

POWER AND GLORY: I

Italy, later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries

We remember the beginning of the Baroque manner of building in such works of late sixteenth-century art as Della Porta's church of the Jesuit Order, *page 389, figure 250*. Della Porta disregarded the so-called rules of classical architecture for the sake of greater variety and more imposing effects. It is in the nature of things that once art has taken this road it must keep to it. If variety and striking effects are considered important, each subsequent artist has to produce more complex decorations and more astounding ideas so as to remain impressive. During the first half of the seventeenth century, this process of piling up more and more dazzling new ideas for buildings and their decorations had gone on in Italy, and by the middle of the seventeenth century the style we call Baroque was fully developed.

Figure 282 shows a typical Baroque church built by the famous architect Francesco Borromini (1599–1667) and his assistants. It is easy to see that even the forms which Borromini applied are really Renaissance forms. Like Della Porta, he used the form of a temple front to frame the central entrance and, like him, he doubled the pilasters on the sides to gain a richer effect. But by comparison with Borromini's façade, Della Porta's looks almost severe and restrained. Borromini was no longer content with decorating a wall with the orders taken from classical architecture. He composed his church through a grouping of different forms – the vast cupola, the flanking towers and the façade. And this façade is curved as if it had been modelled in clay. If we look at the detail we find even more surprising effects. The first storey of the towers is square, but the second is round and the relation between the two storeys is brought about by a strangely broken entablature which would have horrified every orthodox teacher of architecture, but which does the job assigned to it extremely well. The frames of the doors flanking the main porch are even more astonishing. The way in which the pediment over the entrance is made to frame an oval window has no parallel in any earlier building. The scrolls and curves of the Baroque style had come to dominate both the general layout and the decorative details. It has been said of such Baroque buildings that they are over-ornate and theatrical. Borromini himself would hardly have understood why this should be a reproach. He wanted



a church to look festive and to be a building full of splendour and movement. If it is the aim of the theatre to delight us with a vision of a fairy world of light and pageantry, why should not the architect designing a church have a right to give us an idea of even greater pomp and glory to remind us of Heaven?

When we enter these churches we understand even better how the pomp and display of precious stones, of gold and stucco, were used deliberately to conjure up a vision of heavenly glory much more concretely than the medieval cathedrals do. *Figure 283* shows the interior of Borromini's church. To those of us who are used to the church interiors of northern countries, this dazzling pageantry may well look too worldly for our taste. But the Catholic Church of the period thought differently. The more the Protestants preached against outward show in the churches, the more eager was the Roman Church to enlist the power of the artist. Thus the Reformation and the whole vexed issue of images and their worship,

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Francesco Borromini
& Carlo Rainaldi
*Church of Sta Agnese,
Piazza Navona, Rome,
1653*

A church of the Roman
High Baroque



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 Francesco Borromini
 & Carlo Rainaldi
*Interior of the church of
 Sta Agnese, Piazza
 Navona, Rome,
 c. 1653*

which had influenced the course of art so often in the past, also had an indirect effect on the development of Baroque. The Catholic world had discovered that art could serve religion in ways that went beyond the simple task assigned to it in the early Middle Ages – the task of teaching the Doctrine to people who could not read, *page 95*. It could help to persuade and convert those who had, perhaps, read too much. Architects, painters and sculptors were called upon to transform churches into grand show-pieces whose splendour and vision nearly swept you off your feet. It is not so much the details that matter in these interiors as the general effect of the whole. We cannot hope to understand them, or to judge them correctly, unless we visualize them as the framework for the splendid ritual of the Roman Church, unless we have seen them during High Mass, when the candles are alight on the altar, when the smell of incense fills the nave, and when the sound of the organ and the choir transports us into a different world.

This supreme art of theatrical decoration had mainly been developed by



one artist, Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680). Bernini belonged to the same generation as Borromini. He was one year older than Van Dyck and Velázquez, and eight years older than Rembrandt. Like these masters, he was a consummate portraitist. *Figure 284* shows his portrait bust of a young woman which has all the freshness and unconventionality of Bernini's best work. When I saw it last in the museum in Florence, a ray of sunlight was playing on the bust and the whole figure seemed to breathe and come to life. Bernini has caught a transient expression which we are sure must have been most characteristic of his sitter. In the rendering of facial expression, Bernini was perhaps unsurpassed.

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Gian Lorenzo Bernini
Costanza Buonarelli,
c. 1635

Marble, height 72 cm,
28½ in; Museo Nazionale
del Bargello, Florence

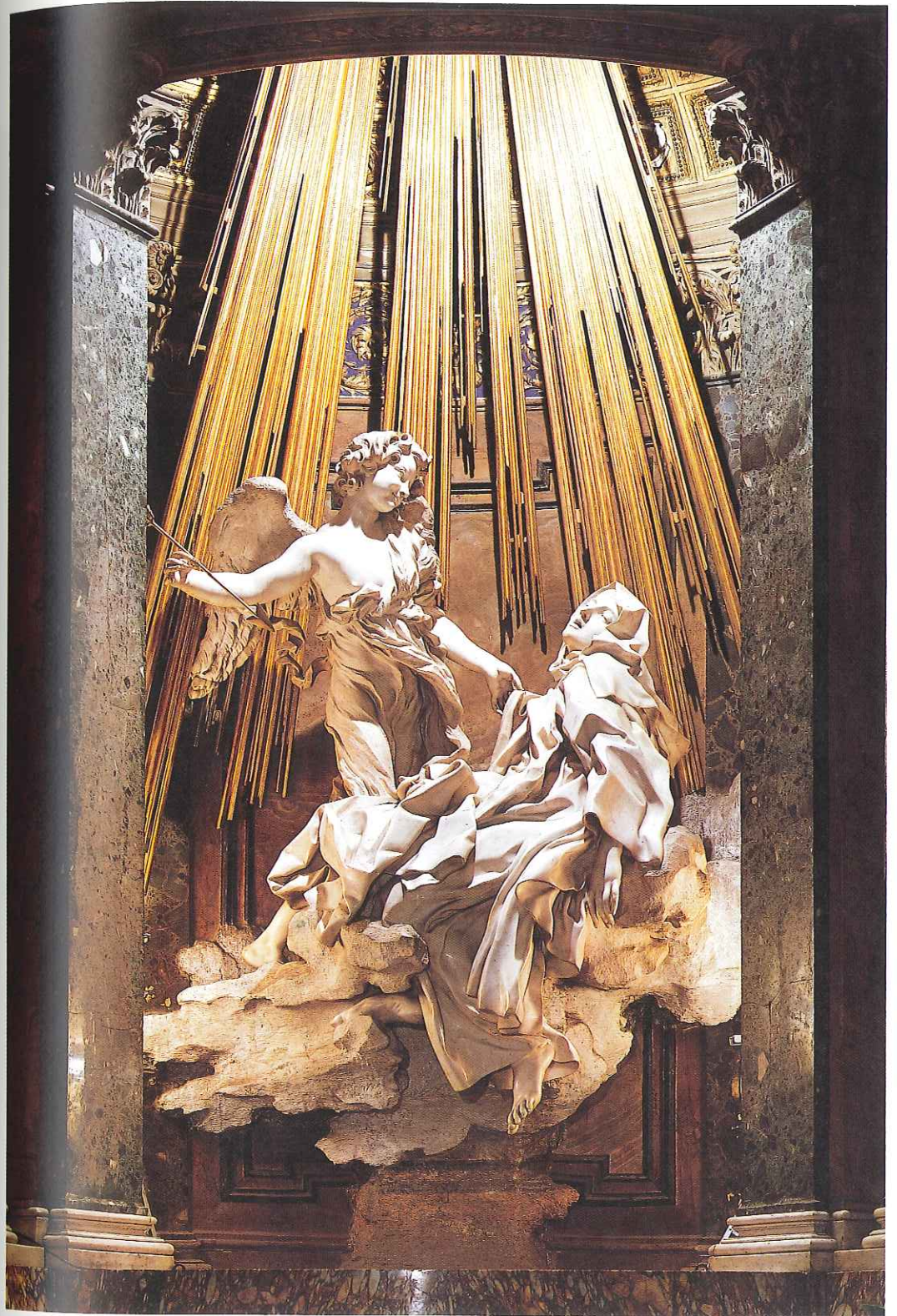
He used it, as Rembrandt used his profound knowledge of human behaviour, to give visual form to his religious experience.

Figure 285 shows an altar of Bernini's for a side chapel in a small Roman church. It is dedicated to the Spanish saint Teresa, a nun of the sixteenth century who had described her mystic visions in a famous book. In it she tells of a moment of heavenly rapture, when an angel of the Lord pierced her heart with a golden flaming arrow, filling her with pain and yet with immeasurable bliss. It is this vision that Bernini has dared to represent. We see the saint carried heavenwards on a cloud, towards streams of light which pour down from above in the form of golden rays. We see the angel gently approaching her, and the saint swooning in ecstasy. The group is so placed that it seems to hover without support in the magnificent frame provided by the altar, and to receive its light from an invisible window above. A northern visitor may again be inclined, at first, to find the whole arrangement too reminiscent of stage effects, and the group over-emotional. This, of course, is a matter of taste and upbringing about which it is useless to argue. But if we grant that a work of religious art like Bernini's altar may legitimately be used to arouse those feelings of fervid exultation and mystic transport at which the artists of the Baroque were aiming, we must admit that Bernini has achieved this aim in a masterly fashion. He has deliberately cast aside all restraint, and carried us to a pitch

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Gian Lorenzo Bernini
*The ecstasy of
St Teresa*, 1645–52

Marble, height 350 cm,
138 in; Cornaro Chapel,
church of Sta Maria della
Vittoria, Rome





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Detail of figure 285

of emotion which artists had so far shunned. If we compare the face of his swooning saint with any work done in previous centuries, we find that he achieved an intensity of facial expression which until then was never attempted in art. Looking from *figure 286* to the head of Laocoön, *page 110*, *figure 69*, or of Michelangelo's 'Dying slave', *page 313*, *figure 201*, we realize the difference. Even Bernini's handling of draperies was at the time completely new. Instead of letting them fall in dignified folds in the approved classical manner, he made them writhe and whirl to add to the effect of excitement and movement. In all these effects he was soon imitated all over Europe.

If it is true of sculptures like Bernini's 'St Teresa' that they can only be judged in the setting for which they were made, the same applies even more to the painted decorations of Baroque churches. *Figure 287* shows the decoration of the ceiling of the Jesuit church in Rome by a painter of Bernini's following, Giovanni Battista Gaulli (1639–1709). The artist wants to give us the illusion that the vault of the church has opened, and that we look straight into the glories of Heaven. Correggio before him had the idea of painting the heavens on the ceiling, *page 338*, *figure 217*, but Gaulli's effects are incomparably more theatrical. The theme is the worship of the Holy Name of Jesus, which is inscribed in radiant letters in the centre of His church. It is surrounded by infinite multitudes of cherubs, angels, and saints, each gazing in rapture into the light, while whole legions of demons or fallen angels are driven out of the heavenly regions,

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Giovanni
Battista Gaulli
*The worship of the Holy
Name of Jesus*,
1670–83

Fresco; ceiling of the Jesuit
church of Il Gesu, Rome





expressing their despair. The crowded scene seems to burst the frame of the ceiling, which brims over with clouds carrying saints and sinners right down into the church. In letting the picture thus break the frame, the artist wants to confuse and overwhelm us, so that we no longer know what is real and what illusion. A painting like this has no meaning outside the place for which it was made. Perhaps it is no coincidence, therefore, that, after the development of the full Baroque style, in which all artists collaborated in the achievement of one effect, painting and sculpture as independent arts declined in Italy and throughout Catholic Europe.

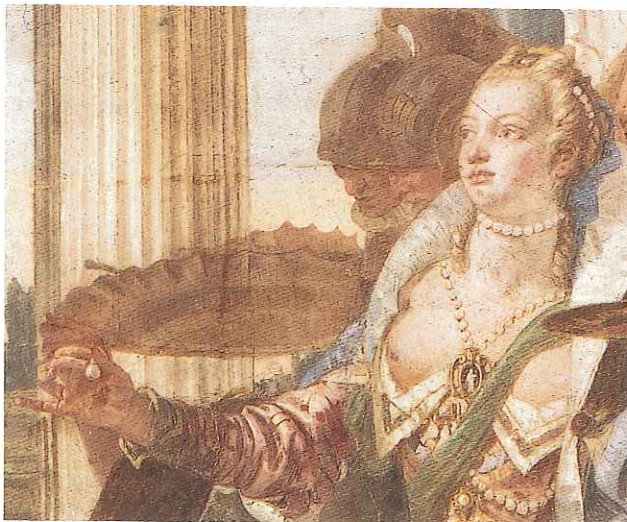
In the eighteenth century Italian artists were mainly superb internal decorators, famous throughout Europe for their skill in stucco work and for their great frescoes, which could transform any hall of a castle or monastery into a setting for pageantry. One of the most famous of these masters was the Venetian Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696–1770), who worked not only in Italy but also in Germany and Spain. *Figure 288* shows part of his decoration of a Venetian palace, painted about 1750. It represents a subject which gave Tiepolo every opportunity to display gay colours and sumptuous costumes: the banquet of Cleopatra. The story goes that Mark Antony gave a feast in honour of the Egyptian queen which was to be the *ne plus ultra* of luxury. The most costly dishes followed each other in endless succession. The queen was not impressed. She wagered her proud host that she would produce a dish much more costly than anything he had offered yet – took a famous pearl from her ear-ring, dissolved it in vinegar and drank the brew. In Tiepolo's fresco we see her showing Mark Antony the pearl while a black servant offers her a glass.

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Giovanni
Battista Tiepolo
*The banquet of
Cleopatra*, c. 1750
Fresco; Palazzo Labia,
Venice

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Detail of figure 288





Frescoes like these must have been fun to paint and they are a pleasure to look at. And yet some may feel that these fireworks are of less permanent value than the more sober creations of earlier periods. The great age of Italian art was ending.

Only in one specialized branch did Italian art create new ideas in the early eighteenth century. That was, characteristically enough, the painting and engraving of views. The travellers who came to Italy from all over Europe to admire the glories of her past greatness often wanted to take souvenirs with them. In Venice, in particular, whose scenery is so fascinating to the artist, there developed a school of painters who catered for this demand. *Figure 290* shows a view of Venice by one of these painters, Francesco Guardi (1712–93). Like Tiepolo's fresco, it shows that Venetian art had not lost its sense of pageantry, of light and of colour. It is interesting to compare Guardi's views of the Venetian lagoon with the sober and faithful seascapes of Simon de Vlieger, *page 418, figure 271*, painted a century earlier. We realize that the spirit of Baroque, the taste for movement and bold effects, can express itself even in a simple view of

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Francesco Guardi
*View of S. Giorgio
 Maggiore, Venice,*
 c. 1775–80

Oil on canvas, 70.5 ×
 93.5 cm, 27¾ × 36¾ in;
 Wallace Collection,
 London

a city. Guardi has completely mastered the effects that had been studied by seventeenth-century painters. He has learned that once we are given the general impression of a scene we are quite ready to supply and supplement the details ourselves. If we look closely at his gondoliers we discover, to our surprise, that they are made up simply of a few deftly placed coloured patches – yet if we step back the illusion becomes completely effective. The tradition of Baroque discoveries which lives in these late fruits of Italian art was to gain new importance in subsequent periods.

*'Connoisseurs' and
antiquaries assembled
in Rome, 1725*

Drawing by P. L. Ghezzi;
pen and black ink on buff
paper, 27 × 39.5 cm, 10 5/8
× 15 1/2 in; Albertina,
Vienna

