Lindenwood University
Digital Commons@Lindenwood University

Student Research Papers | Research, Scholarship, and Resources

Spring 5-2016

Rococo, Reason, and Revolution : The French Intellectual and Moral Response to Aristocratic Indulgence as Demonstrated Through Art

Kimberly Elfrink
Lindenwood University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/student-research-papers

Part of the Art and Design Commons

Recommended Citation

Elfrink, Kimberly, "Rococo, Reason, and Revolution : The French Intellectual and Moral Response to Aristocratic Indulgence as Demonstrated Through Art" (2016). *Student Research Papers*. 4.
https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/student-research-papers/4

This Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Research, Scholarship, and Resources at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Research Papers by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact phuffman@lindenwood.edu.

Rococo, Reason, and Revolution : The French Intellectual and Moral Response to Aristocratic Indulgence as Demonstrated Through Art

Kimberly Elfrink

HIS 354 Nineteenth-Century Art

Dr. James Hutson

5 May 2016

The entrapment of the aristocracy that King Louis XIV began at the Palace of Versailles in the late seventeenth century sparked a vast dislike among the nobility of classical baroque art. Since the French monarchy used this controlled style in order to symbolize the grip it held on the nation, aristocrats sought a new style that embodied freedom from Versailles and celebrated the upper class rather than the monarchy or the state. Because they possessed the most wealth in society at the time, their tastes dictated the direction of art, and, for a large portion of the eighteenth century, the new rococo style became the norm, embodying pastels, luxury, and romantic scenes. However, as industrialization took root in France in the nineteenth century, the bourgeoisie accumulated the most wealth, seized control of painting commissions, and thusly redirected popular art in France to suit their desires. French art during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century then reflected shifting sentiments among and between the classes, especially demonstrating a dislike for excesses as expressed in the rococo era; and these sentiments led to a condemnation of the aristocracy and its indulgences. As the middle-class gained power through knowledge (via Enlightenment thinking) and wealth (via industrialization), they suppressed the nobility and the monarchy and radically shifted art patronage to classicizing, moralizing works of art—the exact opposite of the rococo style.

With the consolidation of power under King Louis XIV, France during the late baroque era faced rigid control under this monarch who exhibited absolutism with state and social power. To prevent resistance from the nobility, he built the Palace of Versailles in 1682 (figure 1) that not only structurally reflected his power, but also kept the elite class out of society—thereby preventing revolt—by continually providing food, drink, and lodging. The dramaticism and ornate decorations of Versailles reflected Louis XIV's preferences for baroque tastes of detailed, dramatic interior design and paintings. However, its dramaticism remained within boundaries, as

is characteristic of classical baroque style. The bandwork along the walls of many of the rooms, for instance, while containing arabesques, remained confined within the molded frame, essentially giving the designs an illusion of freedom yet strictly defining its boundaries.[1] Along with this palace, paintings like Hyacinthe Rigaud's *Louis XIV* (figure 2) demonstrate his love of the classical baroque style that—through its rigidity, naturalization, and clearly defined imagery—was meant to reflect the control that the king held over France and especially those aristocrats living at Versailles.

But, following the return of the aristocracy to Paris after the reign of Louis XIV, the nobles grew tired of hieratic control and developed a new style to demonstrate their "right" to enjoy life as France's dominant social class.[2] This style dominated commissions in France since the aristocracy at this time remained the wealthiest class in the nation. Painter Antoine Watteau served as the pioneer for these new techniques and subjects meant to reclaim power from the monarchy and instead celebrate the *jouissance* ("pleasures") of the broader aristocracy, becoming the leading academic painter of what was later termed "rococo."[3] Drawing inspiration from the loose brushwork and warm colors of Peter Paul Rubens, Watteau inserted *Rubéniste* form, color, and emotion into his paintings. In his reception piece for the French Academy, his *Return from Cythera* (figure 3) marked the creation of a new genre, the *fête champêtre*, that revolutionized the rococo era.

Fête champêtre paintings speak directly to French aristocratic values and reflect the Venetian ideal of going into the romantic countryside for romantic interludes. The genre is most

---

1. Fiske Kimball, *The Creation of the Rococo* (New York: W. Wo. Norton and Co., 1964), 33.
2. Kimball, *The Creation of the Rococo*, 152.
3. Michael Levey, *Rococo to Revolution: Major Trends in Eighteenth-Century Painting* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 56.

often defined by aristocrats in garden settings enjoying romantic activities such as eating, listening to music, and so on—which are reserved *only* for the upper class since their aristocratic success enables them to afford the time and money needed to indulge. In paintings like Watteau's *Return from Cythera* (figure 3) these *fête champêtre* works provide a strict opposition to the orderly, grid like classical baroque style promoted by the monarchy. Instead, they demonstrate fluidity through their subjects, allowing the viewer not to read it left to right like a classical composition but instead to follow the image with their eyes in a serpentine fashion. *Return from Cythera* (figure 3) also reflects the upper-class interest in lovemaking and subtle eroticism, as the subjects of Watteau's painting are departing Cythera after a series of erotic (though not explicit) trysts.

To further depart from monarchical ideals, the aristocracy integrated these new organic trends into interior design once they returned to Paris from Versailles. The Salon de la Princesse (figure 4) reflects these changes with shell motifs, gilt stucco, arabesque designs, and pastel colors that were all meant to deviate from the defined, orderly designs of the Palace of Versailles (figure 1) and represent freedom from its gilded cage. The vine-like relief designs creep organically and mask the separation between the walls and ceiling—removing the rigidity and control not only of interior spaces but also, symbolically, of the monarchy itself. Whereas the Palace of Versailles (figure 1) oppressed the aristocracy, rooms and homes like the Salon de la Princess (figure 4) celebrated its indulgences.

However, wrought out of the excessiveness of aristocratic luxury, this indulgence becomes what Saisselin describes as a "disease" for both women and men.[4] Eighteenth-century

---

4. Rémy G. Saisselin, *The Enlightenment Against the Baroque: Economics and Aesthetics in the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 24.

Dutch-British philosopher Bernard Mandeville attributes their frivolous behaviors to boredom created since they performed less physical labor—a luxury that the lower classes did not have and *should not want* since it supposedly led to immorality and a depreciation of character. He states,

> In France . . . a thousand duties of social behavior unknown among other nations have been engendered by boredom. A woman gets married; she gives birth to a child. One of the men of leisure hears of it; he takes it upon himself to make so many calls; goes to her door every day, talks to the doorman; climbs back into his carriage and goes off to be bored somewhere else.[5]

Mandeville further asserts that these aristocrats' self-indulgence is based on a need to feel "strong sensations" constantly.[6] This desire ultimately leads women to frequent spending (as Saisselin mentions) and men to infidelity—the latter of which can be seen in paintings such as Jean-Honoré Fragonard's *The Swing* (figure 5). This painting especially encompasses the aristocratic ideals of frivolity with its illicit *rendezvous*. In this image, a young woman—the patron's mistress—wearing an elaborate, ruffled pink dress, kicks off her shoe as she is pushed on a swing by a clergy member. In the bushes of this shaded grove, a young man—the patron—leans back in delighted shock as he sees up her dress. The loss of the woman's shoe suggests undress, and she appears though she is unaware of his presence, glorifying the propriety (or lack thereof) of the aristocracy and the immorality of the upper class, especially since the main subject is a mistress as opposed to a wife. Additionally, the subtly erotic nature of this painting makes it an "intrigue"
painting because the unseen is titillating to viewers.

During this time, the embrace of freedom as seen in rococo art as a rejection of the monarchy opened the door to further questions regarding his authority. This began the eighteenth

---

5. Bernard Mandeville quoted in Saisselin, *The Enlightenment Against the Baroque*, 24.

6. Mandeville quoted in Saisselin, *The Enlightenment Against the Baroque*, 24.

century's questioning of the Divine Right of Kings to rule unopposed, as was reflected in Charles-Joseph Natoire's *Psyche Illuminating Eros* (figure 6). This painting demonstrates a scene from the myth of the god Eros and the mortal woman Psyche; Psyche stands above the sleeping, winged Eros with a lamp, which he had forbade her from lighting in order to prevent the discovery that he was not human. Using the rococo techniques of soft, light colors, the dramatic moment of discovery, and the common theme of love, Psyche's refusal to obey the god and her discovery of Eros' true identity mimics the French's questioning of the king's authority: the revelation of the "truth," as it were.

Challenging the hieratic organization originally began in seventeenth-century Great Britain and was expanded upon by the French philosophers François-Marie Arouet (Voltaire) (1694-1778), Denis Diderot (1713-1784), and Jean d'Alembert (1717-1783). Voltaire in particular, through his philosophical novellas, questions the authority granted to monarchs and aristocrats and disagrees that their views and morals should be given higher precedence simply because they belong to a higher social class.[7] He rejected speculative philosophy and instead promoted learning based on one's own experiences and the experiences of others, rather than learning from an ultimate authority such as through texts or universities.[8] His and other philosophers' central tenet—the power of reason over faith—not only challenged the Great Chain of Being (that granted the king his power and ensured that God sanctioned his rule) but also rejected the notion that the few ruling the many is fair to the common people.

However, not all reactions to this new line of thinking were positive. According to art historian Michael Levey, pioneer Watteau recreated through his works like *Return from Cythera*

7. Zbigniew Drozdowicz, “Voltaire's Radicalism,” *Diametros: An Online Journal of Philosophy* 40 (2014): 16.

8. Drozdowicz, “Voldaire's Radicalism,” 19.

(figure 3) *not* the base pleasures of the aristocracy but instead the idea of nature (both in terms of the natural world and human nature) in order to express the freedom granted after their release from Versailles.[9] The Enlightenment, then, since it rejected the freedom that rococo art and rocaille decor provided, ensured that reason and clarity trumped emotion. English poet-painter William Blake was but one of these individuals and scorned the notion that science superseded faith. His philosophy during the 1870s and 1880s stated, “He who sees the Infinite in all things, sees God. He who sees the Ratio only, sees himself only.[10] Blake strongly believed that since the orderliness, austerity, and naturalism of neoclassicism recalled ancient Greek and Roman precedents, they also glorified the violence, state religion, and overall disenchantment inherent to these periods. But this disparity expressed towards antiquity was also applied to Enlightenment thought, and he criticized the new standard for *philosophes* while lamenting that it was applied to art and thusly infusing it with its supposedly misguided ideals.[11] Blake's dislike for the neoclassical values were ultimately born out of his appreciation for romantic ideals and his appreciation for emotion—emotion that later became infused with rococo art, which intellectuals sought to escape by utilizing emphasis on reason. “Reason” being, that is, the “Ratio” that Blake crticized and that appeared in art as a reaction against the departure from rococo.

In this new sytem, the visual arts remained important and communicated ideas prominent throughout this newfound Age of Enlightenment. Pro-Enlightenment philosophers, both then and now, especially criticized the rococo movement for its excessiveness and indulgences. The sentiments of modern-day philosopher Rémy G. Saisselin reflect the attitudes of many late

---

9. Levey, *Rococo to Revolution*, 58.

10. William Blake quoted in Jean H. Hagstrum, “William Blake Rejects the Enlightenment,” in *Blake: A Collection of Critical* Essays, ed. Northrop Frye (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 149.

11. Hagstrum, "William Blake Rejects the Enlightenment," 151, 153.

eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century scholars who, reflecting on the past, assert that rococo was nothing more than a feminized version of the Baroque in which the "flesh seemed to triumph over the spirit."[12] He cites Madame de Pompadour as the personification of Rococo, for she and her female followers embraced luxury and surrounded themselves with modern comforts by spending like a noble despite her burgeois background.[13] The connection, then, between money and women during the rococo era becomes clear—since luxuries often involve spending money and women were spending their husbands' money to meet these rococo standards. When art reflected the self-indulgent nature that these women necessarily participated in, it became also part of this feminized movement.

Those against these aspects of the rococo era capitalize on *The Swing* (figure 5) since the indulgences shown demonstrate the degeneracy of the aristocracy that Enlightenment philosophers criticized. But Levey suggests that the true source of friction between these philosophers and rococo art may have been the deviation from ration as demonstrated by many of these late baroque works. While Enlightenment followers promoted science and reason, rococo artists depicted Nature without using naturalism—all the while using subjects celebrating the aristocratic patrons.[14] As such, later artists, inspired by the orderliness and ration of popular Enlightenment thought, sought not only to suppress the celebration of nobility present in the rococo style of the eighteenth century, but *also* desired a clean break from the emotion and non-logic present in these earlier works.

While the Age of Enlightenment helped redirect intellectual thought, the rise of industrialism in France during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries helped shifted

12. Saisselin, *The Enlightenment Against the Baroque*, 19.
13. Saisselin, *The Enlightenment Against the Baroque*, 22.
14. Levey, *Rococo to Revolution*, 13.

the wealth into the hands of the middle-class. Since they now controlled the most money out of any other social class, the bourgeois taste sent art in a new direction—away from the characteristic pastel rococo frivolity and towards the austerity of genre scenes where the action and narratives are limited. These values were born out Holland, where the sale of genre scenes reinforced the values of the broad, middle-class market.

One example of these popular works is Jean-Baptiste Chardin's *Saying Grace* (figure 7), which was painted directly for the open art market and appealed to French bourgeois values. In this scene, two middle-class children sit in a solemn interior with their mother, who serves food at their dining table. Due to its market appeal, this quiet scene was reproduced as an engraving entitled *Le Benedicte* (figure 8) by Bernard Lépicié, who included a caption stating, “La Soeur en tapinois se rit du petit frere / Qui begaie son oraison, / Qui sans s'inquieter depeche sa priere / Son apetit fait sa raison.”[15] The last phrase of this caption translates roughly to, “[The son] does not care but hurries on, spurred on by his appetite.”[16] This addition further moralizes this everyday scene by informing its viewers not to let their appetites drive them and instead to appreciate what they have. This sentiment directly counters the luxury of the aristocracy, putting *Saying Grace* (figure 7) directly into conversation with rococo attitudes and imagery by countering their lavish forms, rich colors, and immoral themes.

Additional works like the *Marriage à la Mode* series further criticizes the aristocracy. The sexual trysts between members of the nobility that were once celebrated in works like *Return from Cythera* (figure 3) and *The Swing* (figure 5) were now ridiculed in paintings such as

---

15. “Hunterian Art Gallery Collections: GLAHA 933.” Accessed 5 May 2016. http://www.huntsearch.gla.ac.uk/cgi-bin/foxweb/huntsearch/DetailedResults.fwx?collection=art&searchTerm=933
16. Quoted in James Hutson, “The Enlightenment and the Rococo outside of France,” (class lecture,

Ninteenth-Century Art from Lindenwood University, St. Charles, MO, 28 January 2016).

William Hogarth's *The Orgy* (figure 9) (as part of the aforementioned series), where infidelity, unhappiness, and sexually transmitted diseases ran rampant, eventually ending in death. For the bourgeoisie, these paintings reinforced their social mores and reaffirmed their believed superiority over the declining upper class.

Originally, Enlightenment scholars most loudly condemned the frivolity and immorality of the rococo era based on its preference for science and reason. But as the middle-class grew and accumulated more wealth over the aristocracy due to growing businesses, they sought a redirection of art that would lead commissions that previously glorified the aristocracy into middle-class-centered, moralizing, severe works of art. These attitudes then, begun first through intellectuals and then expanding to the middle-class, refleced the overall shift in power based on which part of society possessed the greatest amount of wealth and thusly could afford the most commissions. But these moralizing, classical, monochromatic works that matched middle-class preferences contrasted sharply with the excesses of the rococo era. The aristocratic values most highly sought after in these earlier works later became ridiculed in public and private commissions for the very reasons of freedom and excessiveness that they originally promoted. The luxuries of the French aristocracy were no longer valued in France and were soon replaced with an emphasis on intellect and middle-class values as was evidenced by bourgeois commissions. Ironically, these works were eventually bought even by the very monarchy that the rococo era originally sought to escape.

Illustrations

Fig. 1. Jules Hardouin-Mansart and Charles Le Brun, Hall of Mirrors, Palace of Versailles, begun 1678.

Fig. 2. Hyacinthe Rigaud, *Louis XIV, King of France, in Royal Costume*, 1701. Oil on canvas, 277 cm x 194 cm.

Fig. 3. Jean-Antoine Watteau, *Return from Cythera*, 1718. Oil on canvas, 129 cm x 194 cm.

Fig. 4. Germain Boffrand, Salon de la Princesse, 1737-1740.

Fig. 5. Jean-Honore Fragonard, *The Swing*, 1766. Oil on canvas, 35 in x 32 in.

Fig. 6. Charles Joseph Natoire, *Psyche Illuminating Eros*, 1738. Oil on canvas.

Fig. 7. Jean-Siméon Chardin, *Saying Grace*, 1740. Oil on canvas, 49.5 cm x 38.5 cm.

Fig. 8. Bernard Lépicié, *Le Benedicte*, 1744. Ink on paper, 38.3 cm x 27.7 cm.

Fig. 9. William Hogarth, *The Orgy*, 1735. Oil on canvas, 62.5 cm x 75 cm.

Bibliography

Drozdowicz, Zbigniew. "Voltaire's Radicalism." *Diametros: An Online Journal of Philosophy* 40 (2014): 5-21.

Hagstrum, Jean H. “William Blake Rejects the Enlightenment.” In *Blake: A Collection of Critical* Essays, edited by Northrop Frye. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966.

Hutson, James. “The Enlightenment and the Rococo outside of France.” Class lecture, Ninteenth-Century Art from Lindenwood University, St. Charles, MO, 28 January 2016.

Kimball, Fiske. *The Creation of the Rococo*. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1964.

Levey, Michael. *Rococo to Revolution: Major Trends in Eighteenth-Century Painting*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985.

Saisselin, Rémy G. *The Enlightenment Against the Baroque: Economics and Aesthetics in the Eighteenth Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

University of Glasgow. “Hunterian Art Gallery Collections: GLAHA 933.” Accessed 5 May 2016. http://www.huntsearch.gla.ac.uk/cgi-bin/foxweb/huntsearch/DetailedResults.fwx?collection=art&searchTerm=933