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The Rococo

The Rococo was really a continuation in a lighter, more graceful, vein of tendencies already established in the Baroque. Like the Baroque it was open, dynamic, and convoluted. Beyond that, it was asymmetrical and somewhat sketchy. Usually aristocratic in its patronage and realistic in appearance, the Rococo differed from the Baroque in that it was almost always decorative in effect.

We often describe the Baroque as exuberant. In the Rococo that exuberance becomes self-conscious; it develops a sense of humor and turns into wit. Now, wit relies on reason, a sense of proportion that tells us when means and ends are ridiculously out of touch. For reasonable people Baroque rhetoric and grandiosity could be enjoyed only if taken with a grain of salt. These people were too urbane and civilized to enjoy a propagandistic art; it was important to be charming rather than serious. So Baroque style became playful: it evolved into a game; it became the Rococo.

The term "Rococo" derives from *rocaille*, the French word for a decorative arrangement of rocks and seashells, plants and vines. These natural forms were copied literally in eighteenth century ornament. Their basic lines and rhythms were carried into figurative art, landscape painting, and decoration; we sense their influence in hairstyles, draperies, clouds, tree branches, and architectural designs. The Rococo spiral replaced the Baroque oval, which had replaced the Renaissance circle. Rococo decoration was an escape from fixed centers, symmetrical outlines, and dark, heavy forms.

Architecturally speaking, the Rococo had no particular meaning: it was mainly a style of ornament and interior decoration. Nevertheless, Rococo spaces have a distinctive look. Most obvious is the heavy reliance on painted ornament as opposed to architectural relief and deeply carved effects. There is a certain amount of carved wood framing, but it is kept fairly flat and delicate. Color harmonies based on gold and white, or pink, blue, green, and white, are used to generate the sunny, light-hearted feeling which is the chief aim of Rococo decoration. We should remember that the Rococo was a style that aimed to please rather than instruct. Rococo scrolls, rosettes, and acanthus leaves were beautifully executed but were not meant to be taken seriously as expressive form.



In the eighteenth century, furniture became a major concern of the middle and upper classes. Armies of servants were required to care for a world of mirrors, chairs, settees, desks, commodes, and armoires. They created a new occupation: dusting and polishing. The Rococo also made generous use of mirrors framed with stylized botanical forms covered with gold leaf. These mirrors and their reflections created a world of bouncing light and playful space. Eventually, as in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, the mirror transcended decorative usage: It turned into a device for generating dazzling illusions—so dazzling that large paintings were almost superfluous. The mirror was the perfect symbol of the Rococo spirit: it expressed the ideals of an essentially narcissistic culture, a culture that enjoyed looking at itself.

4-58. JULES HARDOUIN-MANSART and CHARLES LE BRUN. Hall of Mirrors, Palace of Versailles. c. 1680. One side of this long hall is covered with tall mirrors; the other side consists of windows facing the immense park pictured in Patel's *Versailles*. Thus, the king and his courtiers could move back and forth in a sumptuously decorated tunnel poised between two kinds of illusion—one of nature permanently subordinated to the sovereign's will; the other of themselves splendidly and endlessly repeated in glass.

It almost seems as if French painting has become a branch of interior decoration. Architecture, on the other hand, is taken very seriously. Nevertheless, the French Rococo produced three painters of genius: **Jean-Antoine Watteau**, **Francois Boucher**, and **Jean-Honore Fragonard**. They converted decorative painting into a type of visual music which, if one listened carefully, disclosed several of the melodies that would be sung by the voices of modernism.

4-59. ANTOINE WATTEAU. A Pilgrimage to Cythera (detail). 1717. Oil on canvas. The Louvre, Paris This type of picture was called a *fetes galante*, a painting in which real or fictitious persons—beautifully dressed and coiffured—go on a picnic to a romantic island or to a well-manicured park. It differs from a Rubensian frolic in that all the people are clothed, their deportment is proper and courteous, and there is more talk about love than action. From the soft haze in which these figures appear, we can tell that Watteau was a Rubeniste, a devotee of color rather than line (like the Poussinistes), but his people are decidedly slimmer and more elegant than those of Rubens. They also exhibit very unRubensian emotions like sweetness, wistfulness, and sadness about the transience of love. Unlike the Baroque, the Rococo tries to capture the nuances of feelings and form.



Watteau (1684-1721) was the Rococo poet of bittersweet romance. If we compare his *fetes galantes*, or garden parties, with Rubens' gardens of love, it is clear that love has undergone a profound transformation. For one thing, Watteau prefers clothed figures. His pictures show a great deal of silk and crinoline but not much flesh. Nevertheless, a considerable amount of erotic thinking goes on. Watteau does not pretend, like Rubens, that his aristocrats are Greek gods and goddesses at play; instead they are beautifully dressed, contemporary ladies and gentlemen strolling and chatting in natural settings that resemble painted theatrical sets. Rubens' gardens were more natural; they showed few signs of human cultivation. His men were more "natural," too; they grabbed at women. Watteau's men gain their objectives through conversation. Everyone flirts and someone makes an occasional pass. But we may be sure that every embrace follows an invitation—spoken or implied by gesture. Just as nature has been subdued in the carefully manicured gardens of Versailles, so also have the natural passions been tamed. In Watteau, love has become a game rather than a war between the sexes.



Compared to Watteau, Francois Boucher (1703-70) is more openly erotic. For one thing, he usually paints nudes, whereas Watteau's people are always fashionably overdressed. Boucher can execute realistic portraits, landscapes, and genre scenes, but his mythological allegories represent his most distinctive contribution to eighteenth century painting. He invented the girl-goddess, the sex symbol that captured the French imagination from Fragonard to Renoir and that eventually passed into the debased currency of our "pop" culture.

Boucher was really a superior sort of decorator. His main purpose was to use dimpled cheeks, fluttering draperies, pale blue skies, white foam, and green waves to create theater of sweet sensuality. Boucher represented love as healthy, innocent fun; he converted the bedroom into a playground. He was perhaps the first European painter to advance the idea that sex has nothing to do with sin or guilt. Curiously, men are almost totally absent from his pictures. Perhaps they symbolized the wrong principle: force, harshness, brutality.

Boucher, *Cupid a Captive*, 1754.

A student of Boucher, **Jean-Honore Fragonard**, 1732-1806 carried on his master's dedication to idle love but with a style that owed more to Rubens and Tiepolo. Fragonard had a very fast brush. He could sketch rapidly with paint, giving tree trunks, leaves, drapery, and women's bodies a loose but convincing definition of form; he created a delightful marriage of human bodies and natural vegetation. Like Boucher, he used lush landscape elements (billowing clouds, twisted tree limbs, and waterfalls of foliage) to suggest a musical accompaniment to the accidental meeting of lovers in parks and gardens. The scenes are painted with such a fresh touch that we can think of Fragonard as a kind godfather of Impressionism. Surely he was Renoir's idol although Renoir never caught on to Fragonard's light, airy drawing.

4-60. JEAN-HONORE FRAGONARD. *The Meeting (also called The Surprise)*. 1171-73. Oil on canvas, 12'5" x 8'. The Frick Collection, New York Another essay on the subject of aristocratic flirtation. This painting was one of a series, called *The Progress of Love*, which was made to decorate the apartment of Madame du Barry, the mistress of Louis XV. She didn't like it. Other titles by Fragonard are *The Stolen Kiss* and *Cupid Stealing a Nightgown*.



4-61. GIOVANNI BATTISTA TIEPOLO. *Apollo Conducting Beatrice of Burgundy to Frederick Barbarossa*. 1751-52. Ceiling fresco. Kaisersaal, Episcopal Palace, Wurzburg. In Tiepolo, Venetian painting and the Rococo style reached their light, airy culmination. They might lack substance, yet extraordinary skill was required to create such buoyant illusions, especially to unify several perspectives in a single painting. The viewer looking up at an oval ceiling by Tiepolo could even experience a feeling of vertigo, a sense of being swept up into the heavens with those airborne gods, goddesses, and horses.

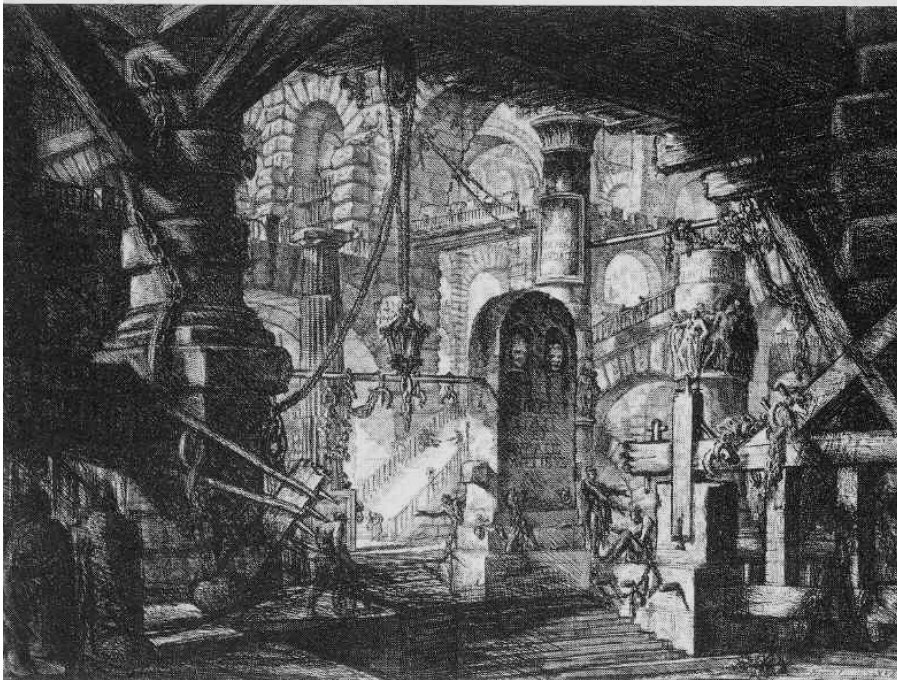
Italy's outstanding exponent of the Rococo, **Giovanni Battista Tiepolo** (1696-1770), was perhaps the supreme fresco painter of the eighteenth century, and a master of ceiling illusionism. His work represents the fulfillment of all the vivacious, decorative tendencies in the Venetian tradition. Tiepolo's technique was the logical extension of Titian's fascination with rich fabrics and Tintoretto's fluid brushwork. Compared to Boucher, he relied on the dynamics of the human figure more than ornamental shrubs and garden furniture. Tiepolo could paint some very gaseous cloud effects, but he was mainly a figurative designer. His people remind us of singers in an opera by Mozart. Indeed, Tiepolo's saints and madonnas may have established the model of deportment that grand opera sopranos follow to this day.

So Tiepolo covered the palace ceilings of German princes and archbishops with angels and saints and heavenly vistas. At the same time, the painting of Roman ruins was developing as an important specialty in Italy. It was part of the incipient romanticism of the eighteenth century, although Poussin had been an early player of the game. It seems that as Rome's power declined, its antiquarian interests grew. In part, this was stimulated by papal sponsorship of archaeological studies and a new Vatican policy of historical preservation. In addition, tourism had become an important source of Italian income, notably in Venice, which joined Rome as a magnet for European gentlemen of poetical or scholarly interests. When it came to classical ruins, Rome was incomparable, but in Venice the Renaissance seemed to come alive. There one could see spectacles that looked as if they had been painted by Tintoretto—especially at the great Carnival which closed

the Season. Skillfully executed by **Canaletto** and **Guardi**, Venetian scenes, or *vedute*, sold by the thousands to Europe's touring gentry. What souvenirs they were!

4-62. FRANCESCO GUARDI. View of the Rialto. c. 1780. Oil on canvas, 27 x 36". National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (Widener Collection, 1942)

Impressionism has many ancestors and Guardi is one of them. Perhaps living close to the water stimulates the development of a painterly technique that can capture shimmering reflections and the effects of changeable light conditions. Like the Impressionists a century later, Guardi made good use of thick-and-thin paint, short flickering brush strokes, and something that resembles broken color. He also studied the quality of light more than the actual structure of buildings and bridges.



4-63. GIOVANNI BATTISTA PIRANESI. The Prisons. See fig. 10-32

impress the spectator by their size and command of all the dimensions of space. Piranesi's play with perspective generates a completely credible world; it seems we can wander endlessly in its geometric innards. Yet, those prisons are terrible, surrealistic dreams; they look like infernal man-traps created by the scientific imagination. Perhaps the eighteenth century had begun to wonder about the implications of Descartes' pure rationalism. Even if his geometry and his space coordinates provided a true picture of the universe, was it possible for that universe to turn into a gigantic prison?

There was, however, a somber sort of Rococo. We see it in the engravings of Giovanni Battista Piranesi (see p. 431), a master of spatial illusions. Piranesi (1720-78) had been trained as an architect and was a serious student of classical archaeology. He employed every device of perspective, lighting, and scale to create a highly theatrical idea of antiquity. Using a low angle of vision and the Baroque device of placing small figures against huge architectural forms, he produced mystery and excitement in the same places where Poussin had seen pure reason and majestic calm. Oddly enough, Piranesi's ruins are more archaeologically correct.

But Piranesi's etchings go beyond the romantic evocation of antiquity; they also express a late Baroque ambivalence about classicism. This is clear in his series of imaginary Roman prisons, or *carceri*. Huge masonry machines that never existed, they