

## Caravaggio to Canaletto: The Glory of Italian Baroque and Rococo Painting

BACK

Event Date(s): 19th Jun 2014  
Location: Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest  
Event web link: [Click here](#)

Reviewed by: Kate Grandjouan  
Reviewed on: 19th Jun 2014

This winter, in Budapest, the Szépművészeti Múzeum staged *Caravaggio to Canaletto: The Glory of Italian Baroque and Rococo Painting* as the closing event of the 2013/14 Italian-Hungarian Cultural Season. The exhibition was conceived by Zsuzsanna Dobos as a sequel to *Botticelli to Titian: Two Centuries of Italian Masterpieces*, which in 2009-10 had attracted 230,000 visitors. It had been the most successful show in the museum's history. The new survey was based on the same concept: paintings from the Szépművészeti's rich holdings would be combined with loans from abroad to provide a comprehensive overview of Italian painting in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The resulting statistics were impressive: 142 paintings by 101 artists; 34 from the Szépművészeti, and the remaining 108 from 62 collections in 11 different countries. Among the many institutional lenders were the National Galleries in Washington and London, the Musée du Louvre in Paris, the Museo del Prado and the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid, the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence, the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister in Dresden, the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna and the National Gallery in Warsaw. The star factor was provided by the loan of nine Caravaggios. These included *Salomé with the Head of Saint John the Baptist* (c. 1608) from London and *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* (c. 1593) from Rome, and the latter featured heavily in the publicity material. Throughout the winter, *Caravaggio to Canaletto* posters stretched across Europe, from the streets of Vienna to the walls of the London underground. Everywhere, it seemed, daily newspapers and tourist advertisements were touting the exhibition as 'the Budapest Winter offer' or the essential 'treat for art lovers'.

The aim of the survey, according to the explanatory panels (which were written in English) was to show 'the main movements of the two centuries' (the Baroque and the Rococo) 'in the boldest possible spectrum'. The exhibition was organized into eight sections and the first four dealt directly with the impact of Caravaggio (1571-1610). 'Face to Face with Reality' connected *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* (c. 1593) and *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* (c. 1600), with nine *Caravaggesque* portraits or still-lives. 'Divine Light and Diabolic Shadow' (26 works) highlighted the artist's influence in the painting of religious subjects. 'Eloquence, Illusion and Splendour' (18 works) tracked the regional development of *Caravaggisme*, now referred to as a style – 'the Baroque' – and one that was characterised by 'High' and 'Late' variants in different parts of Italy. 'Ideal and Norm' (13 works) focused on art in Bologna and the development of a *Caravaggiste* 'antithesis' in the work of Annibale Caracci (1560-1609) and his followers.

These opening sections succeeded in projecting the concept of a shared style, or a loose group or *Caravaggiste* movement. The loans were used to create repetitions and contrasts between different paintings, some of which shared themes like deception, or subjects like decapitation or crucifixion. The hang also showed how a forgotten artist could exist again in a meaningful way because he had mobilized the powerful effects of a pictorial idiom. This was seen in the striking juxtaposition of two paintings of St John the Baptist, one by Caravaggio (*Saint John the Baptist*, 1602, Pinacoteca Capitolina, Rome) and the other by 'A Neapolitan Caravaggesque Painter' (c. 1610-15), which had been borrowed from a private collection in Budapest. Better known imitators and competitors on display included: Orazio Gentileschi (1563-1639), Giovanni Baglione (1566-1642), Battistello Caracciolo (1578-1635), Bartolomeo Manfredi (1582-1622), Nicholas Regnier (1588-1667), Jusepe de Ribera (1591-1652), Daniele Crespi (1598-1630), Cecco del Caravaggio (active 1601-20), Mattia Preti (1613-99) and Bernardo Cavallino (1616-56).

The conceptual clarity behind the four opening sections returned in the conclusion to the exhibition, in a section called 'Italian Journey'. Here, 7 loans, including 3 by Canaletto (1697-1768), were matched with 5 from the Szépművészeti. Among the selection were works by Bernardo Canal (1674-1744), Bernardo Bellotto (1722-80), Francesco Guardi (1770-75) and Antonio Joli (1700-77) and they were used to present the genre of the city landscape – the *veduta*, and its variant, the *capriccio* – in Rome, Florence, Venice and Naples. But between the dramatic opening of the exhibition in Rome with Caravaggio, and its quiet closure in Venice with Canaletto, the middle sections, dealing with the dissemination of the Baroque and its mutation into the Rococo, appeared confusing. The problem seemed to be that it was increasingly difficult to contain the extraordinary pictorial diversity being orchestrated within the single concept of a stylistic unity. A sense of dispersion started in Section 5, with the 34 works in 'Natura Morta/Natura Viva', which was by far the largest thematic grouping in the exhibition. Here, a compilation of portraits (15), landscapes (5) and still-lives (13) bridging the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were chosen to show how the Baroque style had stimulated important changes in the three pictorial genres. Many of the paintings were fascinating in themselves, but it remained unclear as to why we should be considering them together. Caravaggio's *Fra Antonio Martelli, A Knight of Malta* (c. 1608, Galleria Palatina, Florence) was logically paired with Bernardo Strozzi's *Portrait of a Maltese Knight* (c. 1640, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan) as well as with some other 'vivid and tangible' portraits, but the two paintings were also hung not far from a pair of Salvator Rosa landscapes from the Szépművészeti (*Rocky Landscape with Waterfall* and *Harbour with Ruins*, c. 1640) and a Francesco Albani painting of *The Toilet of Venus* (c. 1610, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna). Among the Baroque miscellany was an unfinished painting by Pompeo Batoni, *Self Portrait*, (1773-4, Uffizi Gallery, Florence), some *teste di carattere*, Giacomo Ceruti's portraits of low-life (*Boy with a Basket*, c. 1750, private collection, Brescia, and *Three Beggars*, 1736, MNAC, Barcelona), still-lives of fish, turkeys, cabbages or flowers, and a magnificent *trompe-l'oeil* from the Museo dell'Opificio in Florence (*Cabinet of Curiosities*, c. 1689, attributed to Domenico Remps) which hung next to the Szépművészeti's own *trompe-l'oeil* by Carlo Leopoldo Sferini (*Still Life with a Painting, a Drawing and Painting Tools*, 1677).

If it seemed difficult to produce meaning between distinct pictorial categories by merging them under the single style label of the Baroque, the feeling that there was a distance between the paintings and the explanatory texts continued in Section 6 ('Poetry and Virtuosity in the Settecento'). Again the Baroque was presented as the organizing factor of artistic production over an extended period of time. Crespis, Cretis, more Batonis, Solimenas, as well as a Giaquinto, a Traversi, a Bazzani and a Magnasco were marshalled to show how in the eighteenth century 'High Baroque painting (was) flourishing everywhere'. At the outset of the exhibition, Baroque had been defined as 'a synonym for the bizarre, the excessive, whimsical'. Its 'aesthetic norms' were defined as 'motion, splendour, theatricality, heroism, ambition and complexity'. 'Rococo' was presented as its continuity, as 'a more decorative and graceful variant of the Baroque'. Thus, the job of Section 7 ('Swansong in Venice') was to foreground the appearance of the Rococo as a capricious, graceful variant of the Baroque, and perceptible in the work of Sebastiano Ricci (1659-1734), Antonio Pellegrini (1675-1741), Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696-1770), Giambattista Piazzetta (1683-1754), Pietro Longhi (1701-85) and Pietro Rotari (1707-62). Therefore, 'Rococo' became the next privileged term, designating an aesthetic impulse that was constantly waiting to be activated in representation. Again the selection included some mesmerizing versions of standard subjects; again a heterogeneous group defied such easy synthesis.

In fact, if the exhibition succeeded anywhere with terms like 'Baroque' and 'Rococo' it was in highlighting their inadequacy: that they do not operate as stable, rigid categories that were being passed down intact (as the 'discipline of classicism' or 'the joviality of Rococo') by artists who succeeded as their authentic transmitters (the 'utterly Rococo style of Guardi' or the 'perfection' of Guido Reni's *Caravaggiste* 'antithesis'). Rather, and this is in a purely Latourian sense, this painting anthology presented its artists as 'mediators' constantly transforming and distorting the meaning of the stylistic components that their paintings were made to carry. Rushing in to keep up, the language of explanation spawned terms that became less specific as the exhibition developed. *Caravaggiste* or Neo-*Caravaggiste*? Baroque or its variants – high or low? Rococo or Rococo Neoclassicism?

The exhibition was accompanied by a sumptuous catalogue, which includes contributions by an international cast of scholars. It is a work of multiple approaches and numerous voices. Some authors are exercised by questions of attribution, others by style labels, still more by the pictorial dynamics of their chosen image. In conclusion though, one of the pleasures of the exhibition itself was the way in which the visual constantly succeeds in escaping the strictures of language, and its categorizations, to lead a life of its own. There were only 140 works but it felt exhaustive; so many paintings (and not necessarily the Caravaggios) were powerfully arresting and totally absorbing. Overall, the exhibition certainly deserved more than to be considered as merely one stop in a quick 36-hour tour of Budapest.

*Caravaggio to Canaletto: The Glory of Italian Baroque and Rococo Painting was at Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest, from 26 October 2013 to 16 February 2014.*

*It was accompanied by the catalogue Caravaggio to Canaletto: The Glory of Italian Baroque and Rococo Painting (Museum of Fine Art, Budapest, 2013).*





