

Church Architecture Styles: Baroque



Fig. 1 Architecture, painting, sculpture, and decoration all work together in the Baroque style to create a unified emotional expression meant to impress.

Two events stimulated the rise of the Baroque style of church architecture, the Protestant Reformation (1517-1648) and the Catholic Council of Trent (1545-1563). There were other influences as well but we will limit our discussion to these two in this post.¹

The Protestant Reformation (1517-1648) involved an attack on the pope and the papacy that threatened the people's faith in the authority of the Church. It began, more or less in earnest, when Martin Luther protested the sale of indulgences. The money collected from the sale was helping to fund, in part, the building of the new Saint Peter's Basilica, in Rome. The issue of indulgences grew into a much wider conflict over several doctrines including a debate over the legitimacy of the papacy, itself.

Other Protestant reformers generally supported Luther's ideas but some staked out theological positions more radical than Luther's. Many of the outward signs of the Catholic Church (liturgical art and rituals) were rejected by several Protestant sects. Catholic liturgical traditions were jettisoned not only for theological reasons but also in reaction to the morally questionable and lavish lifestyle of the Catholic hierarchy. Art, imagery, and rich decoration, to varying degrees, were rejected by Protestants as looking "too Catholic".

A minimalist attitude toward worship was adopted by some Protestants, centering church services almost entirely on preaching. Some mostly Protestant regions saw outbreaks of destructive iconoclasm: Catholic images defaced, pulled down or otherwise destroyed. Even Martin Luther was appalled and expressed strong disapproval.



Fig. 2 (L) Many Protestants built churches which emphasized the pulpit and played down traditional Catholic imagery and decoration. This is a Protestant Calvinist "Temple" in Lyon, France called the "Paradise". Fig. 3 (R) Protestant iconoclasts destroying Catholic imagery.

The response of the Catholic Church to the Protestant Reformation came through the Council of Trent. Its strategy is known as the Catholic Counter Reformation. Two aspects of the strategy concern us here: (1) enlisting art to bolster the authoritative image of the Catholic Church and, (2) deploying the Jesuits to reaffirm the traditional teachings of the Church. Both were highly successful.



Fig. 4 Often the Baroque church building seems open to the heavens.

In the Counter Reformation popes commissioned splendid churches meant to wow the faithful and communicate a sense of legitimacy, power and authority. Stunning architectural and decorative affects presented the doctrines and teachings of the Catholic Church in emotionally engaging ways which aroused a positive internal response in the faithful, much like a dramatic play does.

Baroque churches, then, represent the "architecture of rhetorical expression and persuasion."² Rhetorical devices such as "emotionalism, provocation, and alienation were designed to provide the viewer with a sense of immediate experience."³ Rhetorical rules or principles were followed in Baroque art "to delight and move" people as much as in a sermon.

In the case of the art of the new Baroque churches it was/is hard to tell where earth leaves off and heaven begins. Architects, sculptors, stucco artists, and painters join heaven to earth in amazing feats of visual illusion. The interiors of the Baroque churches often seem to be open to the heavens. Saints, angels and clouds swirl ever upward escaping painting frames and crossing over the building's architectural divisions. There seems to be no ceiling in many Baroque churches; no division, no gulf exists between earth and heaven. In terms of design, swirling curved lines and forms predominate creating a sense of dramatic movement.

Everything the Church had always held theologically got a restatement in the emotionally persuasive Baroque style.

Along with the emotional strategy of the Counter Reformation was an intellectual one. The Jesuits –the popes' highly intelligent and trained corps of preachers—were sent out to teach, attacking Protestant theological positions and advancing Catholic ones. Church architecture adapted to the needs of the preachers. The typical basilica church ground plan of a nave with two side aisles gave way to a plan more like a hall or theater that enhanced the ability of the preacher to be seen and heard. Often, elliptical plans were used in the construction of new churches perhaps influenced by the 17th century discovery of an apparent divine ordering in the elliptical orbiting of planets.



Fig. 5 (L) Churches often had elliptical or rounded plans more like halls or theaters, to better facilitate preaching. Fig. 6 (R) Choir areas between the altar and congregation were eliminated in new plans with only a communion rail separating the congregation from the chancel.

In addition, liturgical reforms, in response to Protestant criticism, addressed the need for an increased participation of the faithful in the Mass. Choir screens that obstructed the congregation's view of the altar were ordered removed. The choirs themselves in new churches were removed to the rear of the church and situated in a balcony so that the altar could be adjacent to the nave without any separation other than a communion rail.⁵



All aspects of a Baroque style church work together to create a unified expression of grandeur. Fig. 7 (L) Churches in Germany and Bavaria often have a more frilly, fanciful look. Fig 8 (R) Classical orders often play a more obvious role in Italian and French Baroque.



The facades of Baroque churches are treated like sculpture and appear more three dimensional than the flatter Renaissance style. Fig. 9 (L) Contrasting curved lines and forms often animate a facade. Niches with sculptures are common and cornices can be large, casting a dark shadow underneath. The curves and shadows create drama. Fig. 10 (R) Pediments are often broken by advancing and receding sections. Sometimes the center of a pediment is missing as is the one over the doorway, above. Once again the intention is drama and excitement.



Fig. 11 Here we can see Corinthian columns used not so much to fulfill some important structural purpose, which they do, but rather to dramatically frame the chancel and altar --looking something like a stage set.

The heavy overhanging cornices and use of multiple columns are typical of Baroque. Italian Baroque employs more classical architectural forms (columns, arches, domes, coffered vaults, etc.) than those in other countries.

There were a few Protestant and other non-Catholic churches built in the Baroque style. Mostly, however, it was/is considered a Catholic style.⁶ The Baroque reveals a sensual delight in the physical world and is a uniquely Catholic attitude in that Catholicism understands the created world as essentially good and capable of acting sacramentally --predisposing the faithful to receive divine grace.

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¹ One of the great cultural developments of the Baroque period was Opera. There are obvious comparisons between Opera and Baroque church art in such things as staging and rich vestments. Masters such as Mozart and Beethoven

composed elaborate Masses for orchestra and choirs. The congregation would usually be seated to listen to, for example, the Gloria and Credo or the liturgical action would pause to wait for the singing of a Kyrie, or Sanctus.

² McNamara, Dennis R., *How to Read Churches: A Crash Course in Ecclesiastical Architecture*, (New York, Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2011) p 42

³ Toman, Rolf ed., *Baroque Architecture, Sculpture, Painting*, (China, Ullmann & Konemann, 2004) p. 10

⁴ Toman 10

⁵ Chancel railings or screens had always been a part of most churches but it was during the Baroque period that they were apparently transformed into long communion tables (railings). The faithful approached the altar and knelt along the railing to receive communion. There is evidence that (Bishop) Saint Charles Borromeo may have been the first to order, in Milan, that churches be equipped with a table style chancel railing at which the faithful may kneel.

⁶ The Baroque style was not limited to use by the Church but was also adopted by monarchical and absolutist governments to enhance the appearance of secular power and authority.

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Document=8727. "Le Paradis" a Calvinist Temple, 1564 **Fig. 3** edited: Dirk van Delen (circa 1604/1605–1671) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. The organised destruction of Catholic images, or Beeldenstorm, swept through Netherlands churches in 1566. **Fig. 4** edited: By Tango7174 (Own work) [GFDL (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>) or CC BY-SA 4.0-3.0-2.5-2.0-1.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0-3.0-2.5-2.0-1.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons. Triumph of the Name of Jesus . Curch of the Gesus in Rome **Fig. 5** edited: Francesco Borromini [CC BY-SA 3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>) or GFDL (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>)], via Wikimedia Commons: Floor plan the Church of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane **Fig. 6** "Southern Orders" blog: <http://southernorderspage.blogspot.com/2012/07/receiving-holy-communion-at-dining.html> **Fig. 7** Bernard Dick **Fig.8** <http://udu.ff.cuni.cz/soubory/galerie/baroko%20italie/slides/045b%20Bra,%20S%20Chiara,%20Bernardo%20Vittone,%201742.jpg>. **Fig. 9** Chiesa di San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, Facciata di Francesco Borromini, Roma, 1638-67, 9/3/2007 by Council. **Fig. 10** By user:Lalupa (Own work) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. Santa Maria in Campitelli, Rome **Fig. 11** By SteO153 (Own work) [GFDL (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>), CC-BY-SA-3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>) or CC BY-SA 2.5-2.0-1.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5-2.0-1.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons. Santa Maria in Campitelli.