

## POWER AND GLORY: II

*France, Germany and Austria, late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries*

It was not only the Roman Church that had discovered the power of art to impress and overwhelm. The kings and princes of seventeenth-century Europe were equally anxious to display their might and thus to increase their hold on the minds of the people. They, too, wanted to appear as beings of a different kind, lifted by divine right above the common run of men. This applies particularly to the most powerful ruler of the latter part of the seventeenth century, Louis XIV of France, in whose political programme the display and splendour of royalty was deliberately used. It is surely no accident that Louis XIV invited Bernini to Paris to help with the designing of his palace. This grandiose project never materialized, but another of Louis XIV's palaces became the very symbol of his immense power. This was the palace of Versailles, which was built round about 1660–80, *figure 291*. Versailles is so huge that no photograph can give an adequate idea of its appearance. There are no fewer than 123 windows looking towards the park in each storey. The park itself, with its avenues of clipped trees, its urns and statuary, *figure 292*, and its terraces and lakes, extends over miles of countryside.

It is in its immensity rather than in its decorative detail that Versailles is Baroque. Its architects were mainly intent on grouping the enormous masses of the building into clearly distinct wings, and giving each wing the appearance of nobility and grandeur. They accentuated the middle of the main storey by a row of Ionic columns carrying an entablature with rows of statues on top, and flanked this effective centre-piece with decorations of a similar kind. With a simple combination of pure Renaissance forms, they would hardly have succeeded in breaking the monotony of so vast a façade, but with the help of statues, urns and trophies they produced a certain amount of variety. It is in buildings like these, therefore, that one can best appreciate the true function and purpose of Baroque forms. Had the designers of Versailles been a little more daring than they were, and used more unorthodox means of articulating and grouping the enormous building, they might have been even more successful.



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Louis le Vau & Jules  
Hardouin-Mansart  
*The palace of Versailles,  
near Paris, 1655–82*  
A Baroque palace



It was only in the next generation that this lesson was completely absorbed by the architects of the period. For the Roman churches and French castles of the Baroque style fired the imagination of the age. Every minor princeling in southern Germany wanted to have his Versailles; every small monastery in Austria or in Spain wanted to compete with the impressive splendour of Borromini's and Bernini's designs. The period round about 1700 is one of the greatest periods of architecture; and not of architecture alone. These castles and churches were not simply planned as buildings – all the arts had to contribute to the effect of a fantastic and artificial world. Whole towns were used like stage settings, stretches of country were transformed into gardens, brooks into cascades. Artists were given free rein to plan to their hearts' content, and to translate their most unlikely visions into stone and gilt stucco. Often the money ran out before their plans became reality, but what was completed of this outburst of

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*The gardens at  
Versailles*

The group to the right is a  
copy of the 'Laocöon',  
page 110, figure 69.

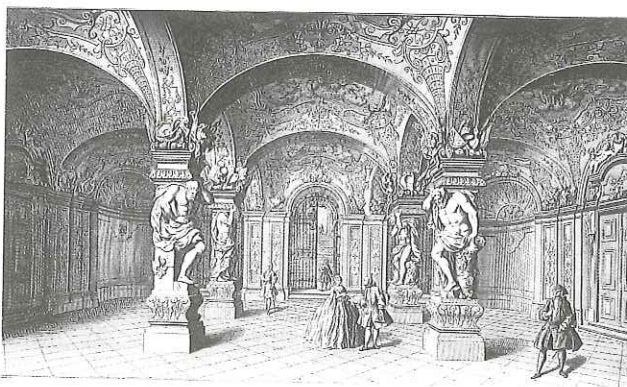


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Lucas von  
Hildebrandt  
*Upper Belvedere,*  
*Vienna, 1720-4*

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Lucas von  
Hildebrandt  
*Upper Belvedere,*  
*Vienna, entrance hall*  
*and staircase, 1724*  
18th-century engraving



extravagant creation transformed the face of many a town and landscape of Catholic Europe. It was particularly in Austria, Bohemia and southern Germany that the ideas of the Italian and French Baroque were fused into the boldest and most consistent style. *Figure 293* shows the palace which the Austrian architect, Lucas von Hildebrandt (1668–1745), built in Vienna for Marlborough's ally, Prince Eugene of Savoy. The palace stands on a hill, and seems to hover lightly over a terraced garden with fountains and clipped hedges. Hildebrandt has grouped it clearly into seven different parts, reminiscent of garden pavilions: a five-windowed centre-piece bulging forward, flanked by two wings of only slightly lesser height, and this group in turn flanked by a lower part and four turret-like corner pavilions, which frame the whole building. The central pavilion and the corner-pieces are the most richly decorated parts, and the building forms an intricate pattern, which is nevertheless completely clear and lucid in its outline. This lucidity is not at all disturbed by the freakish and grotesque ornament that Hildebrandt employed in the details of the decoration, the pilasters tapering off downwards, the broken and scrolly pediments over the windows, and the statues and trophies lining the roof.

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Lucas von  
Hildebrandt  
& Johann  
Dientzenhofer  
*Staircase of the castle  
of Pommersfelden,  
Germany, 1713–14*



It is only when we enter the building that we feel the full impact of this fantastic style of decoration. *Figure 294* shows the entrance hall of Prince Eugene's palace, and *Figure 295* a staircase of a German castle designed by Hildebrandt. We cannot do justice to these interiors unless we visualize them in use – on a day when the owner was giving a feast or holding a reception, when the lamps were lit and men and women in the gay and stately fashions of the time arrived to mount these stairs. At such a moment, the contrast between the dark, unlit streets of the time, reeking of dirt and squalor, and the radiant fairy world of the nobleman's dwelling must have been overwhelming.



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Jakob Prandtauer  
*Melk Monastery, 1702*

The buildings of the Church made use of similar striking effects. *Figure 296* shows the Austrian monastery of Melk, on the Danube. As one comes down the river, this monastery, with its cupola and its strangely shaped towers, stands on the hill like some unreal apparition. It was built by a local builder called Jakob Prandtauer (died 1726) and decorated by some of the Italian travelling *virtuosi* who were ever ready with new ideas and designs from the vast store of Baroque patterns. How well these humble artists had learnt the difficult art of grouping and organizing a building to give the appearance of stateliness without monotony! They were also careful to graduate the decoration, and to use the more extravagant forms sparingly, but all the more effectively, in the parts of the building they wanted to throw into relief.

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Jakob Prandtauer,  
 Antonio Beduzzi  
 & Josef Munggenast  
*Interior of the church  
 of Melk Monastery,  
 c. 1738*

In the interior, however, they cast off all restraint. Even Bernini or Borromini in their most exuberant moods would never have gone quite so far. Once more we must imagine what it meant for a simple Austrian peasant to leave his farmhouse and enter this strange wonderland, *figure 297*. There are clouds everywhere, with angels making music and gesticulating in the bliss of Paradise. Some have settled on the pulpit, everything seems to move and dance, and the architecture framing the sumptuous high altar appears to sway in the rhythm of jubilation. Nothing is 'natural' or 'normal' in such a church – it is not meant to be. It is intended to give us a foretaste of the glory of Paradise. Perhaps it is not everybody's idea of Paradise, but when you are in the midst of it all it





envelops you and stops all questioning. You feel you are in a world where our rules and standards simply do not apply.

One can understand that north of the Alps, no less than in Italy, the individual arts were swept into this orgy of decoration and lost much of their independent importance. There were, of course, painters and sculptors of distinction in the period round about 1700, but perhaps there was only one master whose art compares with the great leading painters of the first half of the seventeenth century. This master was Antoine Watteau (1684–1721). Watteau came from a part of Flanders which had been conquered by France a few years before his birth, and he settled in Paris, where he died at the age of thirty-seven. He, too, designed interior decorations for the castles of the nobility, to provide the appropriate background for the festivals and pageantries of court society. But it would seem as if the actual festivities had not satisfied the imagination of the artist. He began to paint his own visions of a life divorced from all hardship and triviality, a dream-life of gay picnics in fairy parks where it never rains, of musical parties where all ladies are beautiful and all lovers graceful, a society in which all are dressed in sparkling silk without looking showy, and where the life of the shepherds and shepherdesses seems to be a succession of minuets. From such a description one might get the impression that the

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Antoine Watteau  
*Fête in a park*, c. 1719

Oil on canvas, 127.6 ×  
193 cm, 50¼ × 76 in;  
Wallace Collection,  
London



art of Watteau is over-precious and artificial. For many, it has come to reflect the taste of the French aristocracy of the early eighteenth century which is known as Rococo: the fashion for dainty colours and delicate decoration which succeeded the more robust taste of the Baroque period, and which expressed itself in gay frivolity. But Watteau was far too great an artist to be a mere exponent of the fashions of his time. Rather it was he whose dreams and ideals helped to mould the fashion we call Rococo. Just as Van Dyck had helped to create the idea of the gentlemanly ease we associate with the Cavaliers, *page 405, figure 262*, so Watteau has enriched our store of imagination by his vision of graceful gallantry.

*Figure 298* shows his picture of a gathering in a park. There is nothing of the noisy gaiety of Jan Steen's revelries, *page 428, figure 278*, in this scene; a sweet and almost melancholy calm prevails. These young men and women just sit and dream, play with flowers or gaze at each other. The light dances on their shimmering dresses, and transfigures the copse into an earthly paradise. The qualities of Watteau's art, the delicacy of his brushwork and the refinement of his colour harmonies are not easily revealed in reproductions. His immensely sensitive paintings and drawings must really be seen and enjoyed in the original. Like Rubens, whom he admired, Watteau could convey the impression of living, palpitating flesh through a mere whiff of chalk or colour. But the mood of his studies is as different from Rubens's as his paintings are from Jan Steen's. There is a touch of sadness in these visions of beauty which is difficult to describe or define, but which lifts Watteau's art beyond the sphere of mere skill and prettiness. Watteau was a sick man, who died of consumption at an early age. Perhaps it was his awareness of the transience of beauty which gave to his art that intensity which none of his many admirers and imitators could equal.

*Art under royal patronage: Louis XIV visiting the Royal Gobelins Factory in 1667*

Tapestry; Musée de Versailles

