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Developments during the Baroque Age: A Prefiguration for Installation Art

The term “Baroque” most likely has derived from the Portuguese word *borroco*, meaning an irregularly shaped pearl¹. The use of the term originates from the late eighteenth century, when critics disparaged the Baroque period’s exuberant and decorative art². Compared to Renaissance artists reveling in the precise rationality of classical models, Baroque artists embraced dynamism and theatricality. It is precisely from this distinction between the Renaissance and Baroque that emerged subsequent artistic movements. The movement away from a circle and square to the oval and the rectangle provided a three dimensionality within and surrounding the artworks. The picture plane of Diego Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* involves multiple perspectives that extend outside of the painting. Sculpture itself expands the physical movement of the subject and the viewer, as demonstrated in Giambologna’s *The Rape of the Sabine Women*. Furthermore, sculpture became an integral part of architecture, culminating in Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*. In this instance, the chapel did not solely frame the sculpture, rather it became the sculpture, the work of art. The unity of all parts of the artwork, an expansion of the concept of an artwork, and the combination of artistic disciplines reconsecrated the viewer, the artist, and the subject’s vision regarding the artwork. Four centuries later, contemporary artists

¹ “Baroque.”

² Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner’s Art Through the Ages: A Global History*, (Andover, England: Cengage Learning, 2012), 670.

have applied these theories of multiple perspectives and media, evolved throughout previous artistic movements, to installation art.

A work of art that has endured much academic acclaim and critique for its multiple theoretical and visual paradoxes in Velázquez's *Las Meninas* from 1656. In 1623, he was appointed first painter to the king, and upon contact with the decadent court of Madrid he began to paint feverishly for the royal family³. Painted in the foreground is the Infanta, looking forwards, in proper regal seventeenth century attire as her maids attend to her. There is a sitting dog in the right side of the foreground. To the left is Velázquez, in the process of painting, with a large canvas facing away from the viewer. In the right of the background, a man pauses in an open doorway seemingly about to continue up the stairs. The center background hold a mirror reflecting King Philip IV and Mariana of Austria.

There are a few immediate questions that come to a viewer's mind based on this simple description. The canvas on which Velázquez is working, has its back turned to the front of the image. Is he showing himself painting this painting? Is he painting the King and Queen of Spain? Is this one painting then a representation of two? His gaze confronting the viewer would also then be confronting the King Philip IV and Mariana of Austria, for their reflection to be in the mirror. Are they the subjects of his secondary painting, or are they the true subjects of this painting? What, then, is our role as the viewer? Are we being transformed into the King and



Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656.

³ Germain Bazin, *The Baroque: Principles, Styles, Modes, Themes*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1968), 115.

Queen of Spain, or are we the ones being painted? The paradoxes are apparent: the mirror, the canvas, the painter, subject, and the viewer's identity. The relation of the mirror to the space in front of the picture plane, the source of its reflection, and the relation of both to the other elements in the painting are all matters of dispute within academic circles⁴. This short study of *Las Meninas* within this paper is not the place to argue their respective meanings, but to acknowledge their existence and their contribution to the multiple gazes situated within the work. The man in the doorway deepens the picture plane, while the relationship between the viewer, artist, and subjects extend it forwards into reality. As Michel Foucault argues in his book, *The Order of Things*, suddenly these paradoxes create not only a three dimensionality to the artwork, but a gyric one⁵. The gaze of the artist within the painting and the dual subjects confront the viewer and the artist himself. There is an interplay and ovular nature to how each member of the work communicates with one another. Through this work, the viewer notices the break that painting has made during this time period, demonstrating the relinquishment of an articulated system of forms dominant in classical art and moving into an infinite, psychologically engaging flow of interaction⁶.

The developments happening in painting also applied to sculpture and architecture. About a century before *Las Meninas*, came Giambologna's *The Rape of the Sabine Women*. The Grand Duke of Tuscany, Francesco I, chose for this piece to adorn the Loggia della Signoria in Florence

⁴ Amy M. Schmitter, "Picturing Power: Representation and *Las Meninas*," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53 (Summer, 1996): 256, accessed May 5, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/431627>.

⁵ To read a more detailed description of this argumentation, please reference, Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

⁶ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, (New York: Dover, 1950), 158.

in 1583, a year after the sculpture's completion⁷. A true example of the artist's skill lies in the creation of these three figures, measuring 425.4 centimeters in height, out of a single block of marble⁸. Disassociating the work from its mythological roots, Giambologna simply creates three interacting figures, fiercely engaged in movement: a mature man, a youth and a beautiful woman, taken by the younger man from the elder⁹. It is the duality of individuality and unity of the figures that merge to create a dynamism transcending centuries.

The dynamism existing within the sculpture hits the viewer immediately. The weaving tension between the figures emerge from their raw emotion, broad movements, an engagement between one another. This is already a huge shift from Renaissance sculpture. In comparing to Michelangelo's *David* from 1504, these figures do not offer an externally stoic nature. The full expression of sculpture's three dimensionality is seen in this work. The Baroque provides a rebirth of Ancient Greek Hellenistic physicality that bursts through a rigid box that had been containing extended body movements since Gothic times¹⁰. This is one way that Giambologna extends the sculptural plane in order to make contact with the viewer, a parallel to



Giambologna, *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, 1574 - 1582.

⁷ "The Rape of the Sabine Women."

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ I'm sure that this has to do with changes in the Catholic Church's social aims from the Gothic age to the Baroque. During the Gothic, internal pensiveness and beauty was superior to any form of exterior beauty. The Baroque, thanks to the Reformation causing such a hullabaloo, was a moment in which the Catholic Church was trying to connect with the physical, emotional human being. However, this topic would be for another paper and I cannot fully delve into this here.

Velázquez's motives in *Las Meninas*. In this way, he gives credit to the viewer's role in the artwork and directly forms a relationship with him/her.

The engagement of the viewer continues in the staging of the sculpture, both by the artist and by the people who positioned it. These figures do not stand frontally, or stand at all, such as in the *David*. Neither do they offer a main viewpoint for observation. The figures demand for the viewer to move around the piece. As one critic in the *Oxford Art Journal*, Alex Potts, argues, this genre of sculpture broadens how to view an artwork and the multiple angles involved¹¹. He continues my stating that the staging and display of the work are integral to its very substance and a point of evolution growing centuries later into installation artwork¹². This work was, in fact, put on display with this understanding intact, since it is not against a wall or intimately framed by other architectural features. It calls the viewer to dance and to move along with its figures.

An element of theatricality is imbued in these artworks. And, this is no coincidence since the theater is, in fact, a part of the background of Gian Lorenzo Bernini, one of the most revered Baroque artists. Pope Urban VIII highly patronized his career, heavily involved in creating sculptures, fountains, and architectural elements. A fervent career in the theater is greatly reflected in across his artistic media. In 1624, Bernini



Gian Lorenzo Bernini, A detail from *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, 1647-1652.

¹¹ Alex Potts, "Installation and Sculpture," *Oxford Journal of Art* 24 (2001): 7-23, accessed May 8, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3600405>.

¹² *Ibid.*

received the Baldacchino commission on which he would spend the next ten years working¹³ and during these years he began writing and producing theatrical entertainments for the Roman Carnival seasons each year¹⁴. It is fairly clear, with the visual effect and his background, to claim then that theatricality is a prominent aspect in the artist's intention. Where this artwork succeeds, both for the intentions of its time period and for its relationship to the viewer, is this incorporation of the encompassing and dramatic nature of theater.

The theater breaks a barrier existing between audience and object. For the duration of the performance, the audience is compelled by a specific narrative. This narrative uses multiple tools to compel the audience, such as highlighting the stage, building a backdrop, and involving props.

Bernini, in this work, appropriates these fundamental tools to the marble of the Cornara Chapel. As if the physical indentation of the radiating chapel was not enough, he creates a multicolor marble frame within the chapel. The frame is in the typical



Baroque style, two columns on each side that create an

Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, 1647-1652.

undulating effect along with a pediment-like feature as the lintel. Drawing further focus to the sculpture, are the replications of light beams that emerge from behind the sculptures' frame.

These elements aid to break the physical barrier that exists between a sculpture and its spectator.

It literally projects itself forward into the spectator's space, redefining the social construct of

¹³ Robert Fahrner and William Kleb, "The Theatrical Activity of Gianlorenzo Bernini," *Educational Theatre Journal* 25 (Mar., 1973): 6, accessed May 7, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3205831>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

being separated from the artistic realm. This projection, thus an involvement of the spectator's vision, formulates an emotional relationship with the viewer.

This emotional aspect continues in the sculpture's narrative. Its inspiration derives from the personal journals of Saint Teresa, where she describes in detail her physical and spiritual reactions to her visions of God, "He plunged [a spear] into my heart several times so that it penetrated into my entrails. When he pulled it out, I felt that he took them with it, and left me utterly consumed by the great love of God. The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans. The sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease, nor is one's soul then content with anything but God."¹⁵ Art historians have much discussed her visions and the meaning of them; however within this context the fact that Bernini represents a vision in progress is significant enough for this argument. Vision, therefore, is at the heart of this artwork. The vision in progress also extends to the carved spectators at the wings of the chapel. Bernini, with the inclusion of these spectators, he understands the importance of an audience's gaze as well as encourages it. He makes the gaze permanent, signifying that a gaze must always be present in artworks. The multiple frames and gazes solidify a spectacle of vision itself. The presentation of the sculpture also displays itself towards the viewer, acknowledging them as integral part of the piece. The multiple gazes combined with the overwhelming architectural/sculptural features broaden the sense of a sculpture.

These two aspects, multiple gazes and a broadening of media, are absolutely integral to contemporary installation art. Jumping ahead about four centuries, while acknowledging the in-between artistic evolutions, these two aspects remain at the heart of installation art. A work

¹⁵ Susanne Warma, "Ecstasy and Vision: Two Concepts Connected with Bernini's Teresa," *The Art Bulletin* 66 (Sept., 1984): 510, accessed May 8, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3050453>.

installed at 2013 ArtBasel by Chiharu Shiota demonstrates these aspects of contemporary art. It is an abandoned piano concert wrapped in charred thread. The instrument sits in the middle of the space while two rows of empty chairs surround it and the complex network of interwoven yarn dominates the entire scene¹⁶. The wool strands are interconnected and respond to the architecture of the space by acknowledging the gallery walls, translating the entire room into a massive webbed display¹⁷. The work of art is no longer the thread, piano, or chairs, rather it includes all of the objects. It is precisely the combination of each medium that gives the work a unifying message, a fundamental development during the Baroque age. The whole room, its filled and void parts, becomes the artwork. More so, it is the viewer's integration into the artwork through his/her viewership and participation that again evokes the artworks of the Baroque. IN order to view this work, one must walk into it and around it. Four hundred years later and the viewer's gaze is not only integrated into the artwork, but also becomes a part of the artwork itself.



Chiharu Shiota, *In Silence*,
2013.

These developments are certainly a part of the theoretical rather than overtly visual developments happening between the centuries. There has been a clear desire amongst many installation artists to reduce the visual to an even more powerful theoretical and/or psychological level. Although the time period and intention has changed, developments within the Baroque age

¹⁶ “Chiharu Shiota’s Thread Wrapped Charred Piano for Art Basel.”

¹⁷ Ibid.

has facilitated a means to connect with an audience that is still relevant to today's artworks. *3X4608* is a piece by Jeremy Ficca, installed as a part of The Mattress Factory's 2012 exhibition

entitled "Gestures: Intimate Friction". For the artist, he uses the revelation of the floor to confront our understanding of everyday materiality¹⁸. Each of the artworks aforementioned have distinct messages coming from the artist; however, it is how



these messages are conveyed that provokes a dialogue between Jeremy Ficca, *3X4608*, 2012.

artist, subject, object, and spectator. This artwork elevates the floor, transforming it from a seemingly two-dimensional surface to a three-dimensional one, similar to *Las Meninas*. Furthermore, its most effective characteristic is its use of levels and curves. It obliges the viewer to observe not only the objects, but also the space in between. Thus, it engages the room and those in it, acknowledging the presence and participation of those experiencing the artwork.

A large transformation in art across the centuries is the acknowledgement of multiple perspectives and the value of interpretation. The Baroque encouraged multiple literal perspectives and as society moved into modernity, the culture shifted towards inclusion of all types of people. Today, we pride ourselves on accepting people of different religious, socio-economic, linguistic, sexual orientation, etc. backgrounds. Also, we are interested in everyone else's thoughts and actions, demonstrated by the popularity of social media. Our society's ideal in many ways is to honor the opinion and point of view of everyone else. These two installation

¹⁸ "Jeremy Ficca."

pieces by Chiharu Shiota and Jeremy Ficca invite interpretation and for an individuals' own response. This is achieved through the individuals' transformation from a viewer to an experiencer of artworks. One must walk inside of the artwork and thus become a part of the piece itself. Therefore the vision that may define our time period is a wandering one, one with a multiplicity of experiences and interpretations.

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