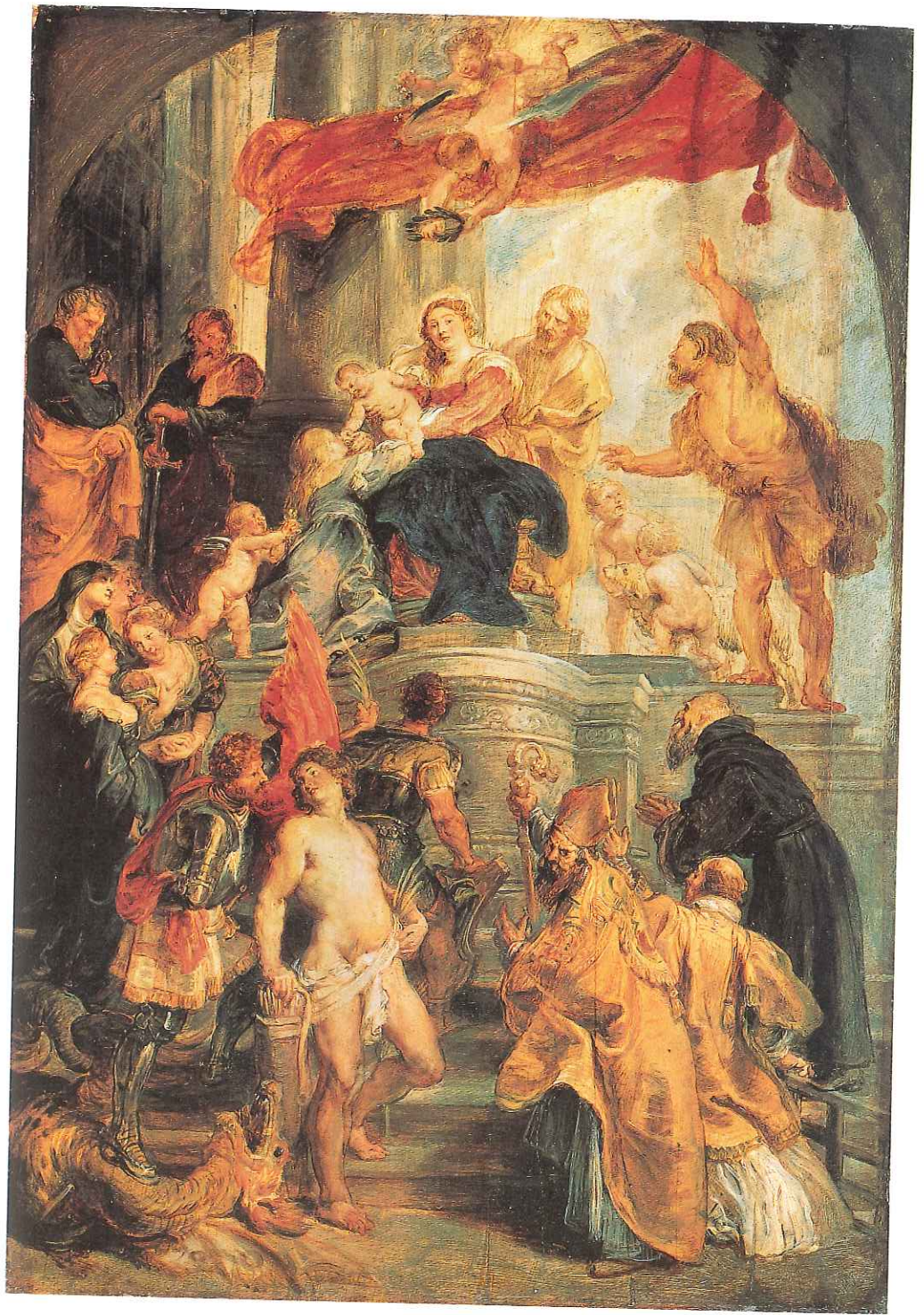
Figure 256, a sketch for the painting over the high altar of an Antwerp church, shows how well he had studied his Italian predecessors, and how boldly he developed their ideas. It is again the old, time-honoured theme of the Holy Virgin surrounded by saints, with which artists had grappled at the time of the Wilton Diptych, *pages 216–17, figure 143*, Bellini's 'Madonna', *page 327, figure 208*, or Titian's 'Pesaro Madonna', *page 330, figure 210*, and it may be worth while to turn to these illustrations once more to see the freedom and ease with which Rubens handled the ancient task. One thing is clear at the first glance: there is more movement, more light, more space, and there are more figures in this painting than in any of the earlier ones. The saints are crowding to the lofty throne of the Virgin in a festive throng. In the foreground the Bishop St Augustine, the Martyr St Lawrence with the grill on which he suffered, and the monk St Nicholas of Tolentino lead the spectator on to their object of worship. St George with the Dragon, and St Sebastian with a quiver and arrows, look into each other's eyes in fervent emotion, while a warrior – the palm of martyrdom in his hand – is about to kneel before the throne. A group of women, among them a nun, are looking up enraptured to the main scene, in which a young girl, assisted by a little angel, is falling on her knees to receive a ring from the little Christ Child, who is bending towards her from His mother's lap. It is the legend of the betrothal of St Catherine, who saw such a scene in a vision and considered herself the Bride of Christ. St Joseph watches benevolently from behind the throne, and St Peter and St Paul – one recognizable by the key, the other by the sword – stand in deep contemplation. They make an effective contrast to the imposing figure of St John on the other side, standing alone, bathed in light, throwing up his arms in ecstatic admiration while two charming little angels drag his reluctant lamb up the steps of the throne. From the sky another pair of little angels come rushing down to hold a wreath of laurels over the Virgin's head.

Having looked at the details, we must once more consider the whole, and admire the grand sweep with which Rubens has contrived to hold all the figures together, and to impart to it all an atmosphere of joyful and festive solemnity. Small wonder that a master who could plan such vast pictures with such sureness of hand and eye soon had more orders for paintings than he could cope with alone. But this did not worry him. Rubens was a man of great organizing ability and great personal charm; many gifted painters in Flanders were proud to work under his direction and thereby to learn from him. If an order for a new picture came from one of the churches, or from one of the kings or princes of Europe, he would sometimes paint only a small coloured sketch. (*Figure 256* is such a colour sketch for a large composition.) It would be the task of his pupils or assistants to transfer these ideas on to the large canvas, and only when they

256

Peter Paul Rubens
*Virgin and Child
enthroned with saints*,
c. 1627–8

Sketch for a large altar-
painting; oil on wood,
80.2 × 55.5 cm, 31½ ×
21¾in; Gemäldegalerie,
Staatliche Museen, Berlin





had finished grounding and painting according to the master's ideas might he take the brush again and touch up a face here and a silken dress there, or smooth out any harsh contrasts. He was confident that his brushwork could quickly impart life to anything, and he was right. For that was the greatest secret of Rubens's art – his magic skill in making anything alive, intensely and joyfully alive. We can best gauge and admire this mastery of his in some of the simple drawings, *page 16, figure 1*, and paintings done for his own pleasure. *Figure 257* shows the head of a little girl, probably Rubens's daughter.

There are no tricks of composition here, no splendid robes or streams of light, but a simple *en face* portrait of a child. And yet it seems to breathe and palpitate like living flesh. Compared with this, the portraits of earlier centuries seem somehow remote and unreal – however great they may be as works of art. It is vain to try to analyse how Rubens achieved this impression of gay vitality, but it surely had something to do with the bold and delicate touches of light with which he indicated the moisture of the lips and the modelling of the face and hair. To an even greater degree than Titian before him, he used the brush as his main instrument. His paintings are no longer drawings carefully modelled in colour – they are produced by 'painterly' means, and that enhances the impression of life and vigour.

It was a combination of his unrivalled gifts in arranging large colourful compositions, and in infusing them with buoyant energy, that secured a fame and success for Rubens such as no painter had enjoyed before. His art was so eminently suitable to enhance the pomp and splendour of palaces, and to glorify the powers of this world, that he enjoyed something like a monopoly in the sphere in which he moved. It was the time during which the religious and social tensions of Europe came to a head in the fearful Thirty Years' War on the Continent and in the Civil War in England. On the one side stood the absolute monarchs and their courts, most of them supported by the Catholic Church – on the other the rising merchant cities, most of them Protestant. The Netherlands themselves were divided into Protestant Holland, which resisted Spanish 'Catholic' domination, and Catholic Flanders, ruled from Antwerp under Spanish allegiance. It was as

257

Peter Paul Rubens
Head of a child,
 probably the artist's
 daughter Clara Serena,
 c. 1616

Oil on canvas, mounted
 on wood, 33 × 26.3 cm, 13
 × 10½ in; Sammlungen des
 Fürsten von Liechtenstein,
 Vaduz

258

Peter Paul Rubens
Self-portrait, c. 1639
 Oil on canvas, 109.5 ×
 85 cm. 43¼ × 33½ in.
 Kunsthistorisches
 Museum, Vienna



the painter of the Catholic camp that Rubens rose to his unique position. He accepted commissions from the Jesuits in Antwerp and from the Catholic rulers of Flanders, from King Louis XIII of France and his crafty mother Maria de' Medici, from King Philip III of Spain and King Charles I of England, who conferred a knighthood on him. When travelling from court to court as an honoured guest, he was often charged with delicate political and diplomatic missions, foremost among them that of effecting a reconciliation between England and Spain in the interest of what we would call today a 'reactionary' bloc. Meanwhile he remained in touch with the scholars of his age, and engaged in learned Latin correspondence on questions of archaeology and art. His self-portrait with the nobleman's sword, *figure 258*, shows that he was very conscious of his unique position. Yet there is nothing pompous or vain in the shrewd look of his eyes. He



remained a true artist. All the while, pictures of dazzling mastery poured out from his Antwerp studios on a stupendous scale. Under his hand, the classical fables and allegorical inventions became as convincingly alive as the picture of his own daughter,

Allegorical pictures are usually regarded as rather boring and abstract, but for the age of Rubens they were a convenient means of expressing ideas. *Figure 259* is such a picture, which Rubens is said to have presented as a gift to Charles I, when he tried to induce him to make peace with Spain. The painting contrasts the blessings of peace with the horrors of war. Minerva, the goddess of wisdom and the civilizing arts, drives away Mars, who is about to withdraw – his dreadful companion, the Fury of war, having already turned back. And under the protection of Minerva the joys of peace are spread out before our eyes, symbols of fruitfulness and plenty as only Rubens could conceive them: Peace offering her breast to a child, a faun blissfully eyeing the gorgeous fruits, *figure 260*, the other companions of Bacchus, dancing maenads with gold and treasures, and the panther playing peacefully like a big cat; on the other side three children with anxious eyes, fleeing from the terror of war to the haven of peace and

259

Peter Paul Rubens
*Allegory on the blessings
of peace, 1629–30*

Oil on canvas, 203.5 ×
298 cm, 80¼ × 117¼ in;
National Gallery, London

plenty, crowned by a young genius. No one who loses himself in the rich details of this picture, with its vivid contrasts and glowing colours, can fail to see that these ideas were to Rubens not pale abstractions but forceful realities. Perhaps it is because of this quality that some people must first get accustomed to Rubens before they begin to love and understand him. He had no use for the 'ideal' forms of classical beauty. They were too remote and abstract for him. His men and women are living beings such as he saw and liked. And so, since slenderness was not the fashion in the Flanders of his day, some people object to the 'fat women' in his pictures. This criticism, of course, has little to do with art and we need not, therefore, take it too seriously. But, since it is so often made, it may be well to realize that joy in exuberant and almost boisterous life in all its manifestations saved Rubens from becoming a mere virtuoso of his art. It turned his paintings from mere Baroque decorations of festive halls into masterpieces which retain their vitality even within the chilling atmosphere of museums.

Among Rubens's many famous pupils and assistants, the greatest and most independent was Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641), who was twenty-two years his junior, and belonged to the generation of Poussin and Claude Lorrain. He soon acquired all the virtuosity of Rubens in rendering the texture and surface of things, whether it were silk or human flesh, but

260

Detail of figure 259





261

Anthony van Dyck
Charles I of England,
c. 1635

Oil on canvas, 266 × 207
cm, 104¾ × 81½ in;
Louvre, Paris

262

Anthony van Dyck
*Lord John and Lord
Bernard Stuart*, c. 1638

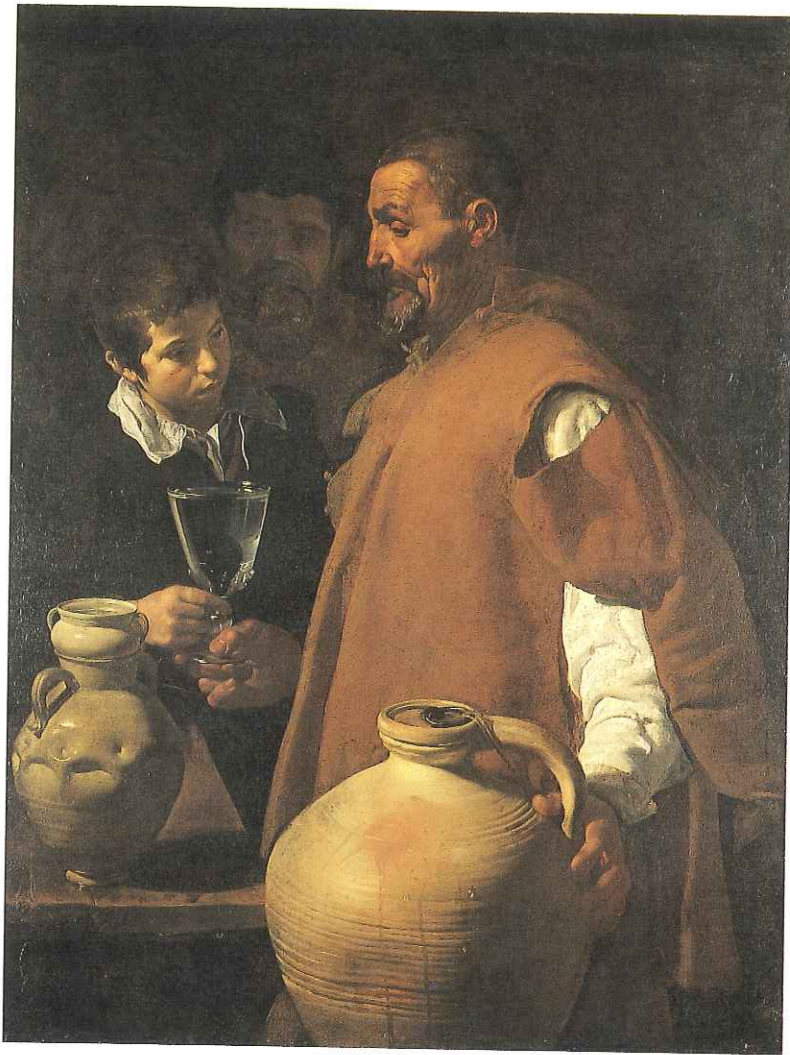
Oil on canvas, 237.5 ×
146.1 cm, 93½ × 57½ in;
National Gallery, London

he differed widely from his master in temperament and mood. It seems that Van Dyck was not a healthy man, and in his paintings a languid and slightly melancholy mood often prevails. It may have been this quality that appealed to the austere noblemen of Genoa and to the cavaliers of Charles I's entourage. In 1632 he had become the Court Painter of Charles I, and his name was anglicized into Sir Anthony Vandyke. It is to him that we owe an artistic record of this society with its defiantly aristocratic bearing and its cult of courtly refinement. His portrait of Charles I, *figure 261*, just dismounted from his horse on a hunting expedition, showed the Stuart monarch as he would have wished to live in history: a figure of matchless elegance, of unquestioned authority and high culture, the patron of the arts, and the upholder of the divine right of kings, a man who needed no outward trappings of power to enhance his natural dignity. No wonder that a painter who could bring out these qualities in his portraits with such perfection was eagerly sought after by society. In fact, Van Dyck was so overburdened with commissions for portraits that he, like his master Rubens, was unable to cope with them all himself. He had a number of assistants, who painted the costumes of his sitters arranged on dummies, and he did not always paint even the whole of the head. Some of these portraits are uncomfortably near the flattering fashion-dummies of later

periods, and there is no doubt that Van Dyck established a dangerous precedent which did much harm to portrait painting. But all this cannot detract from the greatness of his best portraits. Nor should it make us forget that it was he, more than anyone else, who helped to crystallize the ideals of blue-blooded nobility and gentlemanly ease, *figure 262*, which enrich our vision of man no less than do Rubens's robust and sturdy figures of overbrimming life.

On one of his journeys to Spain, Rubens had met a young painter who was born in the same year as his pupil Van Dyck, and who filled a position at the court of King Philip IV in Madrid similar to that of Van Dyck at the court of Charles I. He was Diego Velázquez (1599–1660). Though he had not yet been to Italy, Velázquez had been profoundly impressed by the discoveries and the manner of Caravaggio, which he got to know through the work of imitators. He had absorbed the programme of 'naturalism', and devoted his art to the dispassionate observation of nature regardless of





263

Diego Velázquez,
*The water-seller of
Seville*, c. 1619–20

Oil on canvas, 106.7 ×
81 cm, 42 × 31 7/8 in;
Wellington Museum,
Apsley House, London

conventions. *Figure 263* shows one of his early works, an old man selling water in the streets of Seville. It is a genre picture of the type the Netherlanders invented to display their skill, but it is done with all the intensity and penetration of Caravaggio's 'Doubting Thomas', *figure 252*. The old man with his worn and wrinkly face and his ragged cloak, the big earthenware flask with its rounded shape, the surface of the glazed jug and the play of light on the transparent glass, all this is painted so convincingly that we feel we could touch the objects. No one who stands before this picture feels inclined to ask whether the objects represented are beautiful or ugly, or whether the scene it represents is important or trivial. Not even the colours are strictly beautiful by themselves. Brown, grey, greenish tones prevail. And yet, the whole is joined together in such a rich and mellow harmony that the picture remains quite unforgettable to anyone who has ever paused in front of it.

On the advice of Rubens, Velázquez obtained leave to go to Rome

264

Diego Velázquez
 Pope Innocent X,
 1649–50

Oil on canvas, 140 ×
 120 cm, 55½ × 47¼ in;
 Galleria Doria Pamphilj,
 Rome



to study the paintings of the great masters. He went there in 1630 but soon returned to Madrid where, apart from a second Italian journey, he remained as a famous and respected member of the court of Philip IV. His main task was to paint the portraits of the King and the members of the royal family. While few of them had attractive, or even interesting, faces, they certainly insisted on their dignity, and dressed in a stiff and unbecoming fashion. Not a very inviting task for a painter, it would seem. But Velázquez transformed these portraits, as if by magic, into some of the most fascinating pieces of painting the world has ever seen. He had long given up too close an adherence to Caravaggio's manner. He had studied the brushwork of Rubens and of Titian, but there is nothing 'secondhand' in his mode of approaching nature. *Figure 264* shows Velázquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X, painted in Rome in 1649–50, a little more than a hundred years after Titian's Paul III, *page 335, figure 214*; it reminds us that in the history of art the passage of time need not always lead to a change in

outlook. Velázquez surely felt the challenge of that masterpiece, much as Titian had been stimulated by Raphael's group, *page 322, figure 206*. But for all his mastery of Titian's means, the way his brush renders the sheen of the material and the sureness of touch with which he seizes the Pope's expression, we do not doubt for a moment that this is the man himself and not a well-rehearsed formula. Nobody who goes to Rome should miss the great experience of seeing this masterpiece in the Palazzo Doria Pamphili. Indeed, Velázquez's mature works rely to such an extent on the effect of the brushwork, and on the delicate harmony of the colours, that illustrations can give only very little idea of what the originals are like. Most of all this applies to his enormous canvas (some ten feet high) which goes under the name *Las Meninas* (the maids of honour), *figure 266*. We see Velázquez himself at work on a large painting and if we look more carefully we also discover what it is he is painting. The mirror on the back wall of the studio reflects the figures of the King and Queen, *figure 265*, who are sitting for their portrait. We therefore see what they see – a crowd of people who have come into the studio. It is their little daughter, the Infanta Margarita, flanked by two maids of honour, one of them serving her refreshments while the other curtsies to the royal couple. We know their names as we also know about the two dwarfs (the ugly female and the boy teasing a dog), who were kept for amusement. The grave adults in the background seem to make sure that the visitors behave.

What exactly does it all signify? We may never know, but I should like to fancy that Velázquez has arrested a real moment of time



long before the invention of the camera. Perhaps the princess was brought into the royal presence to relieve the boredom of the sitting and the King or Queen remarked to Velázquez that here was a worthy subject for his brush. The words spoken by the sovereign are always treated as a command and so we may owe this masterpiece to a passing wish which only Velázquez was able to turn into reality.

But of course Velázquez did not usually rely on such incidents to transform his records of reality into great paintings. There is nothing unconventional in a portrait such as

266

Diego Velázquez
Las Meninas, 1656

Oil on canvas, 318 ×
276 cm, 125½ × 108¾ in;
Prado, Madrid

265

Detail of figure 266





267

Diego Velázquez
*Prince Philip Prosper
 of Spain*, 1659

Oil on canvas, 128.5 ×
 99.5 cm, 50 × 39 in;
 Kunsthistorisches
 Museum, Vienna

his picture of the two-year-old Prince Philip Prosper of Spain, *figure 267*, nothing, perhaps, that strikes us at first glance. But in the original, the various shades of red (from the rich Persian carpet to the velvet chair, the curtain, the sleeves and the rosy cheeks of the child), combined with the cool and silvery tones of white and grey which shade into the background, result in a unique harmony. Even a little motif like the small dog on the red chair reveals an unobtrusive mastery which is truly miraculous. If we look back at the little dog in Jan van Eyck's portrait of the Arnolfini

couple, *page 243, figure 160*, we see with what different means great artists can achieve their effects. Van Eyck took pains to copy every curly hair of the little creature – Velázquez, two hundred years later, tried only to catch its characteristic impression. Like Leonardo, only more so, he relied on our imagination to follow his guidance and to supplement what he had left out. Though he did not paint one separate hair, his little dog looks, in effect, more furry and natural than Van Eyck's. It was for effects like these that the founders of Impressionism in nineteenth-century Paris admired Velázquez above all other painters of the past.

To see and observe nature with ever-fresh eyes, to discover and enjoy ever-new harmonies of colours and lights, had become the essential task of the painter. In this new zeal, the great masters of Catholic Europe found themselves at one with the painters on the other side of the political barrier, the great artists of the Protestant Netherlands.

*An artist's pub in
seventeenth century
Rome, with caricatures
on the wall, c. 1625–39*

Drawing by Pieter van
Laar; pen, ink and wash on
paper, 20.3 × 25.8 cm,
8 × 10¼ in;
Kupferstichkabinett,
Staatliche Museen, Berlin

