

SPECIAL FEATURES

BENITO PELEGRIN : THE BAROQUE, BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

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The troubled end of a century

The Baroque is a movement which is generally considered to have begun in the last third of the sixteenth century and to have ended in the mid eighteenth covering the period between classicism and neo-classicism. During this period, however, the Baroque civilisation expressed itself in a multitude of different styles and forms, whether in artistic, philosophical or social terms.

To perceive the movement's relative unity, it is therefore necessary to understand that it emerged at the end of a dark, troubled century, one in which human values had gone astray and people had lost their ideological references. It was a century rife with unanimous protests against the state of a society which people dreamt of reforming, merciless disputes as to the way in which this reconversion, or conversion, should be achieved, and struggles between the supporters of the Reformation and of the Counter-Reformation, between Catholics and Protestants. Europe was in a state of crisis, torn apart by religious dissent, pulled to one side by the call of reason and to the other by the call of faith, caught between the triumphs of science and the triumphalism of theology. The continent aspired to a new order in the wake of these questions and upheavals.

The Baroque must therefore be seen as coming between the enthusiasm inspired by the great discoveries of the early Renaissance, the excitement engendered by the exploration of the globe during that period, and these religious disputes and discouragements between the humanist optimism which prevailed at the beginning of the 16th century and the human doubts that overshadowed its end. It was a movement tinged with both pessimism and enthusiasm, a period of exaltation and discovery, a bold movement but one attached to the past, a period when human beings continued their conquest of the world, their occupation of the land, when they sought to explain their mysteries of the sun, when people were curious about the earth and preoccupied with heaven, inspired by human achievements and ablaze with faith in God.

From a closed to an open world

For 2000 years Europe had lived with the reassuring idea of a closed world, a world confined to the West, between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, by the famous Pillars (today's Gibraltar), where Hercules had written *nec plus ultra*. In the 15th century the Spanish and the Portuguese proved that something lay beyond those

limits, and Charles V, on whose lands the sun was said never to set, was able to add the motto '*Plus outre*' to his coat of arms, inspired by an insane, yet noble dream of universal monarch and concord: one king, one law, one faith.

Ever further, ever higher could also have been the motto of Renaissance Europe as it set out boldly to explore the world and sought knowledge of the universe beyond.

However, with the widening of the geographical stage and the discovery of the New World, Europe was suddenly perceived as the Old World, a continent showing its age, where the evangelical ideals and the dreams of a perfect Christian society, the City of God on earth, had come to nothing.

Renaissance and Renewal

The New World needed a new human being; it was this dream which all those disappointed by the failure of Europe's ideals would take with them to the fantastic lands beyond the sea, to that 'elsewhere' where they could cultivate it and bring it to fruition.

A perfect society was perhaps not unattainable on those islands, those shores of paradise, where the 'Noble Savage' lived in the first state of innocence and had perhaps not yet been contaminated by the virus of original sin, which had corrupted the human race in a Europe punished by God for its evils and its fratricidal hatred.

The toponyms of these newly discovered lands are as much symbols of this dream of renewal as signs of national ownership: New Spain in the south, New England in the north, not forgetting New Zealand, the New Hebrides and the entire retinue: New Granada, New Cordoba, New Santiago, New Orleans, New York.

All of Europe appeared to be undergoing a renaissance, a rebirth with its old myths: the Amazons, the Sirens, the Patagonians. It seemed to be experiencing a revival in new countries with regenerative powers like those of the Fountain of Youth, which the Europeans sought in Florida, the land of eternal spring.

Across the seas the grass seemed greener, the outlook more favourable (the Cape of Good Hope). Everything seemed better, even the air (Buenos Aires). Everything was purer and truer (Vera Paz, Vera Cruz, ...). The explorers left the mark of their devout hopes and dreams on these new shores: San Francisco, San Diego, Santa Barbara, Santa Monica, Los Angeles (the hill of angels). There they found the valley of paradise (Valparaiso), before seeking to satisfy their cupidity in Argentina, La Plata (the land of silver) or Eldorado (the land of gold).

The poor and hungry of Europe, more ingenuously, also transplanted their dreams of a land of milk and honey to the lands over the ocean, a place across the seas with gingerbread or sugar-loaf mountains.

As far back as 1515, Thomas More, a fervent egalitarian and Christian, set his 'Utopia', the first book of a new genre, on a newly discovered island (Cuba), where he located the ideal society to which the reformers would aspire for centuries to come – those idealistic reformers of an outdated world, a world which they could not

change and to which they therefore hoped to give a new way of life; it was this society which the missionaries, the Franciscans and the Jesuits, would attempt to set up here below on earth, or rather on that new, distant earth.

Far-off Utopias

Scarcely one hundred years later, in the very midst of the Baroque age, Shakespeare's 'The Tempest' (1611) described a form of counter-utopia, which was probably also located on Cuba, the nearest of the distant islands. His Noble Savage had become the stupid, cruel Caliban (or cannibal), slave to the white magician Prospero, all in all the prosperous colonialist.

Authors no longer described ideal cities, but still wrote of utopias. However, these were increasingly distant, always elsewhere and ever farther away. Campanella sited his *Citta del Sole* (1602-1626) somewhere near Ceylon, and Bacon's New Atlantis (1627) lay between China and Peru'. As to paradise, since there was no trace of it here below on earth, people had to resign themselves to the idea that it must be somewhere very high above, up there in heaven.

Europe in a State of Crisis

But what had become of this faded Europe's old dreams?

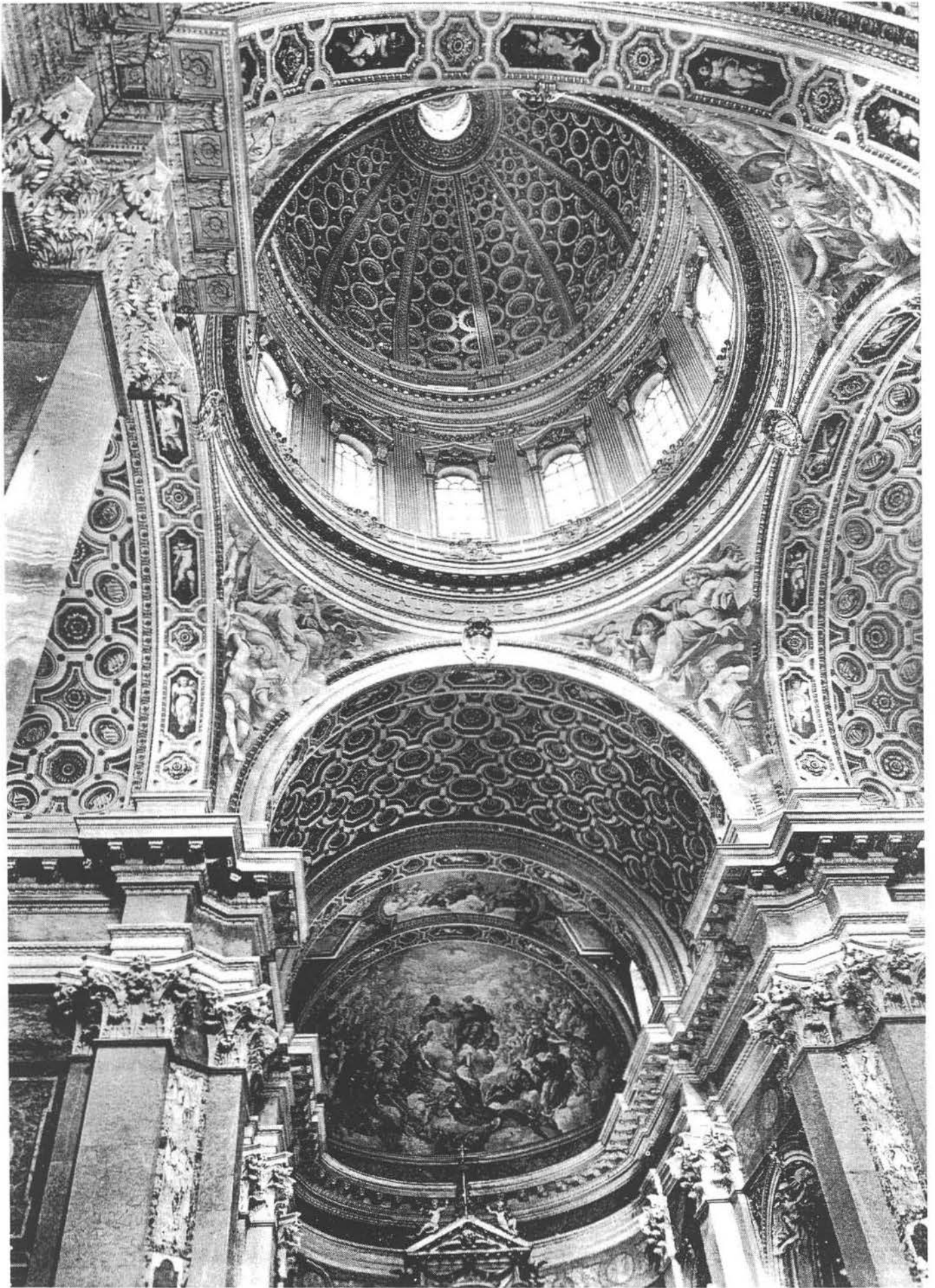
The Roman Church was no longer in Rome. The Reformation had been continuing unchecked since 1517, and for the time being was destroying more than it was building. Ten years later, 1527 saw the inconceivable sack of Rome by Charles V, the most Catholic of monarchs. The Pope no longer acknowledged his 'most Catholic son', and that son brought to his knees a Holy Father who had forfeited his rights by joining the French, the allies of the Protestants and the Turkish infidels! Europeans were killing one another in the name of a God of love.

At a time when humankind was exploring and measuring the physical world, the course it had set itself was becoming indistinct and the issues increasingly clouded in the vast confusion that reigned at the tragic end of the Renaissance.

The Circle

Copernicus, who was linked to the Papal office, overturned the reassuring, ordered concept of the universe, with the earth immobile in the centre, orbited by the sun, when he showed in 1543 that only the sun remained in place, whereas the earth revolved. But, as if to repair this anomaly in a cosmos where the earth was not the centre of all things, close to the eyes of God, Copernicus put the situation right by describing the Platonic harmony of the planets' circular orbits around the sun. His approach was that of a man of the Renaissance fascinated by circular geometry, like Raphael or Durer, and of someone seeking to prove the universe' ideal perfection, a reflection of the perfection of its creator.

Along with the circle, the square and the equilateral triangle were the 'perfect' figures on which those steeped in the classicism of the Renaissance based their world of everlasting, mathematical certainties.



Rosato Rosati: S. Carlo ai Catinari, Rome

The Ellipse

However, early in the century of the Baroque, Kepler discovered to his horror that the planets did not move in harmonious circles around the sun, but that their orbits were elliptical. Not only did the earth turn on itself, like someone possessed, but its movement described an ellipse, a geometrical aberration in that it was a figure without a centre.

Like the circle during the Renaissance, the ellipse, the spiral, the 'serpentinata' line and all kinds of unstable forms were to become the insignia of Baroque painting, sculpture and architecture, in a jumble of curving lines, of convex and concave shapes, which are to geometry what discord is to harmony, what an enigma is to common sense, the metaphor to the concept, a tortured, jarring sentence to plain, simple prose.

Kepler's 'Astronomia nova' (1609) would seem to find an echo in Caccini's 'Musiche nuove' (1600), Monteverdi's 'Seconda prattica' (1607) and Lope de Vega's 'Arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo' (1609), as signs of a will to break away from the old order or of a need for reform.

Two Infinities

Moreover, the universe was far more vast than either Copernicus or Kepler had imagined. With his telescope, Galileo not only discovered other planets, but began to comprehend the previously inconceivable size of the universe, while Cavalieri, his pupil, invented infinitesimal calculus. The Dutch too revealed a form of infinity, using their microscope to discover the infinitely small world of nature. People living at the time of the Baroque were overcome by the frightening lure of the infinite reaches of space above their heads and the minuteness of the infinitesimal beings beneath their feet. Slowly, human minds began to accept the incredible idea of the infinite, although Giordano Bruno had been burnt at the stake in 1600 for having dared to speak of it.

Geography, which was revealing the unimaginable distances that existed on earth, and the new science of cosmology, which was pushing back the hitherto accepted bounds of the universe, threw into upheaval the accepted, harmonious view of the cosmos, with the earth in its proper place at the very centre, alone in the eyes of God.

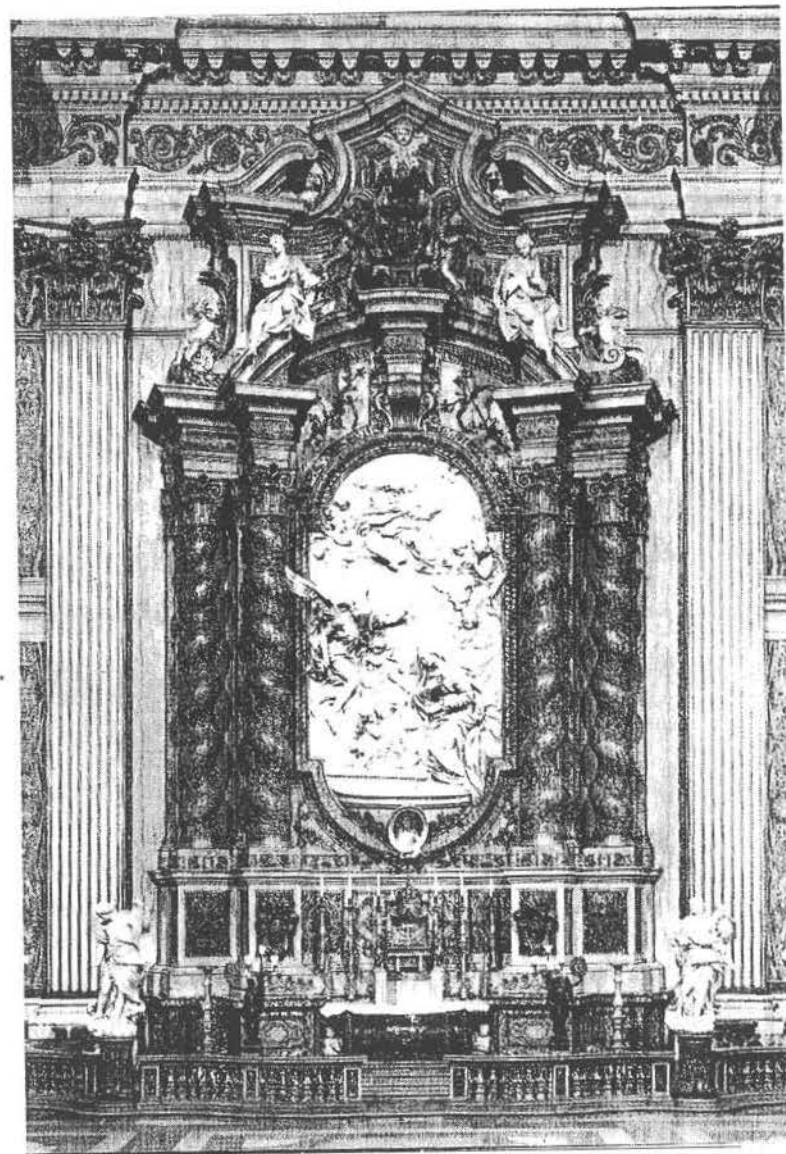
The result was that God was driven further away into the vastness of space, with its infinity of other possible worlds, the God that people had thought so close and attentive to their unique world, God the infinite being who had become such an esteric idea that only the learned could explain it, a God fading away into infinite space, where for some people He would be lost forever.

The Man-God or Man and God

The Protestants, those who had been reformed, would leave man standing alone, face to face with God without any mediator, thereby emphasising the complete



Romano Carapecchia: St. James Church, Valletta



Altar of St. John Berchmans, Rome

dissimilarity between the two and showing a tragic awareness of the gulf which separated the creature of sin from his unknowable, perfect creator.

From the Roman Church's point of view, only the angels could cross that fearsome gulf as they wished, descending to earth as guardians or flying high above in the heavens around the Father. But man, who at the outset was a divine being and who had been imprisoned in the material world by the original sin, was an angel in his soul and a beast in his corrupt body. For his sake the terrible frontier between the microcosm and the macrocosm must be bridged.

The Catholics reacted with the Counter-Reformation, frantically filling the unbearable void, the heavens that had suddenly become too vast, with ladders and steps, with a hierarchy of intermediaries, of intercessors between heaven and earth: Christ, the Virgin Mary, the saints, the blessed, the martyrs, the mystics, the Pope, the bishops, the priest, the entire Church built stone on stone, on Peter the rock, a whole pyramid of beings, reaching to the sky, floating on the clouds, in a state of Ascension or Assumption, depicted in ecstasy in paintings, sculptures and carvings: sensitive, human, close images and faces of a God who had become abstract and distant.

The classical Renaissance building, standing within a square or an equilateral triangle, confined within a circle of perfect figures, seeks like the Greek temple, its ideal model, to give geometrical ideas concrete form in eternity, in the ever-lasting marble. It occupies the ground, fills space, spreads out wide, standing firm on a pedestal of immaterial certainties. It knows truth, beauty and goodness; it has drunk at the pure source of Plato. It brings down to earth the rationality and the clear light of Olympus. It descends majestically from an ideal heaven to live a serene existence in a world in equilibrium, a world without shadows or hidden recesses. Classicism soothes its fears with a guileless dream: that of the transparency of beings and object.

The Baroque building preserves its classical, pagan roots, which anchor it to the ground, but is torn apart, tortured and overshadowed by spiralling columns and contorted shapes. It is a return to the loftiness of Gothic architecture, reaching desperately towards an unattainable heaven.

It has the weight and authority of the classical style, but none of its serenity. It shares the Gothic movement's soaring towers, but not its certainty.

Try as it may to make a moving statement of faith, the dark night of its soul, even lit up by the golden rays that sometimes stream across these buildings, is riddled with doubt. It has lost the lightness of the Gothic style, although it has kept that movement's momentum, and sometimes seems to be at risk of tumbling down the higher it climbs, like an elastic band, stretched vertically towards the sky, which will snap when the inevitable pull of the earth's gravity becomes too great.

The Collapse of Dogmas

With the crisis in people's values and the collapse of dogmas at the end of the century, the sceptics progressed from a relative lack of belief to fully-fledged disbelief. Against a background of religious conflict, their gazing at the infinite heavens did not reveal any God, invisible among the clouds and unfathomable as to his intentions, but

merely a clear cosmos, filled with stars but inaccessible and less fascinating than the earth, the material world below, which had at last been brought within man's reach.

Conversely, the mystics, having renounced the idea of uselessly circumnavigating the globe, whose roundness caused travellers always to come back to their starting point, remained immobile, rooted in their intimate contemplation, their journey to discover their innermost selves, in search of a God in the infinite reaches of their souls.

The Baroque, caught between paganism and Christianity, between reason and faith, is therefore this difference in focus, this tension between heaven and earth, between beliefs which lifted man upwards and material concerns which brought him down to earth, this hesitation, this conflict between gravity and grace, between body and soul, between doubt and faith. It corresponded to modern man's move away from transcendence and towards the immanence of human beings and of their worldly society, here and now on earth, and no longer in heaven. This was the new world view which was gradually taking over.

The Baroque, at its best when cushioned by the clouds and at its worst when divided by a contrast, torn apart by an antithesis, floats along, drifting or hesitating between heaven and earth, uplifted by grace or pulled back down by gravity.



Church of St. George, Ragusa Ibia