

Ceiling Frescoes

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of ceiling frescoes. By the end of this lesson, you'll be able to identify and define today's key terms, describe the use of trompe l'oeil and perspective in 16th- and 17th-century ceiling frescoes, and identify examples of this type of artwork. This will be accomplished through the exploration of:

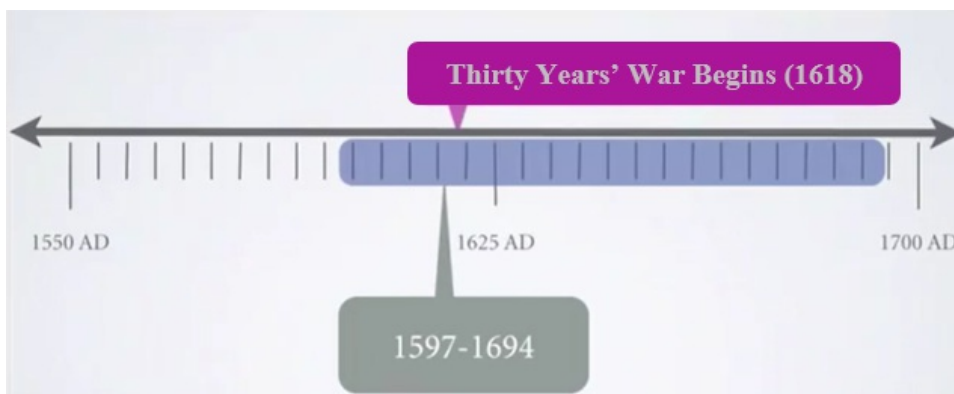


BIG IDEA

The Counter-Reformation was very influential on the development of this highly dramatic and persuasive religious imagery.

1. Period and Location: Ceiling Frescoes

The frescoes that you will be looking at today date from between 1597 to 1694, covering almost 100 years, and focus geographically on Italy.



2. Ceiling Frescoes: Examples

Ceiling frescoes are an interesting subcategory of work. They aren't any different than regular frescoes, at least in terms of how they're made. Stylistically, however, artists use the unique perspective offered by ceiling frescoes in truly innovative ways, creating a sense of awe and wonder in the buildings where these paintings reside.

2a. Annibale Carracci

Annibale Carracci originated from Rome. His work, titled “The Loves of the Gods,” was a series of frescoes painted on the ceiling and upper walls of the Palazzo Farnese in Rome. As the name indicates, the fresco depicts images from the Greek and Roman mythology of gods and the women they loved.



The Loves of the Gods by Annibale Carracci

1597

Fresco

The fresco features mythological couples such as Perseus and Andromeda. Below, Perseus can be seen on Pegasus, about to turn the Kraken to stone with Medusa's severed head.



Another featured couple is Jupiter and Juno, shown below.



A final example is the image of the triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne.



Carracci's style recalls Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescoes, as well as the colors of Titian. His use of **illusionism**—in particular the painted frames that set the images apart from each other—is indicative of a stylistic element that was pervasive in the ceiling frescoes of the 17th century.



TERM TO KNOW

Illusionism

The use of perspective in painting to create the impression of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface; or a philosophy that promotes the material world as an illusion.

2b. Guido Reni

Guido Reni trained in the same Bologna art academy as Carracci. In a fashion similar to his contemporary's work, Guido's "Aurora" is surrounded by a very convincing, albeit painted, frame. It depicts Aurora leading Dawn (in the chariot) and his entourage across the sky, bringing forth a new day.



Aurora by Guido Reni

1614

Fresco

Here are closeups of both Dawn and his entourage:



This artist shows influence from classical Roman triumphal processions, as well as from Renaissance masters, such as Raphael, in his depiction of forms.

2c. Pietro da Cortona

No stranger to elaborate depictions glorifying his family, Pope Urban VIII commissioned the ceiling fresco seen below by the artist Pietro da Cortona as a way of commemorating his family and ensuring their legacy in the hearts and minds of the people. It's an amazing example of the “as seen from below” technique in which the ceiling appears to be blown through the roof, revealing Divine Providence with the halo, directing Immortality, who is placing a crown of stars that symbolize eternal life on the Barberini family.



Triumph of the Barberini by Pietro da Cortona

1633-1639

Fresco

Here is a closer visual of Divine Providence:



The personifications of hope, charity, and faith are holding a wreath that encircles three bees, the symbol of the Barberini family, in the center. This symbol can also be seen on the St. Peter's baldacchino from Bernini—also commissioned by Pope Urban VIII.



TERM TO KNOW

“As Seen From Below”

A specific approach used in painting Italian ceiling frescoes that depicts an illusionistic scene taking place above the viewer.

2d. Giovanni Battista Gaulli

Paintings such as the ceiling fresco “Triumph in the Name of Jesus,” by Giovanni Battista Gaulli, are considered extremely important by the Catholic Church. Whereas the Protestant Church, in many cases, prohibited the use of artwork in churches, the Catholic Church—via the influence of the **Counter-Reformation**—saw these highly dramatic works of art as vital forms of persuasive religious imagery, examples that would encourage faith and religious conversion.

Just as with Cortona’s fresco, the ceiling appears to be blown through the roof, revealing the golden light of heaven shining down.



Triumph in the Name of Jesus by Giovanni Battista Gaulli

1674-1679

Fresco

The artistry exhibited is truly remarkable. The painting is so well integrated with the architecture that it's almost impossible to tell what's real and what's painted. It is an excellent example of **trompe l'oeil**.



Christ is represented by the monogram “IHS” beneath a cross, but it is almost invisible due to the backdrop of blinding light from heaven, which contrasts with the dark shadow of sinners falling back to Earth.





Counter-Reformation

Also called the Catholic Revival or Reformation, it was a response to the Protestant Reformation, and lasted from the Council of Trent to the end of the Thirty Years' War.

Trompe l'oeil

An artistic technique that creates an optical illusion, usually of a three-dimensional space on a flat surface.

2e. Andrea Pozzo

One of the finest examples of trompe l'oeil is the ceiling fresco "Glorification of St. Ignatius," painted by Jesuit monk, Andrea Pozzo.



Glorification of St. Ignatius by Andrea Pozzo

1685-1694

Fresco

Pozzo extends the architecture of the church through painting, creating the impression of tremendous verticality that opens upward towards heaven, in the figure of Christ with St. Ignatius rising toward his savior.



Again, it's almost impossible to tell where the real architecture ends and the painting begins, creating a truly awe-inspiring sensation and tremendously spiritual moment for the pious observer below.



Here's another view of the architecture extending and creating that sense of verticality:



SUMMARY

Today you learned about **ceiling frescoes**. You learned how to identify and define today's key terms, as well as describe the use of trompe l'oeil and perspective in 16th- and 17th-century ceiling frescoes. Through the exploration of **examples of ceiling frescoes** by the artists **Annibale Carracci**, **Guido Reni**, **Pietro da Cortona**, **Giovanni Battista Gaulli**, and **Andrea Pozzo**, you learned how to identify examples of this type of artwork. It's important to note that the Catholic Church, via the influence of the Counter-Reformation, saw these highly dramatic works of art as vital forms of persuasive religious imagery.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Ian McConnell.



TERMS TO KNOW

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