

Key Monuments *of the* Baroque

Laurie Schneider Adams



Key Monuments *of the* **Baroque**

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Laurie Schneider Adams

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A History of Western Art (1993)

The Methodologies of Art (1996)

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Key Monuments of the Italian Renaissance (2000)

Key Monuments *of the* Baroque

Laurie Schneider Adams

First published 2000 by Westview Press

Published 2018 by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

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ACIP catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 13: 978-0-367-00964-9(hbk)

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Preface

The title of this volume, *Key Monuments of the Baroque*, reflects the view that not all art is created equal. It is intended to affirm the existence of individual genius, identifiable styles of art, and historical periods that produced them. It implies that in any given context (time and place) some events are more significant than others; in the history of art, the significant “events” are the key monuments of art: pictures, sculptures, and buildings. They are the products made by the greatest artists and architects of their time. And although works of art may be influenced by external circumstances—for example, social, economic, and political factors; available technology and training; prevailing styles and conventions; cultural attitudes toward religion, secularism, race, gender, class, and so forth—these do not account for artistic production with the same force as the character and talent of the artist.

This bias is not intended to imply that only a single significant style emerges in a given time and place, for history is dynamic in nature. As a result, we sometimes speak of “movements” in art, which denote both the fluid nature of artistic development and the presence of more than one style at a time. Nevertheless, there is usu-

ally a “prevailing” style, which is the characteristic one, coexisting with preferences for earlier (sometimes called “old-fashioned” or “retardataire”) styles as well as with newer developments (called “modern” and, more recently, “avant-garde”). Such aesthetic forces, combined with the abilities of the artists themselves, create the dynamic tensions of art history.

Nor should the external circumstances of context be ignored or underestimated. For example, under the totalitarian regimes of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, avant-garde art was prohibited. Artists could leave their country (as many did), stay in their country and change style (as Malevich did), or lie low in a relatively safe zone in an occupied country (as Matisse did). As has been said many times, “Where there’s life, there’s hope,” a sentiment that can be applied to the production of art no matter what the odds. For the old adage that “truth will out,” one could say that history has also shown that “talent will out.” Despite the traditional Western bias against training women to be artists, therefore, some women made careers in art. Michelangelo’s father opposed his ambition to become an artist and, according to his biographers, beat him physically, abused him

emotionally, and tried to keep him from artistic training. And van Gogh persisted in making art—indeed, made some of the greatest art—even though there was no market for his work during his lifetime.

A book of this size is necessarily limited, which restricts the choices made by its author. Obviously, there are many more key monuments than those discussed here. But the advantage of focusing on a few highlights of a given historical period is that occasional forays into different methods are possible. The very selection of key works means that they can be considered from different points of view, thereby acknowledging both the primacy of individual genius and the contextual forces that interact with artistic production. Among the criteria used in selecting the monuments discussed in these pages is a conviction that their makers were the great artists of their time. As a result, the works push the envelope of stylistic innovation, while embodying significant aspects of their culture.

This text focuses on key monuments of the Baroque style, which varies in different European contexts. It begins with a chapter

on the Mannerist precursors of Baroque and concludes with a brief discussion of Rococo and other eighteenth-century artistic developments. Definitions of bold face terms in the text can be found in the glossary of art-historical terms. Boxed asides provide definitions of artistic media, short biographical sketches, and other useful background information. A brief bibliography includes cited works and suggestions for further reading.

Several people have been extremely helpful in the preparation of this volume. I am grateful to Robert Baldwin for his insights on Flemish painting, to Mary Wiseman for pointers on semiotics, and to Elisabeth de Biève for translations from Dutch into English. John Adams, Paul Barolsky, Carla Lord, and Mark Zucker read the entire manuscript, ferreting out errors of fact and improving the style. The expert copyediting of Carol Flechner also contributed immeasurably to the final product. As always, the encouragement and assistance of Cass Canfield, Jr. has made the project possible.

Laurie Schneider Adams



CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to the Baroque

The art-historical style referred to as Baroque generally designates the time period 1600 to 1750. It began in Rome in the early decades of the seventeenth century and soon spread throughout Europe. Examples of the style are found in Eastern Europe and in the Americas, especially in areas of Spanish influence, but the works illustrated in this text are products of Western Europe. Their characteristics, as we will see, vary according to time and place, function and patronage, and, above all, the style of the artist who created them. Nevertheless, there are certain formal and thematic qualities that define Baroque and that are expressed by the term itself.

Baroque is the French version of the Portuguese word *barroco*, meaning an imperfect, irregularly shaped pearl. The very term corresponds to those aspects of Baroque style that are curvilinear and **asymmetrical**, and emphasize dramatic surface movement. The animated wall surfaces of Baroque buildings, for example, can be related to the undulating surface movement

of a pearl, especially an irregular one. In order to understand better the origins and meaning of Baroque, however, it is useful to consider certain significant historical developments of sixteenth-century Europe as well as aspects of the Mannerist style. Important religious and political changes—most notably the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation—had a profound influence on the arts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The Sixteenth Century: Religious Turmoil

The Reformation refers to the religious upheaval against growing abuses within the Catholic Church, which had controlled Western Christendom since the fall of the Roman Empire. The driving force behind this movement was the German Augustinian monk Martin Luther (1483–1546). He objected to the Church's practice of selling indulgences—letters containing papal

guarantees of salvation. He believed that faith, rather than the purchase of indulgences to gain favor with the clergy, determined the fate of one's soul. Convinced that celibacy should not be required of the clergy, he himself married a former nun. Luther also advocated a return to the simplicity of the Bible as the basic Christian text and argued for reducing the power of the Church hierarchy.

In this stance, Luther came up against the dogmatic German Dominican Johann Tetzel (1465?–1519), whom he regarded as taking money from the poor under false pretenses. Tetzel capitalized on the prevalent fear of hell, pointing out that for each mortal sin, of which many are committed daily, it was necessary to suffer seven years of penance—"endless punishment in the burning pains of Purgatory. . . . Are you not willing, then," Tetzel reasoned, "for the fourth part of a florin, to obtain these letters, by virtue of which you may bring, not your money, but your divine and immortal soul safe and sound into the land of Paradise?"¹ In fact, however, Tetzel used the funds for the personal benefit of certain clergymen and to ingratiate himself with the pope by his contributions to the rebuilding of Saint Peter's in Rome.

In 1517, Martin Luther changed the course of history when he nailed to the door of the Castle church in Wittenberg, Germany, his Ninety-Five Theses. These listed his objections to the widespread corruption in the Church. Flying in the face of Tetzel's arguments were theses 21 ("Thus those preachers of indulgences are in error who say that by the indulgences of the pope a man is freed and saved from all punishment") and 50 ("Christians should be

taught that if the pope were acquainted with the exactions of the preachers of pardons, he would prefer that the basilica of St. Peter should be burnt to ashes rather than that it should be built up with the skin, flesh, and bones of his sheep").²

What Luther intended as reform within the church became a groundswell of protest opposing the Church. Hence the term *Protestant*. Efforts to quell the protests failed, and by around 1600 a quarter of Western Europe had become Protestant. Protestants were concentrated in the north—in England, Scotland, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and north and west Germany. Flanders, France, Italy, Spain, and southern Germany remained Catholic.

The Church's response to the Reformation—the Counter-Reformation—was an attempt at internal reform with a view to reasserting Catholic domination of Europe. A particular force in the Counter-Reformation was Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556), a Spanish soldier who was later canonized. In 1534, he founded the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits), whose role as soldiers of Christ served the pope through missionary work. In 1540, Paul III (1468–1549) approved the Society. Loyola had written the *Spiritual Exercises*, which advocated a system of spiritual and physical discipline calculated to develop a strong moral sense in his "Christian Soldiers." He recommended that his followers meditate in ways calculated to turn them from the materialism of this world to the spirituality of the next. In a section entitled "Meditation on the Agony of Death," he wrote:

Some months after your death. Contemplate this stone already blackened

by time, this inscription beginning to be effaced; and under that stone, in that coffin which is crumbling bit by bit, contemplate the sad state of your body; see how the worms devour the remains of putrid flesh; how all the limbs are separating; how the bones are eaten away by the corruption of the tomb! . . .³

In 1545, eleven years after Loyola founded the Jesuit order, the Council of Trent, named for the city of Trento in northern Italy, met. The council rejected any accommodation to the Protestants and reaffirmed Catholic doctrine. Heresy was to be eradicated by reforming dissenters, banning certain books by listing them on the *Index Expurgatorius*, insisting on certain themes in painting and sculpture as well as dictating architectural arrangements of churches and granting the Inquisition the right to carry out the decrees of the council. The council met three times between 1545 and 1563, and consistently demanded adherence to its views. Those who failed to comply were summarily dealt with, either by excommunication or by more corporal forms of punishment.

The Church's insistence on orthodoxy led to a conflict between religion and science that would continue into the seventeenth century. On the one hand, the sixteenth century was an age of geographic exploration, of technological advances, of scientific study (the anatomical drawings of Leonardo da Vinci), and of humanist authors (Shakespeare in England, Montaigne in France, and Cervantes in Spain). On the other hand, the mystical writings of Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross

were gaining in influence, and the Inquisition was an omnipresent force constantly to be reckoned with.

Mannerist Precursors

From around 1520 to 1590, a new movement in art began to make inroads into the prevailing High Renaissance style in Italy. This new style is called Mannerism, after its complex and ambiguous, yet elegant and refined, character. It differs from the High Renaissance aesthetic in its asymmetry, elongated and distorted forms, provocative, serpentine poses, jarring color contrasts, unexpected spatial juxtapositions, and enigmatic **iconography**. Mannerism marked the end of Renaissance classicism and laid the groundwork for the shift to Baroque. Like the Baroque artists of the following century, the Mannerists had to navigate between the rules of the Inquisition that dominated Church patronage and the earthy, sometimes perverse tastes of their private court patrons.

A quintessential Mannerist sculpture, Benvenuto Cellini's (1500–1571) *Saltcellar* of 1543 (1.1), was completed just two years before the Council of Trent first met. Commissioned by Francis I, king of France, the *Saltcellar* exemplifies the characteristics of Mannerist art produced under court patronage. The highly polished gold surface, the colored **enamels**, and the refined, elegant details appealed to its royal patron. Its fluid forms and elusive meanings—Cellini recorded contradictory versions of the latter—are consistent with both the formal instability of the main figures and the flamboyant instability of the artist himself.



1.1 Benvenuto Cellini, *Saltcellar* for Francis I, 1543. Gold and enamel, 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. \times 13 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (26 cm \times 33.3 cm), Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. (Scala/Art Resource)

The two main figures, rendered with typically Mannerist elongated forms, represent the Greek sea god Poseidon with his **attribute**, the trident, and the earth goddess. They recline unsteadily backward, opening up a broad space between them, and their gazes meet. Their ambiguous character is reflected in their contradictory poses. The earth goddess tweaks her left breast provocatively, as if trying to hold Poseidon's attention. She sits on a pillow supported by an elephant and decorated with *fleurs-de-lis*, emblems of French roy-

alty. Beside her is the pepper container, which is in the form of a conflated **Ionic** triumphal arch. Above the container reclines a smaller nude female, who, like the personifications of times of day and wind gods on the base, is inspired by Michelangelo's figures in San Lorenzo's Medici Chapel. Next to the elaborate salt bowl, alluding to the salty sea, is Poseidon, surrounded by sea horses and dolphins. The swirling white and blue enamel surface on which the gods sit is intended to evoke foaming waves.

Benvenuto Cellini: Autobiography

In 1557, while under house arrest for sodomy, Cellini dictated his autobiography to his fourteen-year-old assistant. It is a remarkable picture of the artist and his times, both of which were in turmoil. Most of Cellini's sculptures, like the *Saltcellar*, were either portraits or of mythological subjects. He worked mainly for private patrons, particularly Francis I of France and Cosimo I de' Medici, duke of Florence from 1537 to 1569 and grand duke of Tuscany from 1569 to 1574.

Cellini's autobiography describes his early conflicts with his father, who tried to force him into a career in music. But at the age of fifteen Cellini defied his father and apprenticed himself to a goldsmith. His later life was turbulent; he was often in trouble with, and on the run from, the law. Actively bisexual, he finally married the mother of his illegitimate children. Cellini's description of his father provides an explanation for his own ambivalence. Despite being named *Benvenuto* ("welcome" in Italian) by his father, Cellini records two well-known early childhood memories that reveal his father's underlying hostility toward him.

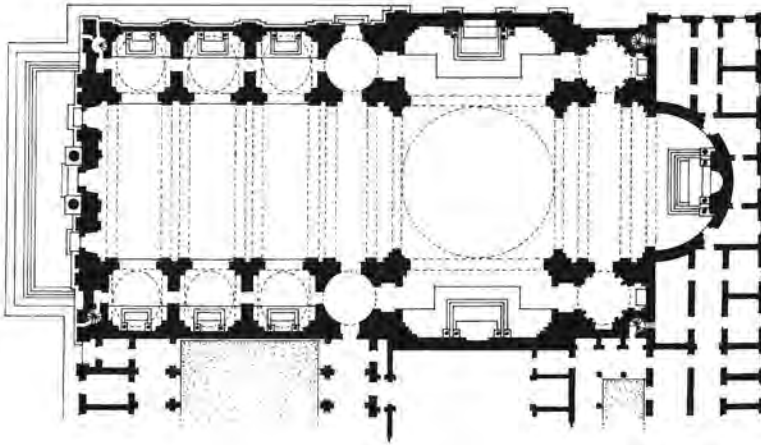
In one, Cellini catches a scorpion and refuses to part with it, whereupon his father cuts off its tail and claws. In the other, Cellini sees a salamander leaping in the fire. (According to traditional animal lore, salamanders have the ability to live in fire.)⁴ His father boxes his ears on the unlikely pretext of making sure he remembers that the lizard is a salamander. Then he kisses Cellini and gives him some money. Both memories (which are surely symbolic distortions known as "screens" or "screen memories") show the elder Cellini as alternately violent and loving, which is consistent with the artist's own ambivalent character. They also contain two motifs that are specifically autobiographical: the scorpion, related to Scorpio (the astrological sign under which Cellini was born), and the salamander (the emblem of Francis I) that appears on the *Saltcellar*.

Although the exact meaning of this object is difficult to determine, it is clear that it was designed to delight the French king. Along with its display of costly materials and artistic virtuosity, the *Saltcellar* is a metaphor for the realms of Francis I. A political reading of the *Saltcellar's* iconography suggests that Francis rules a union of Earth and Ocean.

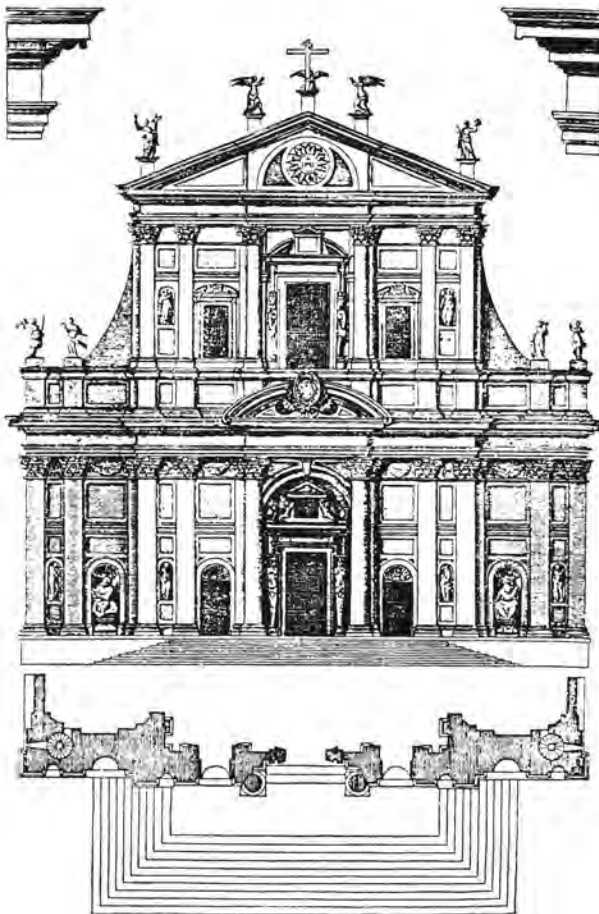
The private meaning of the *Saltcellar*, like that of many Mannerist works produced for the courts, is even more elusive than its allegorical meaning. Possibly the figure of Poseidon stood for the French king (both were bearded), whose emblem, the salamander, is one of the many iconographic details decorating the work. The gesture of

Earth suggests amorous intentions toward Poseidon, which might contain references to the king's personal life. This possibility is reinforced by the connotations of *salt* and *pepper* in the French language (and elsewhere). Both terms denote wit and light satire, as well as having sexual implications. Salt can denote semen, and, in French slang, the verb "to pepper" can mean "to transmit venereal disease." The combination of wit and sexual allusion embedded in the meanings of *salt* and *pepper* conforms both to the formal character and to the iconography of Cellini's work.

Despite the elusive iconography of the *Saltcellar*, one thing is certain: the object would not have passed muster with the In-



1.2 Giacomo da Vignola, plan of Il Gesù, Rome, 1568–1577. After Roth.



1.3 Giacomo da Vignola, design and plan of the façade of Il Gesù, Rome. Engraving, 1573.

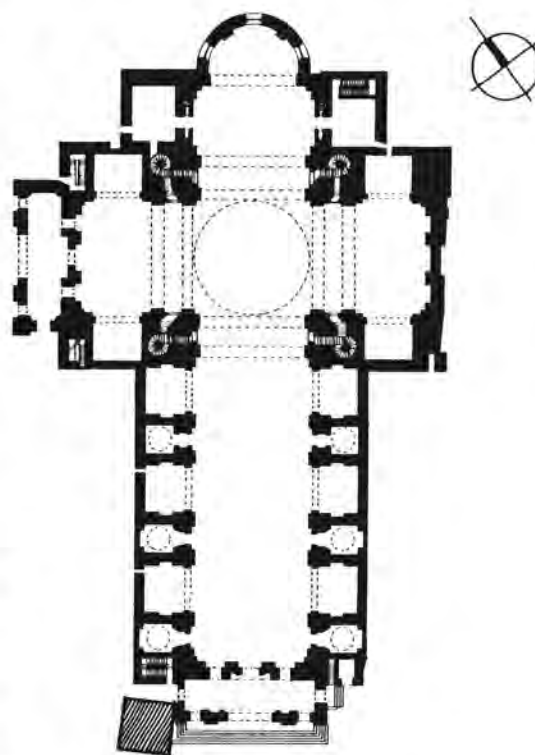
quisition. The Council of Trent objected to mythological subject matter and nude figures as pagan and, therefore, as heretical. It decreed that art illustrate the Bible and the lives of saints, clearly identifying each figure by attributes such as **haloes** and instruments of martyrdom. Imagery, according to the Council, should evoke a mystical identification on the part of the viewer, much as Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* were designed to do.

Such arguments were directly opposed to the humanist movement, which had characterized much of the Renaissance in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and early sixteenth centuries. Not only had the humanists revived and translated the texts of Classical antiquity, but they subscribed to the ancient Greek notion that "man is the measure of things." Humanist artists illustrated mythological as well as Christian subject matter, and treatises were written praising the dignity of man. This latter notion extended to the form of a man's body as well as to the state of his mind and soul, all of which were idealized and believed capable of achieving the highest good.

The Council of Trent also made known its views on architecture, which, it said, should create a spiritual environment for worshipers. To satisfy this requirement, there was a surge in church construction during the Counter-Reformation. The most important of these churches, Il Gesù (1.2, 1.3, 1.5), unlike Cellini's *Saltcellar*, was designed according to the dictates of the Counter-Reformation. Begun in 1568, Il Gesù was the mother church of Loyola's Society of Jesus and would become the most influential church of Baroque Rome. Its plan would also spread well beyond

Rome, disseminated by Jesuit missionaries throughout the world.

The architect Giacomo da Vignola (1507–1573) was the author of the *Regola delle Cinque Ordini d'Architettura* (The Rule of the Five Orders of Architecture), published in 1562 and eventually printed in some two hundred editions. Vignola based his **plan** of the Gesù (1.2) on the Renaissance plan of Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) for the church of Sant'Andrea in Mantua (1.4). Both are **Latin-cross** plans with **barrel vaults** and individual side **chapels** replacing the **side aisles**. The



1.4 Leon Battista Alberti, plan of Sant'Andrea, Mantua, 1470–1493. After Roth.

chapels, a series of identical square modules, each with its own **altar**, allowed for the worship of individual saints and could be owned by private families. Under this arrangement, the congregation was directed architecturally toward the high altar in the **apse**, which was illuminated by light from the dome. Since the only other source of light in the Gesù was the **clerestory** of the **nave**, the **crossing** became the most illuminated space in the church. The light at the crossing thus contributed to the dramatic character of the high altar.

Also emphasizing the high altar was the distance between the apse and the **sacristy**, which meant that when the priest proceeded from the sacristy to celebrate Mass, he could be seen by the entire congregation. The dramatic effect of the priest's visibility—like an actor approaching center stage—was to build up the expectation of the worshipers as he prepared to begin the service. This sense of drama in the service of mystical spirituality, which was required by the Council of Trent, would become a characteristic of the Baroque style in the seventeenth century.

The differences between the plan of Sant' Andrea and that of the Gesù, however, reflect the new demands of the Counter-Reformation. Vignola's **transepts** are relatively shallower (and each contains an altar), his dome larger, and his nave wider than those in Alberti's church. The purpose of the wide nave and barrel vault was to provide space for a large congregation and to improve the acoustics. This enabled worshipers to identify spiritually with the text and music of the Mass, as desired by the Council of Trent. Although the congrega-

tion was encouraged to respond to the priest in the celebration of ritual, it was kept apart from the clergy by the separation of the nave from the **choir**. This reflected the Counter-Reformation view that in spiritual matters the lay public should experience a mystical union with the Church, while preserving the hierarchical structure of the Church.

Vignola's design for the **façade** of the Gesù was never executed because of his death in 1573, but his original conception is preserved in an engraving of the same year (1.3), which also includes a ground plan of the façade. It shows the emphasis on the center by the slight forward projection of the façade; the main door and the window above it on the second story are flanked by columns engaged with **pilasters**. The round **pediment** over the door is repeated twice—over the horizontal **cornice** and inside the crowning triangular pediment. The latter, in turn, repeats the small triangular pediment underneath the arc over the main door.

As one moves away from the center, the sides of the façade become flatter. **Columns** are replaced by rectangular pilasters, and the wall itself is slightly recessed at the ends of the central two-storied section. Creating a visual transition between the vertical sides of the upper center story and the horizontal elements at the top of the extended sides of the lower story are two curved elements. The upper edges of the façade at both levels are crowned with statues of saints and angels, which, like the architectural motion of the surface, create a unified, animated whole.

The present façade of the Gesù (1.5) is the work of Giacomo della Porta (c. 1537–1602),