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Baroque 1620–1800: Style in the Age of Magnificence
Victoria and Albert Museum, London
4 April–19 July 2009

The visual force of a small object, 12.3 centimeters in height, magnetically attracted both experienced and novice viewers entering this exhibition. Around 1700 a jeweler, perhaps from Frankfurt, exploited the lumps and bumps of irregularly shaped pearls to conjure a camel and then added two figures of so-called blackamoors, both wearing old-fashioned breeches rendered in silver, one man poised atop the camel, the other framed by its legs. On the base below, a scene painted in enamels depicts a seated female blackamoor proffering strings of perfect pearls, her colorful feather headdress standing in contrast to the green palm fronds behind her. To the left and right, opened chests reveal, among other treasures, blue-and-white painted porcelain, metalwork chargers and vases, and an abundance of jewels. A tall-masted ship, that quintessential vessel and vector for material and cultural exchanges, sails away from the landscape background, framed on one side by an extensive shoreline and, in the distance, by a towering blue mountain. This finely crafted union of materials, both real and represented, links the microscopic to the macroscopic, embodies a taste for the exotic, and reminded viewers of the original meaning of the term baroque, deriving as it does from a Portuguese word signifying pearl of irregular shape.

Nearby, a large (231 x 340 cm) canvas depicted an elaborate entertainment held for Christina of Sweden in the enclosed area just north of Rome’s Palazzo Barberini. Having abdicated her royal throne, this remarkable woman made her way to the Eternal City and lived the rest of her days there, playing a pivotal role in its cultural life and collecting works of art, books, and manuscripts. In the painting, those in the audience number in the hundreds and occupy both bleachers facing the palace and viewing stands built right outside its fabric. Blackamoors walk among the dozens of performers, while tapestries draped around window frames recall how contemporaries put luxury items to different uses.

Artifacts of nearly every scale and medium presented the stupendous richness of artistic production from the length and breadth of Europe—and many points beyond. An obvious lacuna was the absence of anything fashioned in either Russia or the North American colonies of England and France; this could have been addressed with the display of a commorative medal or an engraving. Still, the inclusion of items from Brazil, China, Goa, Mexico, and the Philippines effectively documented colonialism’s global reach, as well as energetic luxury-trade networks and a style—that is to say, ways of seeing and patterns of production—that local artists inflected both formally and iconographically. For example, the curators thoughtfully paired a Norwegian baptismal font and its font house, both dated to 1704, with a Mexican retable of about 1690 (Figure 1). The Scandinavian church furnishings would have served a Lutheran family and a pastor intimately focused on a liminal rite of initiation, whereas the Mexican object would have towered in gilt magnificence at the end of a vaulted nave, focusing Roman Catholic worshipers’ gazes on a sacramental mystery unfolding at the altar and marked by visual, olfactory, and auditory stimuli. Music was a distinct, pleasant, yet unobtrusive accompaniment to visitors’ movements through the galleries.

The curators’ decision to present the Baroque as “the first global style” silently spoke to the fruitfully broadened perspectives of scholars working in the humanities in the last few decades. Nevertheless, the omnipresent concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk (total work of art) proved that certain governing principles indeed do stand the test of time and reiterated what, in the period under scrutiny, manifestly drove many patrons to commission and obtain, and legions of artists to create, without that explicitly Wagnerian category at their disposal. Skillful practitioners with a wide-ranging curiosity infused their works with brio and rendered boundaries among the arts fluid. With its sets and costumes, the Baroque theater was both an innovative building type—a mark of emulative sophistication among European courts—and a space of coordinated, magical transformation. Moreover, the aristocratic table— with its increasingly rich accoutrements and accompanying rituals of display and consumption, and as a piece of furniture—

Figure 1 Left: Lars Jensen Borg, Font House from Ringsaker Church, 1704. Carved and joined painted and gilded wood, h. 309 cm. Norsk Folkemuseum. Right: Altarpiece of the Virgin of Sorrows, ca. 1690, carved, painted, and gilded wood set with oil on panel and canvas and with silver, textile and glass, h. 615.5 cm. Mexico City, Fundación Televisa A.C. (photo: V&A Images)
was a sphere that privileged sociability, as did theater. The exhibition amply chronicled each to great effect.

Galleries devoted to Art & Performance, Architecture & Performance, The Theatre, The Square, Sacred Spaces, and Secular Spaces, kept architecture forcefully and appropriately in the mind’s eye. In the last section, the palace was anatomized spatially and dissected functionally into staircases, galleries, throne rooms, and audience chambers, bedchambers, cabinets and closets, and dining rooms. At one point, viewers seated (if they so chose) on a bench could watch projected slides that alternated images of palaces, hunting lodges, pavilions, and, in particular, churches and their component parts, such as choir stalls, altars, frescoed vaults, and staircases. A leitmotif that clearly emerged from this virtual tour to Versailles, Turin, Dresden, Rome, Munich, Ottobeuren, and Rio de Janeiro was that the play of curved forms generated exciting dispositions of solids and spaces; that said, to have included in the mix a digital photograph of the pavilion at Wrest Park (Bucks), designed by Thomas Archer, would have rooted something characteristically and exuberantly baroque on English soil.

Works on paper spoke volumes throughout. Some prints, intended to broadcast success, recorded the admired forms of ensembles and individual products that could serve as models; others transmitted compositions born from the imagination that spoke with a language whose rules, once mastered, could spur others to meaningful creation. In his drawing of the dome of Rome’s S. Carlo al Corso, Nicodemus Tessin the Younger, the Swedish traveler and architect, set out to observe and record a modern building; in an attributed design for a state bed, he gave his trained imagination a space within which to invent with panache. Other drawings eloquently substantiated how artists such as Francesco Borromini and Gianlorenzo Bernini engaged in an unfolding process of design and then might gather ideas to present for comment and approval. In this regard, a model for the chapel of St. John the Baptist in the Church of São Roque (Figure 2), made in Rome by several artists and then shipped to Lisbon, neatly did three-dimensional double duty. This miraculous survivor from the devastating earthquake of 1755 provided a rare opportunity to examine a dazzlingly conceived set executed in the latest Roman style, for in this exhibition it stood in the same gallery with silver altar furnishings and liturgical vestments from the actual chapel.

The breadth and depth of the splendid objects gathered in Baroque 1620–1800: Style in the Age of Magnificence will not soon be surpassed. Those who did not have an opportunity to see it can, luckily, turn to the sumptuously illustrated catalog, with entries and more than two dozen thematic essays that will remain an indispensable point of reference for decades to come.

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Related Publication

Figure 2 Giuseppe Palmes, Giuseppe Voyet, Giuseppe Focchetti, and Gennaro Nicoletti, Model for the Chapel of St. John the Baptist in the Church of S. Roque, 1744–47. Carved and polychromed walnut with gilded copper, h. 140 cm. Santa Casa de Misericórdia de Lisboa/Museu de São Roque (photo: V&A Images)