ART OF THE WESTERN WORLD

PROGRAM FIVE:
REALMS OF LIGHT

PART ONE:
THE BAROQUE IN
ITALY AND AUSTRIA

Written by
Carole Lucia Satriona

Final Draft
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WNET/Thirteen
356 West 58th Street
New York, New York 10019
MICHAEL WOOD (vo)

As the 16th century ended and the 17th began, here in Catholic Rome there was a feeling of jubilation, a sense of rebirth.

"Pope Paul V, in the year of our Lord 1612, has brought water 35 miles from the healthiest springs in Bracciano through new and restored aqueducts."

What better way to signal the revival of the ancient grandeur of Rome than to restore its renowned system for bringing water from the distant mountains to the city streets?

Pope Paul's new water supply, the Aqua Paola, or Paul's water, as it was called in his honor, was soon rushing out into the daylight from splendid fountains all around the city.
MICHAEL WOOD (vo) CONT'D
The finest of these fountains was designed by the great sculptor and architect Gian Lorenzo Bernini. It was built in the Piazza Navona, which stood on the foundations of an ancient stadium - a material expression of the idea of "eternal Rome."

MICHAEL WOOD (sof)
The city had survived a hundred years of political and religious turmoil, of war and destruction. Despite the invasions of various European monarchs who had attempted to conquer the city on the pretext of defending it, it had preserved its independence.
And most important, the Catholic Church had survived the rise of Protestantism and its challenge to the authority of Rome, and it was now in the midst of a most extraordinary period of expansion as European colonization and exploration took its influence to the farthest corners of the earth.

This Roman Catholic renewal which historians call the Counter Reformation was given added purpose and vigor by a remarkable group of visionaries.
Rubens, SAINT TERESA,
Kunsthistorisches Museum,
Vienna (Original Footage)

Rubens, THE MIRACLES OF ST.
IGNATIUS LOYOLA,
Kunsthistorisches Museum,
Vienna (Original Footage)

Rubens, THE MIRACLES OF ST.
FRANCIS XAVIER,
Kunsthistorisches Museum,
Vienna (Original Footage)

CHURCH CONSTRUCTION
(Original Footage)

CHURCH OF THE GESU, ROME
(Original Footage)

MICHAEL WOOD (vo)
The Spanish mystic and philosopher,
Teresa of Avila, insisted that
everyone could experience intense
and personal knowledge of God;
Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the
Jesuit teaching order, inspired his
followers to go out to work with
spiritual fervor in the real world;
and the missionary, Francis Xavier,
carried to distant India and Japan
the message of the Roman Church.

To fulfill the needs of the
resurgent Church, artists and
architects from all over Europe
flocked into Rome.

They came to design and ornament
the churches that were built in the
explosion of activity inspired by
the Counter Reformation.
MICHAEL WOOD (vo) (CONT'D)

The church reformers called for works of art and architecture that would bring the people into the churches, inspire faith and religious commitment. An artistic revival resulted and a new style.

It was an exuberant style, reflecting the optimism and the assertiveness of the seventeenth century church.

MICHAEL WOOD (sof)

This style is known as the Baroque.

MICHAEL WOOD (vo)

The fresco on the ceiling above our heads was painted by Pietro da Cortona in the 1630's. It decorates the reception hall of the Barberini Palace in Rome, the family home of Pope Urban VIII, a great patron of the arts.
Pietro da Cortona, THE GLORIFICATION OF POPE URBAN VIII, Barberini Palace, Rome (Original Footage)

MICHAEL WOOD (vo) CONT'D

To the modern sensibility, molded by the notion that less is more, it may seem merely decorative and probably confusing. But a careful look at this work done at the height of the Baroque period reveals a well-thought-out design based on a program - or written plan.

When Urban looked up at his ceiling, he saw the figure of Divine Providence stretch her arms to a chorus of maidens who carry the emblem of his family, the Barberini bees. They carry the bees up to the crossed keys of St. Peter - the symbol of the papacy - and to the papal crown.
Pietro da Cortona, THE
GLORIFICATION OF POPE
URBAN VIII, Barberini Palace,
Rome (Original Footage).

MICHAEL WOOD (vo) CONT'D

The painting is meant to be read.
It tells us that Pope Urban VIII is
a great and worthy man. But it
also tells us that the ideals of
the classical world have been
subordinated to the values of
triumphant Christianity.

Every figure in this swirling
panorama has meaning. The scenes
painted around the sides of the
ceiling, for instance, tell stories
extolling the Pope's virtues. His
unyielding battle against heresy is
here symbolized by Athena
destroying Insolence and Pride in
the shape of the Giants. Here his
piety conquers Lust and
Intemperance represented by the
Satyrs.

Like the artists of the
Renaissance, Cortona uses the
vocabulary of classical antiquity.
But he draws his figures
naturalistically with life-like
vigor and sensuality.
Michael Wood (vo) (cont'd)

The architectural elements are not real but are painted as if they were. They blur the distinction between real and illusory space; at the same time suggesting hidden depths out of which the painted figures seem to tumble.

Overlapping layers of light and dark create a sensation of breathtaking movement.

In this one ceiling we have all the elements of the High Baroque style — a clearly defined program, a dynamic and dramatic tension between naturalism and classicism, between illusion and reality, between light and dark... and always — movement.

Why were Baroque artists concerned with illusion and reality, with light and dark, with movement, time and space?
THE EARTH AT THE CENTER OF
THE SOLAR SYSTEM, Manuscript
Illumination
(Transparency - Morgan Library)

PARADISE, Manuscript
Illumination
(Transparency - Morgan Library)

Copernicus, ON THE REVOLUTIONS
OF THE PLANETS, Text page
(Black & White Photograph -
New York Public Library)

Copernicus, DIAGRAM OF THE
SOLAR SYSTEM
(Black & White photograph -
Morgan Library)

Galileo, TITLE PAGE,
(Black & White Photograph -
New York Public Library)

MICHAEL WOOD (vo) : CONT'D

Before the sixteenth century, the
earth was believed to be the
unmoving center of the universe
about which sun, stars and planets
all revolved. The existence of
human beings - and their salvation
- was the purpose of the universe.

In 1543, the astronomer Copernicus
published his work on the
revolutions of heavenly bodies.
His revelation that the earth moved
around the sun challenged people's
perceptions of themselves.

The title page of Galileo's book on
the solar system shows Copernicus
demonstrating to the revered
ancient philosophers Aristotle and
Ptolemy that their view had been
wrong. The earth was just one of
many celestial bodies, all of which
obeyed the same impartial laws.
At about the same time that Europeans learned that the earth was not the center of the universe, the discovery of the Americas and the exploration of the far east revealed that Europe was not the center of the world.

In this time of spiritual crisis, provoked by the explosion of knowledge, artists sought new ways of seeing and understanding.

The out-thrust left arm of the disciple startled and astonished its first viewers in 1600. It breaks into the space in which we stand.
MICHAEL WOOD (vo) (CONT'D)

The naturalism of this painting of Christ at Emmaus by Michelangelo Merisi - known as Caravaggio - was unprecedented. Its intention is to convince us that we are actually participants in this astonishing event: God's presence in the flesh.

We may no longer regard the earth as unique. Caravaggio seems to be saying. But God has dwelt amongst us. Divinity and sanctity are to be found in our midst.

Caravaggio went out into the streets of Rome and put the people he found there in his paintings.
MICHAEL WOOD (vo) (CONT'D)

He came to Rome from northern Italy in the last decade of the sixteenth century. A strange, violent, driven man, he was in permanent revolt against authority.

Caravaggio was always in trouble with the police - just around the corner from here on the Campo dei Fiori he killed a man in a quarrel and had to flee the city.

He was a carouser and a libertine and painted himself that way.

But the way he painted religious subjects was as shocking to his contemporaries as his behavior.

He painted St. Peter, as a confused and frightened old man...

The Virgin, in life, as a neighborhood housewife...
Caravaggio, THE DEATH OF THE VIRGIN (Transparency - Scala/Art Resource)

Taddeo Zuccaro, CONVERSION OF ST. PAUL (Photograph - Church of S. Marcello in Corso, Rome)

INTERIOR, CHURCH OF S. MARIA DEL POPOLO, ROME (Original Footage)

MICHAEL WOOD (vg) (CONT'D)

The Virgin, in death, he painted as a swollen, careworn corpse. The painting was rejected by the monks who commissioned it. Never before had they seen the Virgin Mary represented as dead rather than dying.

Caravaggio was rebelling against idealized depictions such as this Conversion of St. Paul by Taddeo Zuccaro. This was the conventional way in which divine intervention on earth was portrayed - like a fabulous dream.

But Caravaggio sought to draw the beholder in, to make the worshiper a participant in the drama enacted on the canvas.
MICHAEL WOOD (vo) (CONT'D)

In a small chapel in the Church of Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome.

Caravaggio's Conversion of St Paul depicts the intrusion of the divine into human life as a real moment, meant to be seen from the perspective of someone kneeling in prayer.

A contemporary commented that it looked like an accident in a blacksmith's shop. But Caravaggio, in the spirit of the Counter-Reformation saints, was pleading through his pictures for man's direct knowledge of God.
MICHAEL WOOD (vo) (CONT'D)

One of the principal devices that he used to achieve his purpose was chiaroscuro, the contrast of light and dark in the canvas. Caravaggio rejected the convention of attributing the light source to a radiant divine figure. Here no divinity is visible. There is no explanation for the light source within the painting: light just appears and totally overwhelms Paul. Light itself is the presence of God. Darkness is where God is not.

Caravaggio was one of the first artistic bohemians. Rebellious, uncompromising, and dissolute, he died at thirty-seven. Late in his short life, he portrayed himself as the decapitated Goliath. It's the work of a deeply religious man depicting his own damnation.
Caravaggio, DAVID WITH HEAD OF GOLIATH (Transparency - Scala Art Resource)

Bernini, DAVID (Original Footage)

MICHAEL WOOD (vo) (CONT'D)

While Caravaggio saw himself in the headless Goliath...

The young Gian Lorenzo Bernini gave his features to the heroic David.

Bernini took the immediacy he found in Caravaggio’s paintings and recreated it in white marble – with phenomenal and unprecedented virtuosity.

The sculptors of the Renaissance had often treated the David theme.

Donatello’s David is serenely elegant...

Michelangelo’s is contained, perfect, full of potential...

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MICHAEL WOOD (VO) (CONT'D)

But Bernini's David moves: turns aggressively to confront the observer. True to the spirit of the Baroque, this David is meant to be experienced. The viewpoint in this case, of course, is that of Goliath.

It is said that the Cardinal Maffeo Barberini himself held a mirror to Bernini's face so that the young prodigy could use his own expression of intense concentration as the model for the David.

When the Cardinal became Pope Urban VIII, he said to the artist:

"It is your good luck to see Maffeo Barberini pope, but we are even luckier, for the Cavaliere Bernini lives at the time of our pontificate."

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MICHAEL WOOD (vo) (CONT'D)

There is scarcely a corner of Rome that was not graced by Bernini's touch. From the small, witty adornment - the Elephant and the Obelisk in the little piazza of Santa Maria sopra Minerva - to the vast piazza and its enclosing colonnade in front of the Basilica of St. Peter.

"He is a rare man," said Urban VIII, "and a sublime artist born by divine disposition and for the glory of Rome."
IRVING LAVIN ON CAMERA
Original Footage

AERIAL VIEW OF ST. PETER'S,
Rome (Stock Footage - RAI)

CORNARO CHAPEL, S. Maria
della Vittoria, Rome
(Original Footage)

IRVING LAVIN (sof)
These statements by the great pope about his favorite artist are significant in two ways. They were prophetic of the prodigious role Bernini would play in his works for Urban and the succeeding popes for a period of 60 years. Rome was transformed into a modern city, replete with public monuments meant not just for the elite but for everyone to admire and enjoy. The open arms of the vast porticos in front of St. Peter's convey exactly this sense of out-reach beyond the traditional bonds of society to include every individual in a universal embrace.

IRVING LAVIN (vo)
This concern is made visible in what Bernini described as his "least bad work": the Cornaro family chapel, dedicated to the 16th century Spanish mystic Saint Teresa of Avila which Bernini created about 1650 in the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome.
IRVING LAVIN (vo). CONT'D

Our eyes are met by those of the Cardinal's patron who looks out from among his ancestors and accompanies the visitor down the nave to view the chapel from the center of the crossing.

There we are confronted with a spectacle of truly cosmic proportions. In the pavement before the altar, gesticulating skeletons rise from the lower depths to face their maker at the end of time.

The vault of the chapel has scenes from Teresa's life. Bernini makes a chorus of winged and cloud-borne angels singing, playing instruments, and strewing flowers, seem to filter through the solid vault, filling the chapel with their fragrant hymns of praise and celebration.
CORNARO CHAPEL, S. Maria della Vittoria, Rome (Original Footage)

IRVING LAVIN (vo) (CONT'D)

At the sides, the members of the Cornaro family appear in balconies with architectural backgrounds, whose perspectives merge with that of the church. Their space becomes indistinguishable from ours. They consider, study, discuss, describe, indicate, and thereby bear witness to a mysterious event in which they participate, encouraging us to join them.

Here Bernini created a visual sensation by making a literal portrayal of a woman in ecstasy.

From time immemorial mystics have used the vocabulary of earthly love to convey their feelings to others. Communion with God is like communion with the lover, only infinitely more so. In her autobiography Teresa describes the famous vision of the Transverberation.
CORNARO CHAPEL, S. Maria della Vittoria, Rome
(Original Footage)

VOICE OF S. TERESA

In the angel's hands I saw a long golden spear, and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he pierced my heart several times so that it penetrated my entrails. When he drew it out he left me completely afire with a great love for God.

IRVING LAVIN (vo)

A prime tenet of Christianity is that God created the world out of his love for humanity. Bernini made love and creation the key to his chapel.
MICHAEL WOOD (vo)

Baroque architecture follows different laws from those of antiquity and the Renaissance; gone is the stately equilibrium and logic. Instead the framework seems to move, boundaries seem to melt and walls to dance. The very stone seems to bend itself to the will of the architect. The most willful architect of them all was Francesco Borromini.

S. Ivo della Sapienza is Borromini's masterpiece.

His architecture is intellectually complex - a startling amalgam of mathematics and fantasy.

He knew the history of architecture and drew upon the past boldly and freely.
MICHAEL WOOD (vo) (CONT'D)

The facade curves in but the dome above it curves out, presenting the beholder with a startling dramatic contrast.

Using a symmetry so odd that it seems almost asymmetrical, he opposes convex and concave arcs. The result is that the building itself seems to be alive and pulsating.

Borromini's work emphasized one of the central teachings of the Roman Catholic Church in the 17th century. Salvation could not be attained by reason alone, nor by simple sensual experience; it required an imaginative leap of faith. In bewildering the eye and challenging the mind, Borromini sought to plunge the worshiper into the mystery of salvation.
MICHAEL WOOD (vo) (CONT'D).

Not everyone understood. A contemporary critic wrote:

"Everyone gets in his head a new idea and displays it in public squares and upon façades, madly deforming buildings and even towns."

But an official of Borromini's Church of San Carlo recorded:

"Nothing similar with regard to artistic merit can be found anywhere in the world. Members of different nations arrive daily in Rome and try to procure plans of the church. We have been asked for them by Germans, Flemings, Frenchmen, Spaniards, and even Indians."

The Baroque style in architecture that had its roots in Counter-Reformation Rome spread north into war-torn Germany and Austria.
During most of the 17th century, Austria was preoccupied with its lonely fight against the encroaching armies of the Ottoman Turks.

When the Austrians defeated the Muslim Turks at the gates of Vienna in 1683, a new era began. The Hapsburg Holy Roman Emperors turned to rebuilding their ravaged land.

All along the Danube where bleak fortresses had guarded the river, a chain of magnificent abbeys was built.

The victory over the Turks meant that money was now available for grand enterprises. The monks' taxes paid for buildings rather than for weapons. These abbeys were meant to serve not only as religious communities but also as hospices for the Emperor.
Michael Wood (vo) (Cont'd)

St. Florian's Abbey, begun in 1689, is the work of an Italian and an Austrian - Carlo Carlon and Jakob Prandtler.

In true Baroque fashion, the new abbey was a stage upon which royal ritual could be played out by the visiting Emperor. Paradoxically, the stage usually lacked its leading actor, for the Emperor himself rarely visited any of the abbeys.

But it didn't matter. The object was not imperial housing. It was to make a political point - to bear witness to the unity of Christianity and empire.

Here we are dealing not with the glorification of an individual Emperor but with the need to assert the divine right to rule of an institution - the Habsburg Empire.
ST. FLORIAN'S ABBEY, Austria
(Original Footage)

KARLSKIRCHE, Vienna
(Original Footage)

MICHAEL WOOD (vo) (CONT'D)

Newly victorious over the Turks, the Austrians believed themselves to be the saviors of Christian Europe.

They proclaimed their triumph in their art and in their architecture.

The Karlskirche — or Charles Church — in Vienna is an example of the power of the Christian faith to absorb and transfigure many influences.

The gabled portico reminds us of the Pantheon; the columns suggest Trajan's column in imperial Rome as well as the Bible's description of Solomon's temple; the dome is like the domes of papal Rome; at the ends of the building, the two towers suggest an imperial fortress.

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MICHAEL WOOD (vo) (CONT'D)

Begun in 1716, the Charles Church is the work of Fischer von Erlach who studied the work of Bernini and Borromini in Rome. It's dedicated to Charles Borromeo, one of the great Counter-Reformation saints.

It is not a coincidence that the Austrian emperor at the time was also named Charles. For in the lands where absolute monarchs ruled, architecture was part of the vocabulary of royal power.

The Belvedere Palace in Vienna was built in 1721 for Prince Eugene of Savoy, the general who led the Austrians to their victory over the Turks. The architect was Lukas von Hildebrandt.

The Belvedere actually consists of two palaces, set at opposite ends of an enormous formal garden in which nature has been completely subdued.
BELVEDERE PALACE, Vienna
(Original Footage)

MICHAEL WOOD (vo) (CONT'D)

The design is based on a simple program. Together the two palaces and the garden present the visitor with an allegory of life’s journey.

At one end, where Prince Eugene lived, is the Lower Belvedere and its gardens, representing the earth.

At the other end are the heavens, the Upper Belvedere, where visitors were received.

At first you think that you can go directly to the palace — the path appears straight — but you find that you cannot.

The grand staircase in the center of the garden reveals itself, as you approach, to be a cascade — water.

You must go to the left or to the right.
MICHAEL WOOD (vo) (CONT'D)

The garden forces you be a player
in an allegory of the human journey
to eternity.

The palace faces north so there's
always a shadow on its facade.
Like the heaven it represents, you
can not read its features until you
are very close.

As you arrive at the entrance hall
of the Upper Belvedere, you are
reminded that you may have to
struggle like Hercules to stay on
the right path.

At last the grand staircase brings you to the Hall of the Emperor. In the end, the journey is worth
taking for, if you proceed
correctly, you arrive at your goal.
MICHAEL WOOD (vo) (CONT'D)

This has not been a dismal journey.
It has taken place, after all, in a garden...

A reminder that the earth can be a happy place - at least for the privileged few who might find themselves here as the guests of Prince Eugene.

MICHAEL WOOD (sof)

Like much art throughout history, then, Baroque was optimistic. But whose optimism? The 17th century was certainly a period of great expansiveness in European culture both in geographical space and in the mind. But it was also the time of the Inquisition, of bitter religious wars which devastated the continent, and the time in which despotic monarchs dressed up their naked power in the trappings of benevolence. The style in which they did this can be seen all around us here in the Belvedere Palace.
MICHAEL WOOD (sof) (CONT'D)

The Italian Baroque artists who developed this visual language used it to express the faith, confidence, and power of the Catholic Counter-Reformation Church. It was a style ideally suited to expressing the interworkings of heavenly and earthly rule.

And so, here in Vienna, as throughout Europe, kings and states seized upon this language to make their assertion that their authority was sanctioned by God.

It was a style which had a long life.

MICHAEL WOOD (vo)

Indeed, it still speaks power to us today.
ART OF THE WESTERN WORLD

PROGRAM FIVE:
REALMS OF LIGHT

PART TWO:
THE BAROQUE IN SPAIN AND THE NETHERLANDS

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356 West 58th Street
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MICHAEL WOOD (vo)

The equestrian portrait — the man on horseback — the standard mode for portraying aristocratic and royal rulers. The ruler powerfully up, the subject safely down.

Kings and princes were trained to ride horses in the improbable manner that we see portrayed in equestrian portraits. The idea was that they should be seen to control a rearing horse with just one hand on the reins. Surely such a person could confidently rule and command a kingdom.

MICHAEL WOOD (sof)

Images of power tell us a great deal about the people who make them, but even more about the people who commission them.
The dynastic monarchs of 17th century Europe, their power increasingly challenged by far-reaching social and economic change, sought to present themselves as the heirs of the Roman Emperors - their authority divinely ordained.

For them, art was an instrument of state power - just as armies were important in directing and maintaining the absolute obedience of their subjects.

We have seen how the Counter-Reformation Church demanded of its artists that their images should inflame the religious imagination of the people. Just so, kings required of their court painters that their images should convey a sense of their benevolence, their dignity, their wealth, their taste, and their divine right to rule.
MICHAEL WOOD (vo)

In 1622, Maria de’ Medici, the widow of King Henry IV of France, commissioned the Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens to paint a series of more than thirty enormous canvases. They were to commemorate the four years when she ruled as Regent: from the murder of her husband until her son, Louis XIII, came of age in 1614.

Even though Maria was only the Regent and not really the Queen at all, Rubens employs the full apparatus of glamour, power and glory to proclaim the greatness of her rule. Her late husband, King Henry, is shown being carried off to Heaven. Yet all the action rushes towards Maria, whose position in the painting is higher than the King’s - a little odd since he is the one on his way to Heaven.
But, it is in the religious paintings that Rubens pulls out all the stops. His church paintings, such as the Descent from the Cross in the cathedral at Antwerp, serve the requirements of Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation ideology - inspiring faith, inducing piety. The immediacy and individuality of the figures, the use of great circling arcs in the sweeping compositions, his dazzling use of color, all contribute to the heightened emotionalism that was intended to lift the spectator out of the everyday world into a state of exaltation. His works are the most powerful expression of triumphant Christianity.
MICHAEL WOOD (vo) (CONT'D)

Rubens achieved his success early, as we see in this youthful self-portrait together with his first wife. He was the superstar of the art world of the day - the most-collected painter of his time and the most esteemed court painter in Europe when, in 1628, he was summoned to Spain to paint the king.

From his capital at Madrid, Philip IV ruled the greatest empire in the world, with dominions stretching from the Philippines to Peru. But, bogged down by a long war in the Netherlands, the most powerful state in Europe was about to slip into decline.

As so often in history, at a time beset with uncertainty, the arts flourished.
MICHAEL WOOD (vo) (CONT'D)

Of the painters he met at Philip's court, Rubens was particularly impressed by one - the young Diego Velázquez.

Velázquez was an original who would paint a classical subject like the god Bacchus - getting drunk with a group of real peasants.

Velázquez first drew the attention of the court with his early paintings of simple, unheroic subjects of daily life - what we call "genre paintings."

They were startling pictures, depicting things never before painted - such as the precise moment at which cooking eggs solidified.

Like many of the young painters of his time, Velázquez was profoundly influenced by the naturalism of the Italian Caravaggio.
Michael Wood (vo) (cont'd)

Caravaggio placed miraculous event in a familiar naturalistic setting.

Velázquez fused the real and the mythological to create a new, psychologically penetrating reality. In The Forge of Vulcan, he chooses the moment when the god Apollo tells Vulcan that his wife, Venus, is making love to Mars, the god of war. Velázquez combines theatrical gesture with the astonished faces of real workmen set in an authentic forge.

He quickly became a favorite portrait painter of King Philip.

As court painter, Velázquez would make a portrait of one of the royal family. In his studio, assistants then made copies which were sent out to foreign courts. This was an important part of the diplomatic process of the day, especially of the business of finding marriage partners for royal offspring.
Secure in his position as court painter, Velázquez turned his attention to formal and painterly innovation.

In his portraits of the jesters and dwarfs at the court, Velázquez was free to experiment. He understood that paintings made according to the classical rules produced something other than what the eye sees. The eye cannot focus simultaneously on different planes. Here, Velázquez treats the background to a portrait as a blur. It works the way the eye sees.

The boldest and most daring of Velázquez’ paintings is explored for us by Professor Simon Schama of Harvard University.
SIMON SCHAMA WITH LAS MENINAS,
Prado, Madrid
(Original Footage)

SIMON SCHAMA (sof)

Las Meninas is in the most literal sense a challenging painting.
Coming on it, we are challenged by no less than six pairs of eyes trained intently on us. The effect is distinctly unsettling. It's rather as though we'd blundered into a corner of the royal domain where we had no business being.
But one pair of eyes and one pair of hands — those of the artist — ensure that once we have strayed into Velázquez' magic box — we can't casually take our leave and move on to whatever else happens to be in the next gallery.

Pinned to the spot by the most extraordinary visual conundrum ever painted, our first reaction is probably to find out, as best as we can, "What exactly is going on here?"
SIMON SCHAMA WITH LAS MENINAS, Prado, Madrid (Original Footage)

SIMON SCHAMA (cont’d)
The most incurious explanation, but one we can surely start with, is that Velázquez has offered us an informal glimpse into his working day, producing one of the many portraits he executed of the royal princesses, designed to advertise their desirability in one of the marriages on which dynastic politics so crucially turned.

Royal in-breeding had its problems, especially for the Spanish Habsburgs, exaggerating their family trademarks: pop eyes and lantern chin. And as if to compensate for this unpromising raw material, Velázquez provided brilliant production numbers, gorgeously costumed, using a daring blob-and-blotch technique to give the illusion of a dancing light playing on the kind of fabric—silks, satins, and taffetas—that would best show them off.
SIMON SCHAMA WITH LAS MENINAS, Prado, Madrid (Original Footage)

(Cont'd)

What else do we know for sure about this painting? From an account published half a century after Velázquez' death, we know that the scene is set in the royal palace of the Alcazar in a room set aside for the use of the royal painter, one which he turned into his studio.

Velázquez himself had been given responsibility for decorating the palace and installing its paintings, including two by Rubens that we can see, rather dimly, hanging at the back of the painting.
SIMON SCHAMA WITH LAS MENINAS,
Prado, Madrid
(Original Footage)

SIMON SCHAMA (sot) (CONT'D)

The same account manages to
identify nearly everybody in the
composition: the five-year-old
princess – the Infanta Margarita;
the maids of honor, the meninas
themselves; courtiers and guards.
By setting himself down amidst all
this royal company, Velàzquez,
decorated with the knightly cross
of Santiago, is staking out a claim
to the nobility of his calling in a
culture where to be a painter
usually precluded being a
gentleman.
SIMON SCHAMA WITH LAS MENINAS,
Prado, Madrid
(Original Footage)

SIMON SCHAMA (sof) (CONT'D)

The real subject of Las Meninas is
not the royal princess. Still less
is it Velázquez' social
pretensions. The true subject is
the art of painting itself. In the
course of the painting, Velázquez
shows us his whole box of tricks:
ilusions of space, depth and
perspective. Yet he always
withholds from us the exact means
by which he executes those
extraordinary effects and
illusions. Las Meninas really is a
conjuring trick of the greatest
genius.
SIMON SCHAMA WITH LAS MENINAS, Prado, Madrid
(Original Footage)

SIMON SCHAMA (sdf) (CONT'D)

Like all conjuring tricks it teases and provokes us by multiplying uncertainties. We can't even be sure of the exact subject matter of the painting on which Velázquez is working and whose surface is actually hidden from us. Perhaps it is not of the princess at the front of the painting but a portrait of the King and Queen whose image we belatedly realize is reflected on the mirror at the back wall.

Yet, in this cunning game between artist and beholder, there is a third possibility. Namely that that mirror reflection is not actually of the painting, but of the real King and Queen who have dropped by to observe, like royal eavesdroppers, their artist at work.
Now, in that case, this would put me, in front of the picture plane, in the disconcerting position of the shoes of Philip IV.

In all likelihood the painting was meant for the private pleasure of the King alone and the privileged eavesdropping implied by the reflection would certainly explain all the attentiveness of those gazes, directed in different ways at the royal intruder.

Yet there is nothing deferential about this painting at all. In this realm it is the artist rather than the King who is sovereign.

Well, after all these amazing visual fireworks, it comes as something of an anti-climax to learn that Velázquez spent the later part of his life in an almost obsessive quest for gentlemanly status.
The snobbery that made him hunger to be a Knight of the Order of Santiago may seem degrading to us, perhaps. After all, the nobility of the man lay in his art which he had taken to undreamt of levels of sophistication and technical virtuosity. Perhaps our disappointment is just a measure of the huge distance from his culture to ours. His sublimely confident play with illusion and reality, with certainty and uncertainty seems to make us want to recruit him as a fellow-traveler of the modern world. But the Knight of the Order of Santiago, surrounded by other servants of the cult of royalty – dwarves, maids of honor, princesses, and courtiers – stares back at us, the hidden contents of his enigmatic painting forever denying us that familiarity.
MICHAEL WOOD (vo)

Even more successfully than Velázquez, Rubens played the court game to perfection. As the years passed, honors piled up. He was knighted. He undertook difficult diplomatic missions. But religious and territorial wars in northern Europe raged on. Rubens grew discouraged.

He withdrew from court and public life and went home to the baronial house he owned in Antwerp. His first wife had long since died and he married the sixteen-year-old Helena Fourment. It has been suggested that he was satirically alluding to himself and Helena when he painted this aging but still lusty satyr carrying off a young nymph.

His paintings joyfully and sensually celebrated his love for Helena.
VIEW OF CASTLE OF STEEN, Belgium (Original Footage)

Rubens, LANDSCAPE WITH CASTLE OF STEEN (Transparency - Bridgeman/Art Resource)

Rubens, THE CASTLE PARK (Transparency - Saskia/Art Resource)

BOATS ON IJSSELMEER, Netherlands (Stock Footage - Jewish Museum)

VIEWS NEAR SCHERMERHORN, Netherlands (Original Footage)

MICHAEL WOOD (vo) (CONT'D)

He purchased the Castle of Steen and, with his family and his titles, retired to a twilight fantasy of country life as the Lord of Steen.

Rubens' landscapes are suffused with a kind of nostalgia. They evoke a dream of an aristocratic life—a life based on the ownership of land.

Today, it's only half an hour or so by car or train from the landlocked aristocratic landscape that Rubens painted to the seascapes, rivers, and canals of the Dutch Netherlands.

Though not far apart physically, these two societies were as different at heart as the landscapes they inhabited.
MICHAEL WOOD (vo) (CONT'D)

The Dutch escaped from feudalism by making new land. They built dikes against the sea in a vast communal effort that continues to this day. They made their own precarious land, and their peculiar geography made them.

Vermeer's View of Delft shows us a secure town that has confidently mastered its difficult environment.

The sea shaped Dutch society. But eighty bitter years of a cruel and bloody war for independence from their Spanish rulers created a Dutch nation.

In the middle of the seventeenth century, the seven northern provinces of the Netherlands emerged victorious from their struggle for independence and established the predominantly Protestant Dutch Republic.
MICHAEL WOOD (VO) (CONF'D)

In a Europe dominated by absolutism and Catholic monarchies - Spain, France, Austria - the Republic was an island of relative freedom.

MICHAEL WOOD (SOF)

And the Town Hall of the Dutch city of Amsterdam, built in the 17th century, tells us something about the life and the ideals of the Dutch Republic. It has none of the qualities of absolutist architecture. Here, no grand colonnade leads the world in to a central focus as at St. Peter's, Rome. No succession of rooms, and corridors, and staircases takes us to the monarch's bedroom, as at Louis XIV's palace at Versailles. What you have here in Amsterdam are seven simple, unpretentious doorways.
MICHAEL WOOD ON-CAMERA AT AMSTERDAM TOWN HALL
(Original Footage)

MICHAEL WOOD (sof) (CONT'D)
The architecture of the new Town Hall, then, is an embodiment of the independent political aspirations of the Netherlands, an expression of Amsterdam's sense of itself as a free city at the center of the world.

MICHAEL WOOD (vo)
In the 17th century, the Dutch city of Amsterdam was the greatest economic power in the world, a vast marketplace, where every kind of goods could be had - pepper, whale oil, Japanese lacquer, cloth, wine.

The Dutch became rich.

They were the most urban society in Europe - literate, stable, well-fed, and decently housed.
They knew themselves to be fortunate. They strongly identified with the chosen people of the Old Testament — with all that implied about the need for piety and obedience to God’s will.

In this peculiar new society, artists could not look to the traditional sources of patronage. There was no royal court. And the Dutch Protestant churches had been stripped of pictures, as we can see in this painting of the Mariakerk in Utrecht by Pieter Saenredam.

Nevertheless, the Netherlands experienced an explosion in the production and consumption of art. The first mass art market in history arose because, for the first time, ordinary people bought paintings, etchings, and drawings. Artists produced in large quantity for that market.
J. Cats, ILLUSTRATION FROM BOOK
(Black & White Photograph - Morgan Library)

Willem Claeszoon Heda, STILL LIFE WITH TROUT, Mauritshuis, The Hague (Original Footage)

Jan Steen, THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (Original Footage)

Jan Vermeer, WOMAN WEIGHING PEARLS (Transparency - National Gallery, Washington, D.C.)

MICHAEL WOOD (vo) (CONT'D)

The society was defining itself in the images it produced.

The simplicity of these domestic scenes is often deceptive. This Still Life with Trout by Willem Claeszoon Heda, while reassuring the Dutch of the plenty in their lives also warns them of the remorseless passage of time.

Jan Steen’s comic painting The World Upside Down was intended to amuse. But it also cautions against the dangers of excess. Here drink and sexual license cause a household to slide into complete domestic disorder.

Jan Vermeer’s Woman Weighing Pearls stands before a painting of the Last Judgment, warning that wealth must not distract us from our ultimate fate.
Jan Vermeer, WOMAN WEIGHING PEARLS (Transparency - National Gallery, Washington, D.C.)

MICHAEL WOOD (vo) (CONT'D)

The Dutch genre paintings are not just innocent images of everyday life, but of the problems and moral crises of everyday life. Like other works of the Baroque period, they convey a message.

Group portraits are still important today. In the seventeenth century Netherlands they were essential, for power in the Dutch Republic was held not by a prince, but by corporate bodies, boards of governors, councils. And so the group portrait was, for the Dutch, the equivalent of the equestrian portrait in aristocratic and dynastic states.

In the hands of the most remarkable of the Dutch painters, the group portrait becomes an intense and purposeful expression of the group ethos.

The Nightwatch.
More has been written about Rembrandt than any other painter in the history of western art. But if we had to think of one word that would sum up the essence of that art it would probably be "drama". All the elements of Rembrandt's art were put to the service of drama, none more so, perhaps, than light.

His use of light was at the opposite extreme from Vermeer's. The Delft painter flooded his figures with an even, serene radiance, so that they sparkled with the intensity of an image caught by a lens. Rembrandt, on the other hand, turned the lights down low, plunging his histories into a theatrical darkness, the better to use his spotlight for dramatic emphasis and expressive brilliance.
The painting was one of Rembrandt's most important assignments but it was also, perhaps, one of the most difficult.

Militia pieces were hard work. In this picture by Nicholas Eliaszoon Pickenoy, we can see that they were much like boardroom or team photographs, expressions of the collective spirit. On the other hand, each of the sitters was paying a tidy sum to have his own individual likeness rendered as faithfully and as flatteringly as possible.

So, conventionally, they are lined up in front of us in a shallow, elongated space, marked out from each other just by variations in uniform or by gestures of painful artificiality.
SIMON SCHAMA (sof) (CONT'D)

Rembrandt brushed aside all these compromises. Instead of lining-up his figures in a frieze-like format, he scooped out great hollows of recessed space at the back and front of the painting. And this sculpted space really gave Rembrandt the freedom that he needed to deploy his troops with animation.

The drastically foreshortened hand of Captain Banning Kok and the drastically foreshortened halberd - that weapon there - of Lieutenant Ruytenbergh, give the painting the quality of propulsion, so much movement forward that it almost threatens to trample the beholder with an irresistible onrush of energy.

The painter seems to make virtue out of energetic disorder. It is, after all, how the Dutch often liked to see themselves: full of dynamism and high spirits.
SIMON SCHAMA WITH NIGHTWATCH, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (Original Footage)

SIMON SCHAMA (sof) (CONT’D)

At the same time, Rembrandt did his best to give the group a more soldierly appearance. The figures we see here loading a musket, shooting it off, dangerously close to the Lieutenant’s hat, and blowing the powder away from the top of the gun, all correspond to the war-like values which this group of soldiers still liked to believe they embodied.

It’s a group portrait and a history painting; something that testifies to the reassuring disorderliness of plain citizens. It’s really chaos on an epic scale, something which immediately expresses not dumb discipline but high animal spirits, a boisterous riot of energy, movement and visual noise that explodes out from its center towards us: in every sense, to give it its correct title, The March Out of the Company of Frans Banning Kok.
Michael Wood (vo)

The flair for drama that invests The Nightwatch with so much energy carries over into Rembrandt's more intimate work. His portraits go far beyond the mere rendering of facial features and social position. In the eyes of Rembrandt's subjects, we read personal and private history—and psychological nuance.

Rembrandt made this self-portrait at the age of twenty-three.

It is Rembrandt's steady, deep, probing gaze, that penetrating look to something beyond the surface...that distinguishes what many consider his greatest work—that monument of self-scrutiny: his self-portraits.

In about forty paintings, 20 engravings and 10 drawings Rembrandt offers us himself, an individual.
Michael Wood (vo) (cont'd)

This extended act of self-portraiture was unprecedented in western art.

It may be instructive to look once more at Velázquez' great meditation on art. The painter confronts us with a challenging stare, daring us to follow his lead in contemplating the nature of perceived reality. But Velázquez stands in a highly structured social and political framework which is part and parcel of the meaning of the painting.
Rembrandt, SELF-PORTRAIT, The Iveagh Bequest, Kenwood (Transparency - The Iveagh Bequest, Kenwood (English Heritage))

Rembrandt, SELF-PORTRAIT, Frick Collection (Transparency - Art Resource)

Rembrandt, SELF-PORTRAIT, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (Original Footage)

MICHAEL WOOD (vo) (CONT'D)

Rembrandt also portrays himself confronting the viewer and in relation to his craft. But Rembrandt is entirely alone, with his palette ready to define himself in his characteristic thick impasto, the paint troweled on and worked with his fingers rather than with the brush. Rembrandt, in his solitude, with his direct look and with his coarse, visibly-applied paint asserts his presence, his selfness, his individuality as the matter for contemplation.

MICHAEL WOOD (sof)

In the story of western art, the 17th century, the age of Baroque, began, through much of Europe, in subjection to the ideals of the Italian Renaissance. But by the end of the century, new artistic tastes had developed, new ways of seeing the world.
Michael Wood (sof) (cont'd)

Boldly naturalistic, richly sensual, ambitiously intellectual, passionate and profound, Baroque artists had served a variety of masters in achieving that. They had, as always, provided the images of power for absolute monarchs whose subjects now increasingly saw them as all too mortal. They had provided religious images to bolster a faith shaken by the rise of modern science and by religious conflict.

But something else had happened. By the end of the century, western artists had achieved, as never before, the depiction of inwardness.

Michael Wood (vo)

Look how Rembrandt fixes our gaze, draws us in, plays with our emotions, compelling our attention to the mystery of a single human heart.