

Italian Baroque Art

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers Italian Baroque art. By the end of this lesson, you'll be able to identify and define today's key terms, explain the influence of the Counter-Reformation on the art of the Baroque, and describe the difference between the Baroque and Renaissance styles by comparing Bernini's and Michelangelo's Davids. This will be accomplished through the exploration of:

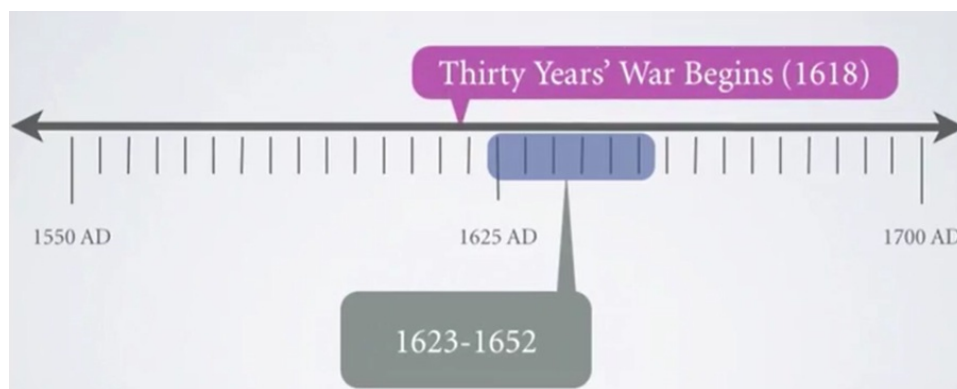


BIG IDEA

The Baroque is a style of art and architecture characterized by grand scale, movement, and dramatic effects.

1. Period and Location: Italian Baroque

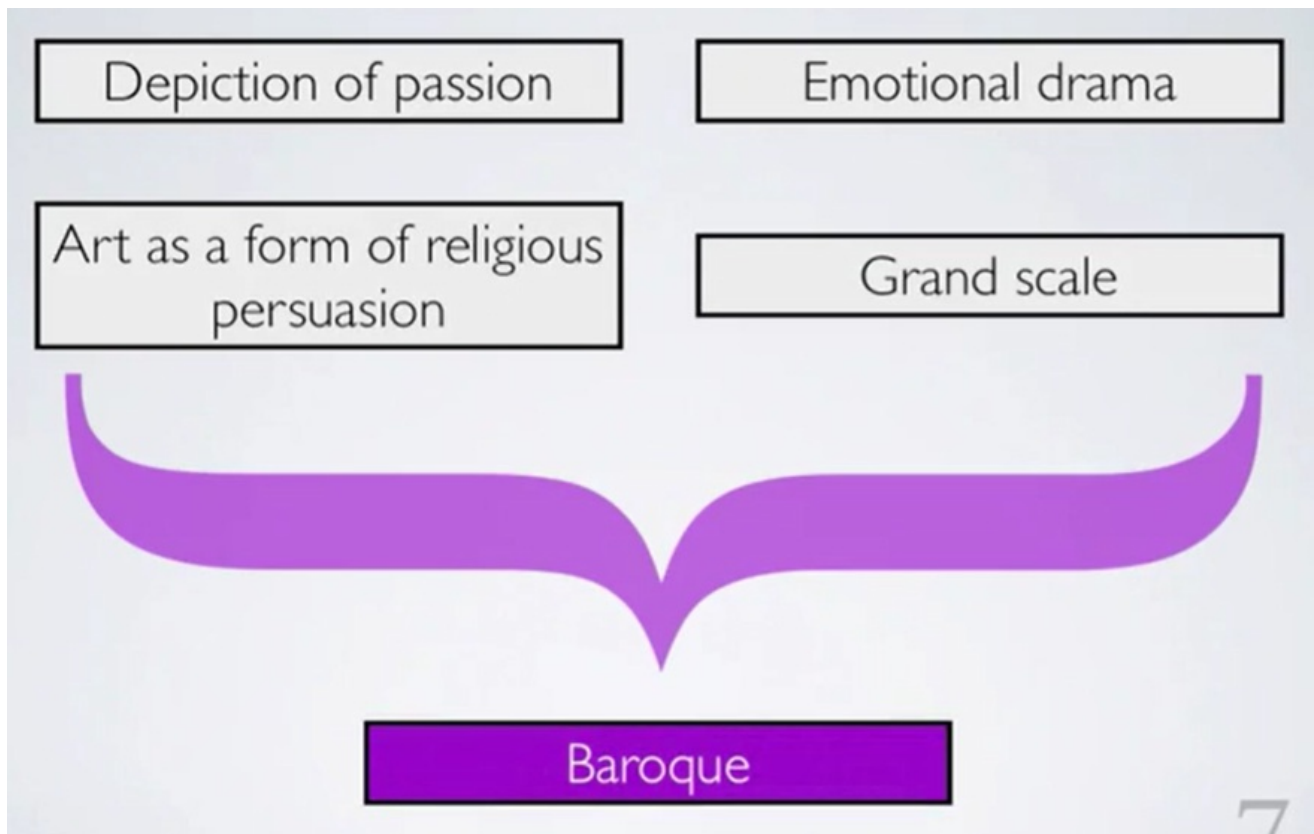
The artwork that you will be looking at today dates from 1623 to 1652. The Thirty Years' War, which began in 1618, is noted on the timeline as a reference point. The artist you will be learning about today hails from Naples, Italy.



2. Italian Baroque Art: Characteristics and Historical Context

The Baroque refers to a style of art and architecture that followed Mannerism and the Renaissance in Italy, but extended beyond the Italian borders. Whereas Renaissance art could be described as rational and scientific, the Baroque was passionate, and depicted scenes filled with emotional drama. The many examples of **Renaissance** art—such as Michelangelo's "David"—show a constrained emotion, suggesting impending

action. **Baroque** art, by contrast, shows overt emotion and plenty of action or dynamism.



Historically speaking, Catholic and Protestant relations at this time were tempestuous, and came to a head with the onset of the Thirty Years' War. This was just over 100 years after Martin Luther famously nailed his theses on the door of a Wittenberg church, marking the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.

At the Council of Trent, where Catholic leaders met and essentially called for a response to the Protestant Reformation, the Church's use of artwork was evaluated and deemed to serve an important persuasive function within the Church. The Catholic response to the Protestant Reformation was the Counter-Reformation.



THINK ABOUT IT

Why do you think there would be noticeable differences in the artwork produced in Catholic countries versus Protestant ones? The Council of Trent's decision that the Church's use of artwork served this important persuasive function is a complete departure from the Protestant Reformation's prohibition on the use of art within the Church.



TERMS TO KNOW

Renaissance

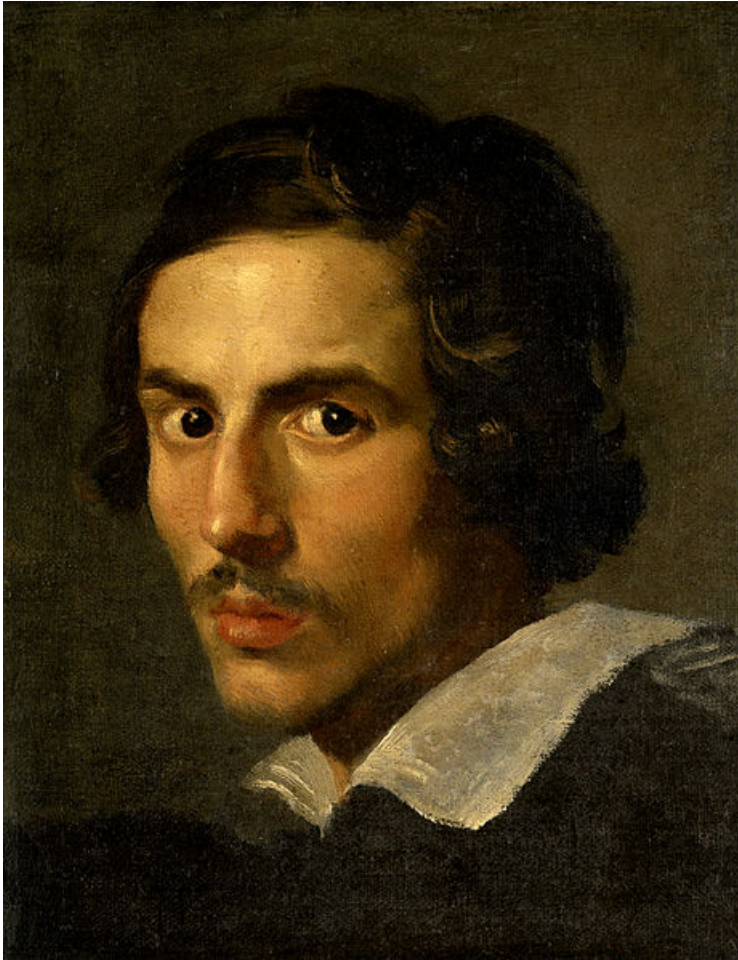
A cultural movement marking a time of accelerated activity and learning expressed by art and literature in Europe during the 14th to 17th centuries.

Baroque

A style of architecture and art characterized by grand scale, movement, and dramatic effects.

3. Bernini and His Artwork

Gian Lorenzo Bernini, or simply Bernini, was an incredibly talented artist of the Baroque era, known primarily for his skills as a sculptor, but also immensely talented in painting and architecture. His self-portrait is shown below. Bernini was commissioned by the Catholic Church to create a number of works of art.



Self-portrait by Gian Lorenzo Bernini

1623

Oil on canvas

Naples, Italy

3a. “David”

The theme of David and Goliath has been a popular one; it may seem that almost every artist of note created his own interpretation of that biblical story. Bernini was no exception. His masterpiece is a brilliant example that embodies all of the elements of the Baroque style, and serves as an excellent contrast to the Davids that preceded it during the Renaissance.

Bernini depicts the hero winding up to launch a stone at Goliath. It’s a very dynamic scene. You feel as though you’re viewing a snapshot of the man in action. It’s an interesting contrast between the fierce determination and steady gaze of his face and head, and the sense of torsion and energy in the way the body is coiling, almost like a pitcher ready to throw a fastball in a baseball game.



David by Bernini

1623-1624

Marble

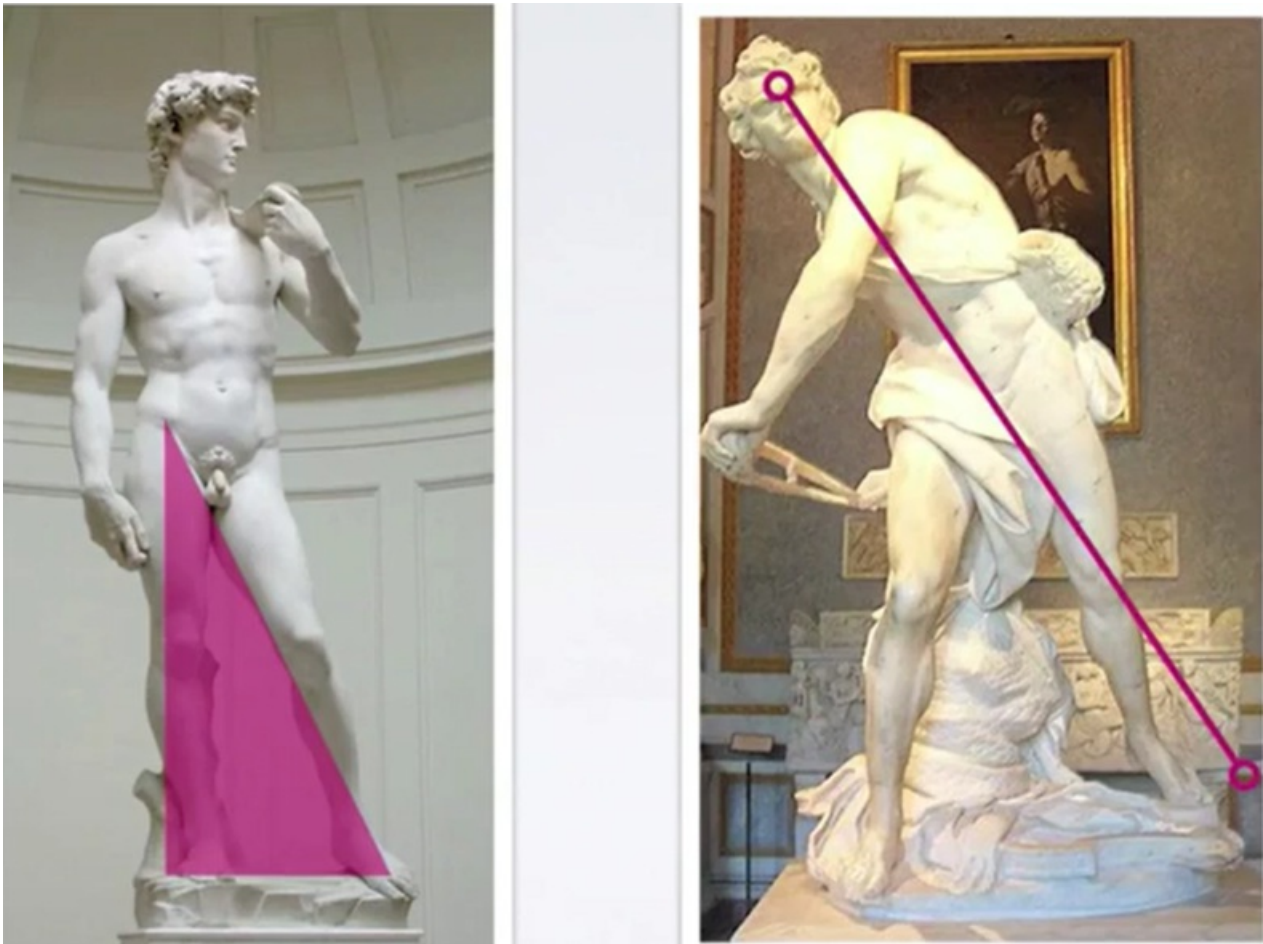
The stylistic contrast is most apparent when Bernini's "David" is compared with its Renaissance counterpart, the "David" by Michelangelo, shown below. In the same way that Michelangelo's "David" is regarded as a masterpiece of Renaissance style, Bernini's "David" is regarded as a masterpiece of the Baroque—the same story, but two very different thematic interpretations.



David by Michelangelo

Michelangelo's "David" is rather static, posed, and tranquil in his overall appearance. However, there is an intensity in his focus, which enhances the sensation of restrained emotion. Compare the two sculptures side by side, below. Even the geometry of Michelangelo's "David" is an application of the Renaissance ideal. The pyramid, or triangle, that is a hallmark of the Renaissance style, can be seen in his contrapposto-style pose and reinforces this feeling of stability and calm.

Bernini, in the Baroque fashion, coils his "David" around a sharp diagonal, which serves to create a sense of movement and tension. This is further enhanced by the way the drapery around "David" appears to shift and slip away from his body, reminiscent of examples of Hellenistic sculpture from Greece that use a similar technique.



While Michelangelo's use of contrapposto creates stability, Bernini's "David" breaks free of it. If Michelangelo's "David" is the calm before the storm, Bernini's "David" is clearly the storm itself.

3b. "Ecstasy of St. Teresa"

The Baroque embodies emotion, drama, and dynamism. Bernini's sculpture depicting St. Teresa in ecstasy, from the Cornaro Chapel at the Church of Santa Maria Della Vittoria in Rome, clearly articulates the Catholic Church's view that depictions of intense spiritual experiences were important devotional and persuasive functions of artwork.



Ecstasy of St. Teresa by Bernini

1647-1652

Marble

According to the story, St. Teresa's conversion took place during a bout of intense visions that followed the death of her father, in which she felt a pain in her heart that she attributed to a fire-tipped arrow repeatedly thrust in her by an angel. The experience could be described as delightfully agonizing, and Bernini depicts these conflicting sensations brilliantly. Again, he uses a sharp diagonal as his primary axis for the swooning saint, whose clothes appear to billow upwards as she falls in ecstasy into a cloud.



The angel appears to be at the apex of her arrow-thrusting motion, about to lunge forward with her golden arrow and pierce the heart of Teresa again. It's through powerful visualizations such as this that the Catholic Church felt a connection could be made between the devout on earth and the heavenly realm that transcended it.





SUMMARY

Today you learned about **Italian Baroque art**. You learned how to identify and define today's key terms, and describe the **historical context of Italian Baroque**, especially the influence of the Counter-Reformation on the art of the Baroque. You also learned how to describe the stylistic **characteristics of the Baroque**. Lastly, you explored the work of the artist **Bernini**—including his “**David**” and “**Ecstasy of St. Teresa**”—and learned how to describe the difference between the Baroque and Renaissance styles by comparing Bernini's and Michelangelo's Davids.

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



TERMS TO KNOW

Baroque

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Renaissance

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