Baroque Passions and Allegories

1. What is the Baroque?
The baroque vision is the vision of an age in which the study of physical sciences emerges, making it an age characterized by respect for the visible and material world. But this is also an age in which the renaissance philosophy of humanism culminates in an intense interest in the psychology of human beings and the expression of emotional states in all forms of art, from architecture to landscape painting and portraits, and from religious subject matter to secular. The interest in psychology contributes to several critical qualities of baroque art: 1) this is allegorical art, no matter how naturalist it looks-- the presence of an underlying allegory can be found because it is the allegory which gives the work its meaning; an emphasis on the depiction of profound emotional and physical states such as ecstasy, religious visions, death and martyrdom--emotions, in other words, which are intense, often horrific to look at, and human. The third quality is something we have already encountered in the northern European interest in making a rhetorical art: the tendency for art to become a theatrical experience for the spectator. This is true regardless of the medium, although certain media undoubtedly lend themselves to this better than others.

Bernini and the Passion for Transformation
Gian Lorenzo Bernini was the son of a sculptor, Pietro Bernini. Stories suggest that he carved his first works by the age of 13, although some say he was as young as 8. For the most part, in the beginning of his career Bernini struggled to move beyond the legacy of Michelangelo and to unite it with the mannerist influence of his father. From one he takes an interest in the experience of multiple viewing points in the stationary work of art, and from the other he takes the idea of a center of energy. We also know that the Laocoon statue group was an important influence on his work.

Pluto and Persephone, 1621-2: a scene of action, violence, and vitality; a frontal view but interesting views are created in the round. Bernini has transformed the marble into malleable material, looking almost like real flesh. In fact, in all his work, the most outstanding characteristic is his ability to treat marble as a sensual textural material, creating skin which virtually looks like skin and sheets and robes which appear to ripple with the slightest breeze. The composition of Pluto and Persephone is dominated by Persephone's left arm and Pluto's right arm: parallel although they are engaged in opposing actions. Pluto is pulling, while Persephone is pushing. The molded stone reveals the way Pluto's hand indents the flesh of Persephone's thigh, and on her face, we can see tears. Bernini has drilled into her mouth, creating the illusion of an opening which can be gazed into; the combination of open mouth and flying hair works to suggest terror and an attempt to flee. Pluto is the image of a regal figure who clearly thinks he has the right to what he desires. It is a climactic moment, the moment of capture and the moment of Persephone's resistance: Pluto has just seized Persephone, and he carries her struggling to Hades, symbolized by Cerberus at the base of the statue, which, because of its three heads, draws
us around the statue.

Apollo and Daphne, 1622-5: this is a similar story of an abduction but here we have a moment of metamorphosis, metamorphosis as a more striking example of resistance. The metamorphosis is Daphne's transformation into a tree as she resists Apollo. This story was a popular theme for painters but not for sculpture because of the centrality of change to the story; yet that is the precise moment which Bernini chooses. The suggestion of change, even in a monumental and solid medium, marble, characterizes the Baroque, regardless of the medium. In the statue of Daphne and Apollo, because the tree is the ultimate symbol of life and of womanhood, Daphne's transformation represents more than resistance to Apollo; it is a metaphor of freedom and eternal beauty embodied by a woman, but because this is the 17th century, for a woman to signify these things, she must give up her human existence. This does, however, unite her with the Virgin Mary in Mary's moment of ascension. There would seem to be an insistence on religious values and transcendence in Bernini's most powerful works, but it is a peculiarly psychological and theatrical expression of religious values. This mixture is, however, what gives his works their power.

David, 1623: Bernini's David, although not a sculptural group, vividly implies the presence of Goliath and involves the unsuspecting viewer in the dramatic action. The figure is set in a spatial context in a very innovative way. He is twisting in space and must be seen in the round if we are to experience the sense of a split second, a moment in David's story, the moment just before the release of the slingshot which is the split second Bernini has chosen. Where Michelangelo presented David in the moment of contemplation before action, and Donatello showed him after the conclusion of his act, here we are present while the action is being carried out. With this statue, if you approach it from the front, you have the experience of feeling that Goliath is behind you--you are pulled into the narrative, the space of the room is activated and transformed into a theater, but not a theater in which you sit passively or even emotionally--you are implicated in the action. Thus, we share the space of the statue, we even "breathe" the same air--this is a statue that really calls for the viewer to assume a particular position, it implies a single viewing point, just as Renaissance statuary does. And yet, it stimulates the viewer to move around it, a necessary action in order to understand more completely the action of the statuary subject. The call for movement is the relationship he retains to mannerism. But the need for one key position dominates the meaning of the statue---this is the center of energy which mannerism lacked.

Another example of the Baroque depiction of transformation can be seen in the Ecstasy of St. Teresa, 1645-52, a statue ensemble by Bernini and complete theatrical context. If Protestantism called for austerity, in life, emotions, and art, the counter-reformation responded with increased emotionality. When Bernini captured these moments of ecstasy and transformation, they become metaphors of conversion to Catholicism. The Coronaro Chapel and the statue of St. Theresa is controversial, less for the suggestion of masochism than for the suggestion of an equation between spirituality and sexuality. St. Theresa herself is known to have said that when the angel appeared and thrust his spear
into her, “the pain was so great that I screamed aloud, but simultaneously I felt such infinite sweetness that I wished the pain to last eternally.” Depicting a moment of religious mysticism, transition is present here in two ways. Theresa has just been pierced by the arrow of the angel and she is literally rising to be at one with God. But the scene is also offered to us as a theatrical moment, with the family members of the chapel seeming to sit in box seats on the side of the altarpiece. On the one hand, we share their space and become a member of the audience with them. At the same time, they are part of the performance which we watch, so we, the real audience, watch a play being performed within a larger play. Raphael did something along those lines in a painting; but here, Bernini makes the theatrical experience a literal part of the sculpture and therefore of real space. It is a complex vision: the scene originally was lit by daylight through a concealed window; the side walls of the chapel have reliefs of the family engaged in meditation or disputes; there is a fresco of the Holy Ghost and angels is in the vault; and color, spreading through the marble, the decorations, the fresco, along with the sense of dramatic action conveyed through the rays falling on Theresa apparently coming from the Holy Ghost, links the whole scheme and completes the creation of the theatre. This is a vision of movement rather than static immobility, not only in Teresa's rising movement but also in the role given to the spectator—all the arts appear to be united and inseparable here.

Theatricality is inherent to all of Bernini’s work; his churches and architectural settings function as stage sets for the action of the city, the rituals of religion, and the staged activities of his sculpture. His sculpture, more than that of any preceding sculptor, comes alive and seems to act a role, often in a setting created specifically for that performance. His sculptures and drawings are shown in movement, but not only do they appear to sing or talk, weep or run—they demand a response from the viewer who occupies the same space the sculpture occupies.

Baroque Painting

Caravaggio

- a short and dramatic life which may be as characteristic of the period as his art was influential
- from Milan, an orphan, made his way to Rome where he became known as a troublemaker and street fighter

Judith Beheading Holofernes, of 1599

a popular story, well-known at the time

Holofernes: an Assyrian general, laid seige to the Israelite town of Bethulia

Judith, a widow, devises a plan; takes Abra, her maid, with her to the general’s tent tells him that he will be able to defeat the Israelites if they sin against god, and they were about to do this, therefore Holofernes should wait a little longer

He invites her to dine with him, gets drunk and falls asleep

she beheads him, they place his head in a basket of food, and leave
the Assyrians fall apart without their leader
as an allegory, rather than history: Judith may signify Judaism
in another interpretation, Judith is a symbol for Mary, as the avenging church of the
reformation and Holofernes is the forgiving church, which in this painting is defeated? Or is he the embodiment of evil, of the devil, and therefore must be destroyed?

Apart from the painting itself, the meaning is ambiguous; but the painting adds to that ambiguity by the contrast between the demeanor of the women, especially Judith, and Holofernes, who seems to cry out for our compassion and sympathy, and who certainly seems stronger than Judith.
The painting takes place in a tent but little of the space within the tent is indicated so it could almost be laid out on a shallow stage as a reenactment; this tendency to push the events into the foreground, not that different from an artist of the Renaissance, does continue to characterize most of Caravaggio's work, although the difference between his way of doing it and that of someone like Raphael is that in Caravaggio's painting, we don't see the background, there is no other place for our eyes to go.

In fact, the differences between Caravaggio and Raphael were quite large and they were noticed while Caravaggio was living: Bellori, for example, writing in the 17th century, complains that Caravaggio ignored the precedents of classical statuary along with artists as great as Raphael, choosing instead to make nature his model; as a result, Bellori says, Caravaggio gives us the beginning of contempt for beauty, paintings which lack decorum, which imitate filth and deformity and vulgarity.

Caravaggio: Calling of St Matthew, 1600
• in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus called to Matthew as he sat at a table in the customs house
• again, characteristically, the space of the painting is shallow and the action is set close to the edge;
• the figures are dressed in two different styles: contemporary dandyish fashion for the day, and antique costume for Christ and Peter
• composition: two rectangles, a vertical rect at the right and horizontal, crowded rectangle at the left; separated by a sliver a space between them and by the clothing; joined by Christ's hand which reaches across the divide
• he points to Matthew, using the same gesture which Michelangelo used in the hand of Adam although the arm of Christ reminds us of the arm of God in the same fresco
• the lighting is symbolic, coming from a source in the upper right where there is no window in the painting but which symbolically would be coming from the chapel where the painting is hung; light becomes a metaphor for revelation or the absence of revelation on the faces in the dark
TENEBRISM (from tenebroso) “painting in the shadowy manner” using violent contrasts of light and dark
Conversion of St Paul, 1600-1
- the moment when Saul is converting to Christianity and becoming a disciple
- an unusual painting because we really have no clue as to what is happening; the groom seems more interested in his horse, the horse seems to be close to stepping on Paul
- the horizon line in the painting is very low, bringing the viewer in at an unusually close viewing point; in the chapel, the painting would have been approximately at the height of our eyes

The Entombment of Christ, 1604
Again, he plans the painting in a way which includes our position in the chapel as we look at it; in this case, the composition is organized along a strong diagonal from Christ’s body up to the outstretched hands of Mary; all the figures are in a similar pose and closely connected visually
the figures are coarsely rendered, rather than idealized, giving the scene a more naturalistic or realistic feeling and more like a genre painting as opposed to a religious painting; this is an important quality to note because it seems to express a larger theme at this time, a tendency to reformulate the sacred in more secular terms; eventually, secular subject matter will completely displace the sacred but at this point, the inclination is this striving toward a unity of the two.

In terms of the religious doctrine of the period: the fact that the men in the painting are laying Christ’s body on the altar, which is outside of the painting, suggests that the painting is about transubstantiation, or the transformation of the Eucharistic bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, believed by Catholics but rejected by Protestants.

Artemisia Gentileschi

Danae: 1612, painted on copper
This painting is less well known than the famous Judith paintings but it is of interest because it illustrates some of Artemisia’s style in the context of the use of unusual materials and because it precedes the beginning of her tenebrist paintings and the influence of Caravaggio.
Although the presence of gold coins as a sign of Zeus’s presence is not unique, Artemisia’s treatment of the coins is unusual: she not only has allowed the coins to accumulate on Danae’s thighs, but Danae also clutches some in her right fist. The hand position tells us that Danae is unwilling, and that she resisted the god; at the same time, the extended neck and left art suggest that she is sexually aroused.
Titian made several paintings of the same subject. Although a comparison shows that both paintings use light to enhance the drama and poetry, Titian has created a relatively unified setting in which it is difficult to separate background from foreground, nature from the material world, and the like; Artemisia has placed the drama of her painting less in the
background and more directly in the body of Danae, using the maidservant as a counterfoil to Danae's body – the same position but reversed and upright. The more extreme contrast between light and dark seems to reflect Artemisia's early synthesis of the influence of Caravaggio with that of Titian, while the focus on the female body as a body of strength and passion seems to be entirely her own.

The Beheading of Holofernes
Artemisia Gentileschi made at least four paintings which relate to the story of Judith and Holofernes. She was clearly not alone in her fascination with this story as many other painters also used it; the subject matter is characteristic of the Baroque preference for “dark” or noir-ish subjects, and in Artemisia’s case, it also relates to her preference for strong and heroic women. Is there any psychological or biographical reason for this preference? Perhaps, but it should come as no surprise, given that this tendency to unite the psychological self with the work of art was a baroque tendency. We will examine one of her Judith paintings and compare it to Caravaggio’s.

self-portrait of the artist, Artemisia Gentileschi, ca 1630, displays this new interest in showing the human figure in motion, a quality which contributes to an increased sense of psychological presence and something we’ve already seen in sculpture: the presence of a human figure in the work of art who appears to be speaking to us or displaying intensely private emotions, whether of ecstatic or horror, but expressing them so strongly we have no choice but to experience them as well.