

Baroque. Age of Contrasts

National Museum Zurich | 16/9/22 – 15/1/23 | Level 2 of the new extension

Tour of the exhibition

Prologue

The exhibition explores the great cultural epoch of the Baroque against the backdrop of its far-reaching religious, social and political upheavals. The Counter-Reformation, the Thirty Years' War, international trade relations and progressive colonisation had a lasting impact on the art and culture of the era. The exhibition opens with an animated map of Europe and the world, providing an insight into the denominations, the theatres of war, trade routes and expansions in an interconnected and increasingly globalised world.

1. Section: Architecture and urban planning

The first section takes visitors first of all to Rome, the “cradle of the Baroque”, where the Catholic reform movements saw the construction of magnificent churches. Ticino architects played a significant part in shaping the architectural image of the Eternal City, and were involved in some notable projects that are presented in the exhibition: Carlo Maderno worked on the design of St Peter's Basilica, Francesco Borromini built the church of Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza, and Domenico Fontana had a hand in Rome's urban planning. The demand for Italianate architecture was growing throughout Europe, and architects from Switzerland's Valle Mesolcina, such as Enrico Zuccalli, quickly became established in southern Germany.

The Jesuits contributed to the global spread of the Catholic faith and Baroque building culture. In his monumental painting, Andrea Sacchi depicted a scene in the interior of “Il Gesù” in Rome, the mother church of the Jesuit order and an important model for Baroque sacred architecture. The lively cultural transfer was also felt in Switzerland. St Gallen Cathedral (*Stiftskirche St Gallen*), an historical model of which is on display, is the result of collaboration between architects and artists from Switzerland, southern Germany and Austria.

2. Section: Garden and nature

The next room is given over to the art of gardening and festival culture. The gardens of Versailles became a model throughout Europe, and the pursuit of order, symmetry and centralization became an expression of power and prestige. French garden style was adapted with astonishing rapidity in Solothurn, Bern and Basel,

as the plans shown illustrate. The hitherto rather monotonous diet of the Swiss people was improved by new vegetable varieties introduced by Huguenots fleeing religious persecution. But the garden was also a place of relaxation and recreation, and a setting for lavish festivities, as illustrated by a small stage with baroque instruments and a listening station. Opera, dance and musical performances were an integral part of courtly life.

In the visual arts, the landscape was becoming established as a separate category of painting. Swiss artists such as Albrecht Kauw and Felix Meyer focused on the topography and natural phenomena of the local landscape.

3. Section: Interiors and fashion

The magnificent tapestry from the *Manufacture des Gobelins* in Paris perfectly exemplifies France's pre-eminence under the absolutist rule of Louis XIV – not just politically, but also in the areas of interior decoration, handicrafts and fashion. Spanish dress, as depicted in Diego Velázquez's portrait of the Spanish queen, gave way in the mid-17th century to exuberant French courtly fashion. Like all of Europe, Switzerland took its lead from the extravagant fashions of France – it's no coincidence that the prevalent type of women's dress is called *robe à la française*. While Lyon developed into a centre for the silk industry under the protectionist and mercantilist policies of Louis XIV, significant proto-industrial centres for textile manufacturing and watchmaking also emerged in Switzerland.

The Baroque banqueting table set out opposite the tapestry, with silverware from western Switzerland, shows how the refined table manners seen at the courts of Europe influenced Switzerland's upper class. Other high-quality objects, including the Meissen porcelain service with chinoiserie and the precious lacquered box from Amsterdam, give visitors a picture of the extent of global exchange during the Baroque era.

4. Section: Knowledge and art

The ongoing colonisation in North and South America and the expansion of global trade networks led, on the one hand, to exploitation and crises, and on the other to enrichment and the accelerated circulation of goods and knowledge. As new scientific instruments, the telescope and the microscope are paradigmatic for the reorientation of the general understanding of the world. Swiss scholars such as Johann Jakob Scheuchzer, Maria Sibylla Merian and Jost Bürgi engaged in the empirical study of nature. The era is characterised by artists and scholars engaging in wide-ranging travels, and the establishment of academies, observatories and collections.

The “gallery picture” by Cornelis I. de Bailleur shows, using a wide variety of objects and artworks, how knowledge of the world was compiled, presented and discussed. Objects displayed in the exhibition such as miniatures by Joseph Werner and Anna Waser, embossed medals and intricate nautilus cups have as much claim to a place in any Baroque collection as landscape drawings and paintings of various genres. The still life by Simon Luttichuys typifies the interests in collecting and trading that were prevalent at the time. In the midst of all this grandeur and opulence, wars, famines and plagues made people aware of the transient nature of their own existence and acted as a breeding ground for scepticism and melancholy. In art, the *memento mori* – remembering that we all must die – became a motif, as in the *Vanitas* still life by Swiss painter Georg Gsell.

Epilogue: Baroque after the Baroque

The exhibition space concludes with a large-scale stained glass feature by Zurich architects Trix and Robert Haussmann, which takes up the Baroque idea of spatial illusion with an imaginary curtain. Created in the 1970s, the work is an example of the revival of Baroque elements in the 20th century. During this period, the concept of “Baroque” was updated, among other things by the book *Le Pli* (published in English as *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*) by philosopher Gilles Deleuze, and was no longer applied merely as a designation for an epoch or a style, but as a creative, almost universally transferable term. This expansion of meaning makes it possible to transport to the present day concepts that were widespread in the Baroque era.