

Q: Does the term ‘Baroque’ refer to an artistic style or to a time period?

A: Although you will sometimes hear scholars refer to a “Baroque style,” the term “Baroque” technically refers to the art-historical period spanning roughly 1600-1700. Since the prevailing interests and styles of the Baroque varied from region to region as well as from decade to decade, using the term “Baroque style” is rather vague. Keep in mind, for example that in the Italian Baroque, the dramatic, dynamic style of Caravaggio coexisted alongside the more serene and Classic style of the Carracci. Often when you hear someone refer to the “Baroque style,” he or she means the dramatic style of artists like Caravaggio and Bernini, because that style marked a departure from the artistic traditions of the Renaissance; the new style spread through many European countries and directly challenged artistic traditions.

Tags: [artistic styles](#), [Baroque](#), [terminology](#)

Q: What is the difference between chiaroscuro and tenebrism?

A: Chiaroscuro is an Italian word that combines the words “light” and “dark.” When applied to works of art, it refers to the contrasting of light and dark to model forms and create a sense of depth. As artists of the Renaissance became increasingly interested in creating a window into space, this method became more and more commonplace. During the Baroque period, artists exaggerated the use of chiaroscuro to create the dramatic contrasts between light and dark that artists like Caravaggio were so famous for creating. This exaggeration of the shading of chiaroscuro is known as “tenebrism.” Although there is a slight difference in meaning, art-historians sometimes use these terms interchangeably.

Tags: [Baroque](#), [Caravaggio](#), [Chiaroscuro](#), [Tenebrism](#)

Q: What do scholars mean when they describe a trend of “realism” in Italian and Spanish Baroque art?

A: The terms *realism* and *realistic* can be confusing, as they can mean different things depending on who is using them and what the context is. For example, in the Renaissance, artists painted space in a way that is often described as “realistic.” So what was different about the “realism” of the Baroque in Italy and Spain? Well, in the case of Italian and Spanish Baroque, “realism” is used to describe more than just the physical world rather to address the sometimes unpleasant realities that people experience in the world. That is why in Spanish Baroque sculpture, you often see graphic depictions of suffering, and in Italian Baroque painting, you often see unidealized figures. The goal is to make the depicted stories as psychologically realistic—and therefore relatable—as possible.

Tags: [artistic styles](#), [Baroque](#), [terminology](#)

Q: How did private and public art differ in Baroque Rome?

A: Public art in Baroque Rome virtually always supported the message of the Counter-Reformation. Therefore, there was very little secular art in the public sphere and almost none of the mythological themes that were so popular in the Renaissance. In private art, however, the intellectual and pleasurable interests of secular art could be pursued. In a church you would never see anything but a devout religious image, but in a private palace or other residence, you might see some mythological or secular subject matter.

Tags: [Baroque](#), [Mythology](#), [Patronage](#), [Public Art](#), [Renaissance](#)

Q: Why was the building of Saint Peter’s Square so important? What was its function?

A: Saint Peter's Square was an extremely important space not only because it preceded Saint Peter's Basilica, the most important church in Christendom, but also because the square had a highly functional use as well. The square was a processional space, useful for certain religious ceremony processions. It was also a welcoming space for pilgrims visiting the church. In line with the Baroque period's interest in theatricality, it served as something of a stage space for those about to enter this most holy basilica.

Tags: [St. Peter's Basilica](#), [St. Peter's Square](#), [Theatricality](#)

Q: Why was Borromini so interested in geometry and mathematical relationships in his architecture?

A: The interest in geometry and mathematical ratios was not new to Borromini or the Baroque period. Since ancient Greece, artists had been employing mathematical ratios to achieve a geometrical precision and perfection. The idea was that through science and nature one could get closer to an ideal and therefore closer to godliness. In the Baroque period, not all architects focused on these sorts of proportions, instead using visual cues to adjust their buildings.

Tags: [Architecture](#), [Borromini](#), [mathematical ratios](#)

Q: What are some of the major differences between Italian and Spanish Baroque painting?

A: Italian and Spanish Baroque painting had a lot in common. Not only was the art of both countries defined by Catholicism, but artists in both countries were interested in capturing a sense of immediacy and realism. It can be argued, however, that Spanish artists were interested in capturing an intensified sense of realism, verging on harshness. In the

vein of Caravaggio and his realism, Spanish artists focused more on realism and less on theatrical and exuberant styles so favored by the Italians. In addition, the Classical vein of painting that was popular in Baroque Italy had little to no life in Baroque Spain.

Tags: [Caravaggio](#), [Italian Baroque](#), [Realism](#), [Spanish Baroque](#), [Theatricality](#)

Q: Caravaggio reportedly led a wild and violent life. Did this have any bearing on his paintings?

A: Many scholars love to discuss Caravaggio's biography, which includes lots of fighting, including a duel in which Caravaggio killed his opponent. Coupled with this biography are a number of portraits with an undeniably violent subject matter. Take, for example, his *Judith Beheading Holofernes* and his *David with the Head of Goliath*, in which he painted his self-portrait on the severed head of Goliath. There is no way to know for sure what was going on in Caravaggio's mind, but it seems that a life of such turmoil would certainly come into play when painting violent images.

Tags: [artistic influence](#), [artistic styles](#), [Biography](#), [Caravaggio](#), [David with the Head of Goliath](#), [Judith Beheading Holofernes](#), [Violence and Art](#)

Q: How has Artemisia Gentileschi's biography been read to relate to the art she produced?

A: Artemisia Gentileschi is famous not only for her skillful and poignant paintings but also for a personal scandal she endured. Her teacher, Agostino Tassi, raped her and a very public trial followed in which he was found guilty of his crimes. Given this story, there have been many feminist interpretations of her works, which often include female violence towards men (note her several versions of Judith and Holofernes) and male objectification of women (think of her Susanna

and the Elders, for example). As with any artist, it is difficult to know for certain what was in Artemisia's mind without written documentation, but it seems prudent to consider the trauma she experienced at the hands of a man when we look at her paintings involving relationships between men and women.

Tags: [Artemisia Gentileschi](#), [Baroque Art](#), [Biography](#), [Violence and Art](#), [Women Artists](#), [Women in Art](#)

Q: Cardinal Borghese commissioned some of Bernini's most celebrated sculptures for his villa in Rome: *Pluto and Proserpina*, *Daphne and Apollo*, and *David*. Two of these three sculptures, however, depict mythological subjects. How would this have been acceptable for a religious figure as prominent as a Cardinal?

A: When considering art produced in Counter-Reformation Rome, it is better to consider whether a commission was public or private than to consider the individual patron. Although Cardinal Borghese was a religious figure, these sculptures were commissioned for his private villa. Certainly other people would have seen these sculptures, but their private status meant that they could depict the same intellectual and non-religious subject matter that private patrons commissioned during the Renaissance. Were these sculptures intended for a public space, however, they would have been quite unacceptable as they did not conform to Counter-Reformation standards.

Tags: [Bernini](#), [Counter-Reformation](#), [Patronage](#), [Sculpture](#)