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## THE PERIOD'S FAVOURITE ELEMENT... – WATER IN THE BAROQUE CULTURE

**ABSTRACT:** The utmost fluidity in the Baroque was best presented by its one, and true element –the water itself. In Baroque culture water was indeed everywhere; it flowed in the great marine paintings of Dutch seventeenth century, it rippled as a powerful metaphor through Baroque poetry and, more than anything, it was embodied in its own liquid architecture. Through the construction of fountains it could be argued, Baroque art achieved almost a new art form that used respectively marble and bronze, as well as the movement of water. This was the architecture at its most ephemeral and spread with unbelievable speed throughout the Baroque world.

The water proliferated through 17<sup>th</sup> century gardens and it was simultaneously an image of power and a repository of a greater symbolic force. It denoted one of the great elements of which our world is composed, and it enabled the garden to truly resemble a microcosm of the world. Versailles and Chantilly stand as grand monuments of the water as a symbol of absolutist earthly powers, so vast that even the natural elements had to be subjected to it.

But water was not only the favourite element of the Baroque due to its embodiment of earthly and symbolic authority; it worked as a preferred metaphor of the transience of life and our mortal selves. At that period, water was synonymous not only with fluidity but with *flux*, a time itself.

**KEYWORDS:** water, Baroque, landscape, liquid mirrors, fountains, transience, Baroque poetry.

Although water and its complex panoply of connotations figured greatly in all periods of arts and culture (from River Gods of the classical world to the notions of baptism and purification that the water conveyed in Christian symbolism), in the Baroque age it acquired an additional wealth of meaning, and furthermore it became the element most related with the Baroque. In his prominent *La Litterature de l'age Baroque en France* Jean Rousset wrote a famous metaphor that the Baroque façade *is a Renaissance façade submerged in the moving*

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*water, or more precisely its reflection in the rippling water, where the entire edifice moves in the rhythm of the waves* (ROUSSET 1968: 157). Such strong association of the Baroque with water was not accidental and was already acknowledged a century earlier by Heinrich Wölfflin in his famous study of the Renaissance and Baroque. Wölfflin named it *the period's favorite element* thus recognizing the importance water and its qualities held for the proper understanding of the Baroque culture (WÖLFFLIN 1964: 54–156).

As was often the case in this age of pluralities, where the concepts of time, space and the man were manifold and polyphonic, Baroque's interest in the element of water took upon itself many semblances. It encompassed visual and performing arts, architecture and poetry, literature and garden design. Water was portrayed with utmost swirl in the paintings of the Dutch Golden Age, it flowed eloquently thorough Baroque poetry, it rippled in the elaborate water machines on the stages throughout Europe, and it even merited its own liquid architecture in the spectacular fountain design. Never before in early modern culture the fountains gained such magnificence and importance, and not until Bernini's creations water was ever used as a constitutive element in its own right. Consequently, in age of the Baroque, water was present in both its physical and metaphorical sense, conveying in its flux the plethora of meanings that would be analysed through this paper.

The lure of water for the Baroque man resided in its physical qualities. Water displayed the same characteristics so often attributed to this troubled epoch – it was ambivalent by its very nature, a slippery mutable substance that adjusted to any space it occupied (TODOROVIĆ 2017: 117–154). The mutability as well as adaptability were often associated not only with the culture of the period, but also with the style itself. In the early modern age, there was not a style that possessed such remarkable ability of adaptation and appropriation, the qualities that enabled the Baroque to expand from the purely European to the first global culture. Only through its pronounced ability to appropriate elements from other cultures or confessions, whether in South America, England or the Archbishopric of Karlovci, the Baroque became a universal phenomenon. (DAVIDSON 2007)

As this quality of mutability was defining the macrocosm of the Baroque world, it was equally present in the microcosm, shaping a novel understating of man. Michel de Montaigne already declared that our *life is nothing but movement* (MONTAIGNE 1958: 840), while the English poet William Drummond wrote *that the only constant is in constant change* (CUNNINGHAM 1833: 115), announcing the epoch whose main protagonist was believed to be in perpetual transformation. The epoch and the man were thus constantly reflected in myriad waters that flowed through the arts of the period. As Luis de Camoes wrote:

Times ever change and with them our wills  
Each being changes, as does confidence,  
For all the world is made of naught but change,  
Assuming qualities forever new. (SEGEL 1974: 207)

The water in the Baroque held yet another set of rather contrary associations. Despite its mutability, water was also highly perishable. Once devoid of a receptacle it lost its shape

and dissolved, it was consumed or evaporated – thus exemplifying the quality of the ephemerality so beloved by the Baroque age. At the time when the subject of transience and brevity of one's existence, was a pivotal one for the Catholics and Protestants alike, the fleetingness of water became one of preferred metaphors (TODOROVIC 2012: 95–123). Its inconstancy appeared with equal measure in the Baroque poetry and in Baroque visual arts. Lakes, rivers, streams and waterfalls came to stand for both the inconstancy of nature and of our mortal selves. From *inconstant glass* and liquid mirrors in the poems of de Cerisy and Le Moyne to the rushing streams in the paintings of Salvator Rosa, Jacob van Ruisdael – the Baroque man reflected the mutability of life in the volatility of moving waters.

### Disquiet, Disaster, Disruption

The notion of time and transience continued one of the great obsessions of the Baroque age, then the most inconstant element of them all, the water, was thought to epitomize it in its entirety. Although more dramatic representations of water would be discussed further, it was already present in many seemingly idyllic landscapes of the age. Several classical French landscapes created by Nicolas Poussin, Gaspard Dughet or Sebastien Bourdon represent not only the Arcadian abode filled with lush vegetation, golden light, and tranquil waters, but also a more sinister image of nature. Not unlike its idyllic counterparts these depictions of nature were images of fantasy. They were careful constructs of land and water aimed to simultaneously communicate a dual message – that of perfect Arcadian realm and its ominous reverse, Arcadia in the Shadow. While the most famous of these shadowy Arcadias, Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego*, uses the image of a tombstone as a direct and overt reference to death and transience, those shaded landscapes of his contemporaries employed rather different symbolism. They were mostly populated by classical ruins and rushing or moving waters to denote fleetingness of our earthly existence. As in the poetry of the period, Baroque artists used the symbolism and the ephemerality of elements to represent the instability of human condition. As Giovanni Sempronio so eloquently wrote:

Oh Lord what thing is a man? (...)  
 A mist which springs from earth and vanishes,  
 A foam which rises from the sea and falls;  
 A bloom which April brings to life and wilts;  
 A lighting bolt, which burns and cuts the air;  
 The smoke which rises in the sky and fades (SEGEL 1974: 220).

In his *Landscape with Ruins* from a private collection Gaspard Dughet combines all the elements of the Arcadian nature with the subtle warning of our impermanence. A ruin of a Roman temple covered in weeds and ivy towers over the undulating lush landscape. Directly below this focal image of the painting, stands a large waterfall. In the foreground, several sheep, those inevitable inhabitants of idyllic worlds peacefully graze on the grass, while their shepherds sit by the rushing waters.

Despite the presence of the shepherds and their tranquil flock, this painting does not convey only the image of the Golden Age, but also its more ominous reverse. The presence of the ruined temple and the waterfall both denote the all-obliterating flight of time, the Great Destroyer. While the crumbling temple reminds the beholder that even the greatest Empires and most revered divinities fall into the chasm of oblivion, the presence of those great masses of rushing and plunging waters further accentuate the message of transience. The swishing waves and hurling mist add the dynamism to the depicted scene, investing this serene land with the notion of ceaseless movement, and equally unrelenting passage of time. Those forces, that Baroque man knew so well, no one would be able to escape.

A similar paring of flowing waters and the picturesque, but foreboding ruins, is the main subject of the painting *Landscape with the Mill and Ruins* (1653) by Jacob van Ruisdael nowadays in the Art Gallery of South Australia<sup>1</sup>. Like his French colleague, Ruisdael was far more known for depicting visions of the Golden Age, but in this painting his vision of perfection contained a somber undertone. The green and abundant vegetation and the rippling stream could pass as the image of Arcadian lands if it were not for the ruins of the mill and the specific treatment of the trees around it. Right above the mill stands a large, twisted tree whose main branches appear to be scorched by lightning. Its ruinous state seems to mirror architectural ruin underneath, both reflecting the inexorable flight of time, as unstoppable as the flowing waters in the foreground. The flight and flow forever equated in one grand image of impermanence. Seen as the compendium of symbols this dual landscape has a similar function to vanitas scenes of the Dutch Golden age which at the first glance they appear to the beholder as lavish and decorative still-lives, only to be revealed as the emblems of life's fleeting flow.

These two paintings use the symbolism of the ephemerality of water in a rather subtle form. Far more disturbing and rather more dramatic is a specific type of images of the sea that proliferated in the age of the Baroque. Unlike their tranquil counterparts, the Dutch marine paintings, both visions of patriotic fervor and displays of maritime glory of the Netherlands, depict waters as agents of disquiet, disaster, and disruption.

Long before the Romantics constructed the notion of the sublime, tempests and floods, deluges and shipwrecks populated the canvases throughout the Baroque world. Artists all over Europe, from Poussin in France, Rubens in Flanders, Carlo Sarazeni in Venice to Backhuysen in the Netherlands, incorporated images of tempests and deluges into their works aiming to portray the growing disquiet of their times (GOEDE 1980).

Much more acutely than Arcadias in the Shadow these scenes although robed into the mantle of the Old or New Testament themes, were to stand as a foreboding metaphor of their quotidian. In the rendering of tempests, one perceived a key distinction between the Baroque and the Renaissance understanding of nature, and symbolic use of water in its depiction. In the Baroque age nature is so often a dream in the shadow. The shattering

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<sup>1</sup> AGSA Inv.no.853P6 <https://www.agsa.sa.gov.au/collection-publications/collection/works/landscape-with-a-mill-run-and-ruins/23865/>

of the religious and political systems existing for centuries, the time of great wars, bloodsheds and terrors left the Baroque man disillusioned, and doubtful in the face of ideal, though perfected nature of Arcadia (GREENBLAT 1980; MARAVALL 1986: 179–184). It was truly the age where the man was no more Alberti's mortal god, but a doubtful and weary *Hercules on the crossroads*. Man was no longer the center of all things, but the one who knew that his years on earth *were tempest, fire, shadow, mist and nothing* (SEGEL 1974: 239).

Although the Flood had been one of time-honored themes of Christian iconography from the beginning, now the repertoire of maritime calamities was greatly augmented. It is nowhere more evident than in Poussin's painting of *Winter, Deluge, or the Last Judgement*, from the famous series *The Four Seasons* (1660–1664) kept in the Louvre (MILOVANOVIC 2021: 209–211).<sup>2</sup>

His intensely disconcerting image of winter is not, as was customary with his contemporaries, a representation of one of the seasons, a bare landscape, or the one robed in ice and snow. It is a winter perceived as an entire realm of disquiet, the age of deluge. This is a catastrophe of majestic proportions, an image of death and destruction not only of the nature but of the humanity itself. The entire scene is dominated by dark ominous waters, and its sense of despair is surpassed only by the deeply menacing image of the stormy skies above. The only light is produced by the flashing of the lightning bolts that intersect the sky and illuminate groups of desperate men and women struggling to escape the rising waters. Amid all the prevailing chaos, one figure stands out – the figure of man perched upon the rock with his clasped hands in prayer turned towards the sky. The lone ray of sun break right above the Noah's Ark as a glimmer of hope, as a subtle sign of Divine intervention stands alone (MILOVANOVIC, SZANTO 2015). But it looks as a fragment, almost an afterthought, since the rest of the canvas is given to the apocalyptic vision of the land left without God, without pardon and without salvation. For Poussin the winter of humanity so vividly depicted, could be overcome only through faith and the action of the church. Although it was more than an expected moralizing concept at the time of Counter Reformation, Poussin introduced the element of doubt, skepticism and uncertainty. The symbol of salvation appears as a mere footnote, not as a glorifying propaganda piece for the *Ecclesia Triumphans*. Just as his shepherds in Arcadia had to accept that Arcadia is no longer, even in the story of the Deluge the salvation is not a certainty. In the turbulent age of destruction, a tempest seemed the most fitting metaphor.

In the period of the greatest Dutch commercial and economic ascent and equally successful artistic achievements, Dutch artists mastered a novel subject of marine painting. These works were a patriotic ode to the Republic and to the glories of this great seafaring nation. During this period artists such as Jacob van Ruisdael, Jan Porcellis, Simon de Vlieger, Ludolf Backhuysen created works that were a dazzling construction of light, air and above all of water itself (GOEDE 1980). While these works held the greatest importance as displays of artistic virtuosity, they were almost never just depictions of seascapes. More

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<sup>2</sup> Louvre Inv.no. 7306, <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/clo10066113>

commonly they incorporated famous commercial and military vessels or commemorated great victories that were commissioned by wealthy patrons to promote the glory of their achievements and their trade. Moreover, as it was the case with Dutch still-lives, these paintings often conveyed a hidden religious symbolism. Tranquil seas and limpid waters, soft light and gliding ships all denoted the tranquility of the soul upon its journey to safe Haven(s) of devout Protestantism.

Beside these essays on sea, wind and light, there were subjects that carried messages of profound disquiet. Tempests, shipwrecks and the raging sea proliferated through Dutch art bearing symbols of great struggles and temptations not only of sailors but of all the souls in those unsettling times.

The painting by Ludolf Backhuysen *Ships in Distress of the Rocky Coast* (1667) in the National Gallery of Washington possesses all the aspects of these turbulent seascapes.<sup>3</sup> The entire scene appears to be one grand vortex of sea light, sky, and rocks. In their midst, with the last morsel of strength, three large vessels are contending turbulent waves. The prevailing sense of peril is further accentuated by ragged rocks and intense contrasts of light and shadow that envelop the scene. Everything seems in furious and fervent movement, as if the violent swirls of the sea have given impetus to equally volatile whirls of clouds and twisted formations of the rocks that awaiting the shattered vessels.

All the ships display the Dutch flag, and their shape suggests merchant boats with sails torn and frayed. Moreover, in the lower right corner only the top of a mast emerges from the ominous gray waves, indicating that one ship had sunk already. Understood symbolically, the ship and its crew are the microcosm of the Republic itself, then tossed upon tempestuous seas of international politics.<sup>4</sup> As in Poussin's dark image of *Winter* this immediately proposes the vision of a country and man himself past salvation. It is the sea of the last days, a desolate seascape beyond hope, where no trade and no riches could offer either safety or atonement. But there is still a glimmer of hope, as the sun's rosy rays are slowly breaking through the stormy clouds in the upper left corner of the painting.

Despite allusions to commerce and the state of the Republic, this is above all, a grand maritime allegory of transience. It was composed, in the same way that many still-lives were constructed, to act as a constant reminder to their beholders, that nothing lasts, nothing is certain, that only true piety prevails. There are no skulls or hourglasses, no soap bubbles nor withering roses, but the notion of ephemerality of our earthly existence is equally compelling.

The symbol of shipwrecks and ships in the storm was a rather popular political allegory and despite these apocalyptic maritime scenes it also greatly populated emblem books of the period. From Alciati's *Emblemata* (1615) to the *Emblemata* from Padua (1621) and a number of its Renaissance predecessors *Emblemata liber* (Lyon, 1550), *Emblematum libelus* (Paris, 1542) one encountered the image of the ship (often a galleon) at stormy seas.

<sup>3</sup> NGA Inv.no. 1985.29.1 <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.65898.html>

<sup>4</sup> See the catalogue entry <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.65898.html>, last accessed 1. 2. 2022.

It was the emblem of *Spes proxima* – or *Hope at hand*, the sentiment that was respectively conveyed both by Poussin's and Backhuysen's paintings. It is the emblem no. XLIII. whose subscription narrates the same concept as we've discussed in connection with our tempestuous images and not surprisingly it conveys political connotations.

Our country is battered by many a storm, and hope of future safety is all that we have.  
It is like a ship far put at sea driven along by the tempest and already gaping open to  
the salty waters-

Yet if the brothers of Helen, the shining stars, appear (*the Dioscuri – the protectors of  
sailors Castor and Polux*), then good hope revives the company's lost courage.<sup>5</sup>

Beside the emblem of peril and salvation at sea, Baroque emblematics offered several other emblems where the storm and shipwreck were the main protagonists of which the most interesting are: emblem CXLII *Princeps subditorum in columitatem procurans* with a large anchor enveloped by a dolphin floating upon the stormy sea (denoting the prince who cares for the safety of his subjects), and emblem LXXXVIII *In avaros vel quibus* (On avaricious or better being treated by strangers) with the image of a man being thrown overboard the ship on the stormy sea and a dolphin coming to his rescue. It referred to the story of the famous classical musician Arion who was saved by the dolphin in a storm, and signifies, despite a radically different context, a similar message – the sea seen as a peril, could be overcome through miraculous intervention.

However, Baroque depictions of tempests and storms did not necessarily portray such forlorn visions of humanity. In his *Neptune calming the storm* (1633)<sup>6</sup> in the Fogg Museum (Harvard Art Museum) Peter Paul Rubens depicts an entirely different atmosphere to Poussin's tempest of despair. Placed in the realm of classical mythology and populated by Olympic deities and their cortege of demi-gods and fantastical beings, the entire drama of the sea, sky and wind is turned into a grandiose stage spectacle. In this painting the fleet of magnificent ships in the background is saved from the raging tempest by the triumphant figure of Neptune in a water chariot pulled by an animated group of water horses. The grandiose and authoritative gesture of the god of the seas, halts the turbulent waves and casts the tempestuous clouds away. The fortuitous end of the sea voyage aided by the Neptune indicates that this is no ordinary journey. The fleet in the background belongs to Ferdinand Cardinal Infante of Spain, the Archbishop of Toledo, travelling from Barcelona in 1633, and the painting was created to celebrate his safe crossing.<sup>7</sup> Owing to Neptune's wondrous intervention, this image is not to be the warning of transience, but a propaganda piece of the highest order. Not only that the Cardinal Infante, a brother of King Philip IV of Spain, is the favorite of Olympic deities, but with their aid he could conquer the seas and overcome

<sup>5</sup> Emblem XLIII (italics mine) *Spes proxima*, from Andras Alciati, *Emblemata*, (Padua, 1621) available at the site Alciati at Glasgow, <https://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/alciati/>, accessed last January 10<sup>th</sup> 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Fogg museum Inv.no. 1942.174, <https://harvardartmuseums.org/art/299966>

<sup>7</sup> See the catalogue entry of the Fogg museum <https://harvardartmuseums.org/art/299966> <https://harvardartmuseums.org/art/299966>, accessed last 5. 2. 2022.

the transience itself. There is also a slight allusion to another classical hero – Aeneas himself. In Virgil's *Aeneid* Neptune rises from the depths of the sea to save Aeneas's fleet from the storm. Despite the fact that Ferdinand was the Cardinal of the Most Catholic Kingdom, his association with a Aeneas was a time-revered tradition of the Habsburg mythologization of sovereignty where they were lauded as the direct descendants of Aeneas (TANNER 1993).

The prevailing sense of spectacle and a theatrical rendering of the scene was very intentional, since the painting was in fact created as a *modello*, or a sketch, for the main scenography of Cardinal Infante's triumphal entry into Antwerp in late April of 1635 (TANNER 1993). Such triumphal entries were common practice in Dutch cities to show their allegiance to the Spanish Habsburgs and Rubens was commissioned to create the entire scene and stage design for the elaborate event in Antwerp. The entire spectacle would become one of the grandest opuses a Baroque artist created for a festival of state. The first stage of the progress of Cardinal Infante from Spain to Netherlands involved a rather perilous journey which was considerably delayed due to a powerful sea storm. Thus, the grandiose mythological celebration of this sea voyage, and its main protagonist, was created to celebrate the Habsburg Archbishop, under whose command were the elements and the time itself.

### Still and Liquid Mirrors

The mutability and volatility were not the only qualities of transience that the Baroque epoch recognized in the waters' glistening realm. The reflective power of the water's surface was employed to convey sheer fluidity of being and the transitory nature of the world itself. Thus, the shimmering and glittering surfaces of waters populated respectively the visual arts of the period and its poetry. From Hobbema to Claude le Loraine, waters flowed and rippled through Baroque paintings reminding their viewer that his own existence was as brief and as fickle as the shimmer of light on the passing wave (MELCHIOR BONNET 2002).

In its quest to transport the fluidity of existence to the Baroque audience, the arts of the period, often equated the glittering surfaces of mirrors and waters. They both produced flawed reflections, and inconstant images, and they equally inspired meditations upon insubstantiality of our presence. The particular concept of water as the agent of transience inspired one of renowned French poets of the age, Habert de Cerisy to compare water's surface to that of *inconstant glass* and liken it to portraits in constant movement.

Qi comme nel un beau miroir, dans sa glace inconstante  
De tous se voisines le peinture mouvante (ROUSSET 1968: 245).

The mirrors, and consequently their fluid counterparts, offered a wealth of possibilities for the exploration of the self and the transitory nature of one's presence. In the process of reflection, the mirrors initiated the process of self-reflection, thus becoming the preferred moralizing symbol from late Middle Ages and throughout the entire early modern



period. On the other hand, for its power to reflect likeness, the mirror bore the notions of vanity and death which acquired a new poignancy from the late sixteenth and throughout the seventeenth century.

In the arts of Northern Renaissance, in the works of such distinguished artists as Albrecht Dürer or Hans Baldung and later in Italian states as well, the mirror had an established role in the narratives on futility of vanity and death. All of them gazed with delight into their own reflections and inevitably connected these sins with the ill-fated object. Moreover, in the paintings of that age, mirrors usually glistened in the hands of young maidens, who were meant to remind us that life and existence like their beauty, were ephemeral, fragile and brief. Therefore, they were also accompanied by two ultimate agents of destruction, Death and Devil, that further emphasised the moralizing aspect of the represented scene (MELCHIOR BONNET 2002: 187–222).

Already in the late Renaissance this equation of Death with the Mirror departed from the realm of allegory and was included into the portraits of the period. One of interesting examples, Lukas Furtenagel's double *Portrait of Hans Burgkmair and his wife* (1529), nowadays in the Kunsthistorisches museum Vienna<sup>8</sup>, disconcertingly presaged the Baroque attitudes towards death, towards mirrors and time itself. The couple in the painting face the spectator and hold a convex mirror with the inscription *Know thyself*, and *That's what we really looked like, but in the mirror nothing but that*. Their expression is thoughtful and somber, befitting someone who's facing not one's own reflection, but a reminder of death. In the mirror's shimmering surface, instead of the reversed likeness of themselves, two white skulls return their gaze, reminding them what was to come. But that is only one side of this portrait. Beside looking at the mirror Hans Burgkmair is also facing and inviting the spectator with his outstretched hand. He is encouraging us all to follow his example, and his gaze – to contemplate the depths of the mirror and the chasms of ourselves (TODOROVIC 2012: 20–22).

Consequently, the mirror as both the agent of reflection and self-reflection, so disquietingly present at Furtenagel's painting, would become one of the prevailing applications of mirrors in the Baroque symbolism. In a world where the meditation on human existence held such central position – the inconstancy of its projection was a fitting metaphor for the brevity of life. Notions of reflection and self-reflection were united in one shimmering object.

Following these concepts Spanish Baroque painter Jusepe De Ribera portrays his *Philosopher* (1611/15?), in a private collection, sold at Christies in 2013, as a solemn middle-aged man deep in contemplation of the glistening mirror in his hands. Although rarely exhibited, Ribera's painting initiated several additional interpretations in recent scholarship. The depicted philosopher is often identified as Socrates, whose famous phrase *Know thyself*, which is so prominent in Furtenagel's portrait, is here fittingly illustrated.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the entire painting is also interpreted in a Christian context, where the beholder was supposed

<sup>8</sup> KHM Inv.no. Gemäldegalerie 924, <https://www.khm.at/en/objectdb/detail/768/?lv=detail>

<sup>9</sup> Christies Lot essay <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5701788>, accessed February 3<sup>rd</sup> 2022.

to be reminded of the renowned sentence of St. Paul from his Epistle to the Corinthians (First Epistle to Corinthians, 13) where the ideas of Socrates are given Christian connotations: *For now, we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face: now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I known.*<sup>10</sup> Unlike Furtenagel's double portrait here it is philosopher's own immaterial self that returns the gaze from the depths of the looking glass, and not the allegory of death. But that is only one level of understanding, since the message that Ribera's *Philosopher* projects is as complex and as manifold as Baroque notion of the mirror was. The image that the philosopher gazes into, is indeed his own likeness, but it appears clouded, dark and insubstantial. Such instability of the mirror reflection tacitly denotes the essential ephemerality of being, a concept of great importance for many philosophical works. This painting most aptly presents not only Ribera's notable classical erudition, but also how the mirror in his own age became the perfect double for the Baroque notion of the self.

As seen in Ribera's painting Baroque culture had a rather complex relationship with mirrors. They offered a multiple symbolism that, in this age of paradox, could encompass the entire intricacy of being. At the time when the polyphony of identities came to represent the individual of the age, when the notion of the fluid selves and fluid souls proliferated, these changing existences could be most fittingly captured in the ever-flowing inconstancy of mirror images.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, it could be said that the mirrors, both water and glass ones, served as the metaphor for the entirety of that fluid age of the Baroque. From their iridescent depths they returned the images that were both reverse and inconstant visions of reality. In the period when reality and illusions were seen as two sides of the same coin, or when illusion was a necessary accompaniment to reality, the distorted visions of the physical world became perfect metaphors for such worldviews. Life, presence and illusion were forever intertwined in one inseparable whole, as in the theatre play of Calderon della Barca:

What is life, an illusion, a shadow,  
A fiction, the greatest blessing (in life) is tiny,  
For all life is a dream, and dreams are only dreams (HILL, TREJO 1975: 185).

Even more importantly for our discussion, the mirror in the Baroque age became firmly associated with the concept of time itself. From the hands of maidens, the looking glass passed into the hands of that great fluid adversary – the allegory of Time. The image of time and transience was not only in the mirror like in Furtenagel's painting, but often the mirror was the very attribute of time itself, as in the poem of Giovanni Canalle:

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5701788>, accessed February 3<sup>rd</sup> 2022.

<sup>11</sup> As the history of mirrors and their reflections in European culture is impossible to contain in one paper, we would concentrate only on those aspects that are important for understanding the role of mirrors and their reflections had for the fluidity of the Baroque age.

(...)

This glass I hold reflects the foolish world,  
 In all its changes and from leap to leap,  
 I now prepare new forms and semblances (SEGEL 1974: 221)

Thus mirrors, and as we shall see also liquid mirrors, so often accompanied vanitas scenes throughout the Baroque world. The ominous reflection from the Furtenagel's portrait came to be one of the main protagonists of the painting. Those somber looking glasses were often paired with the symbols of death-time or time as death that curious chimera of Baroque imagination that united two ultimate powers over humanity. In the usual repertoire of hourglasses and soap bubbles, perishable luxuries, extinguished candles and fading roses, the mirror held a position of prominence next to the one of the most compelling symbols of ephemerality, the skull. Like in Canale's poem, the Time metaphorically held a mirror in his hand.

While in the vanitas painting of Cornelius Vermeulen *Still-life* (1688) the skull was placed by the mirror in the focal point of the painting, in the canvas of an anonymous Dutch master, the author went a step further and made the skull observe its own reflection in the mirror conveying the message of the world annihilated, where nothing remained but death and disquiet. However, not only mirrors but all reflective surfaces in vanitas paintings, like glass and silver sphere in Claez *Vanitas still-life with the Violin and Glass Ball*, (1628) or in Jacques de Gheyn's *Vanitas* piece from the Metropolitan museum (1603), appropriated the role of mirrors and reminded the beholder on utter insubstantiality of existence.

The message on brevity of life, and the transience of the world and ourselves, became even more powerful when the mirrors became utterly fluid, when they turned into water. Thus, particularly in Baroque poetry, the reflective water surfaces were employed as the ultimate agents of time, the bleak reminders of the fragility of human condition (KRONNEGER 1985: 245–260; GIORGI 2020).

One of the most famous poems that celebrated the shifting and elusive power of the liquid mirrors is *The Sea* by the French Baroque poet Le Moyne:

La Mer est le miroir de cette Mer d'essence,  
 ou nul estre ne flotte, ou tout estre est substance;  
 En sa bonace on voit un Dieu tranquille et doux;  
 On voit en sa colere un Dieu plein de courroux (ROUSSET 1968: 253).

Le Moyne creates an essay on fluidity within his poem – the fluidity of presence, of the world and the man himself. Analogous to the Baroque mirror rooms, constructed almost at the same time in Versailles, the reality and illusion mirror one another until the confine between the reality and unreality is virtually dissolved.

The equal principle of inversion of spaces and materials was at the same time one of the key principles of the Baroque illusionism depicted upon in the ceilings in San Ignazio by Padre Pozzo in Rome or in Franz Anton Maulbertsch fragmented visions on the dome

of Maria Treu, the Piarist church, in Vienna. There the stucco resembles painting, and the painting appears three dimensional as sculpture and nothing is what it appears to be. In these paintings as in *Le Moyne* poem, not only the illusion and reality are merged, but reversed until one cannot be distinguished from the other, until everything is amalgamated in one grand fluid vision.

The mirrors, both still and liquid ones, had an additional power to make inanimate animate, to induce the object with the power of motion, to initiate flow where there was none, confirming that the entire visible world, is pure motion. Such profoundly fluid worlds, created through the insertion of mirrors, were most absorbing in the visions of heaven composed in the churches of the Baroque world. From the Mirror Chapel of Clementinum in Prague (TODOROVIC 2012: 128–130) to the Church of Oaxaca in Mexico (Chapel of Senor de Tlacolula), mirrors were implemented into ceiling decoration to depict heavens in motion and their flickering reflections enveloped the congregation in the 'Divine light', testifying that the flow was an equally prevailing principle of the Divine realm and of the earthly abode. By entering into such spaces, the beholder of the Heavenly spheres, was supposed also to symbolically reflect upon him-herself and explore the depths of his soul. While in Prague in the chapel of the Jesuit college the mirrors only heighten the fluidity of the surrounding ceiling and wall decorations, in Oaxaca they had the dual function. The gleaming, ever moving, images of eight large mirrors set the highly ornate ceiling in the everlasting motion, and also drew additional light in the rather dark space of the chapel.

For *Le Moyne*, Padre Pozzo, Jusepe Ribera, Maulbertsch and for many of their contemporaries, life was a shadow, a flux, a mere appearance. Thus, liquid, and real mirrors in painting as in poetry captured so fittingly this insubstantiality and inconstancy of vision and uncertainty of presence.

Poetic visions of watery worlds and reflected identities as seen in *Le Moyne's* or Canale's poems in the Baroque age had its solid counterparts in the most curious of mirror rooms that this age produced. Although Noto and Amelienburg, and above all Versailles presented glorious halls of mirrors, the intent for their construction was primarily political aggrandizement and hardly ever the projection of the multiplicity of the selves and the fragility of the world of matter.

Created in 1725 at the close of the Baroque period in Sicily, the Hall of Mirrors in the Villa Palagonia in Bagheria, offers a worldview that is greatly removed from the triumphant projection of power that reigned over the spaces in Versailles. For the Prince of Bagheria the main hall of his villa serves a particular purpose: his aim is to create a vision of Arcady, but also an image of its shadowy counterpart. In this great hall the walls are enclosed with images of ideal nature while the entire ceiling is covered in hundreds of small mirrors reflecting the events in the room and multiplying the identities of gathered guests *ad infinitum*. Although intended as the place for both entertainment and display, the Hall of Mirrors in Villa Palagonia offers its visitors a curious experience. By observing the infinity of their likenesses projected on the ceiling, the beholders find themselves 'transported' to the realm of Arcady reflected from the frescoes below. At the same time,

they perceive the sheer uncertainty of such vision, that keeps changing, distorting and flowing from one pane of looking glass into another.

Unlike the Hall of Mirrors, the image of the garden at Villa Palagonia offers a completely reversed concept. Instead of the glories of eternal nature and delights of Arcady, its waters reflect the image of the troubled world. Disturbing figures of monsters and dragons, fantastical beings and mythological ogres populate the lush garden. Although intended to amuse more than to frighten this terrifying display also functions as a witty reminder that Arcady was, and will remain only a dream. The same message that imbued the landscapes of Poussin and Dughet is elaborated here in a complex vision of the shattered ideal.

The same disbelief in the veracity of our realities, and in the transience of the visible world born by the shifting surfaces of watery mirrors is present in the poem *The castle of Richellieu* (1653) by the French poet Desmartes (KRONNEGER 1985: 249–250; GIORGI 2020):

Icy je voy sous terre une lune seconde.  
Icy le palais mesme, et si clair, et si beau,  
A chef precipite se renverse dans l'eau.  
O! tromperie aimable, jeu de la nature! (ROUSSET 1968: 242)

Under the water he sees a second moon and glorifies the grand illusion and the game of nature, implicitly implying that only illusion makes up the reality. For him, nature is nothing but a painting, a pure fiction a mirage. As excellently pointed out by Giorgetto Giorgi, in his recent study on artificiality of Baroque literature, an almost identical vision can be found in Cervantes's *Cyrano de Bergerac* when in one of his letters, Cyrano encounters in a *liquid mirror* a mirage of a captivating inverted watery world.<sup>12</sup>

Equally out-worldly subaquatic vision like the ones described by Desmartes and Cervantes, can be found upon the walls of the church of Il Gesu in Palermo. The curious work by Antonino Grano, executed in the luxurious *pietra dura* offers to the beholder a rather unique image of nature. Although it is just the background for a heroic Old Testament sculptural group, it greatly captivates its viewer. A strange undulating coastal landscape, with gentle hills and imposing cities, opens in front of the spectator making him doubt the credibility of his senses. Grano's vision of nature is created in blue, green and turquoise semi-precious stones turning the entire scene into a strange watery world not unlike the reflections in liquid mirrors of French poets (KRONNEGER 1985: 249–250; GIORGI 2020). This fluid realm, this 'jeu de la nature', shimmers and flickers in the depth of the chapel, almost like water itself, thus creating the illusion of an image in perpetual motion. Desmartes's liquid mirror at the castle of Richelieu, and Cervantes's in *Cyrano de Bergerac*, both offer not only liquid, but also a strangely inverted world, where the laws and principles of our reality seem to be upended. In these inverted worlds where fish fly, birds swim and trees

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<sup>12</sup> For further elaboration of this point see Giorgetto Giorgi, *Two modes of disclosure in the 17<sup>th</sup> century: ordo artificialis and ordo naturalis*, in RIEF (Revue Italienne d'Etudes Francaises), 10/2020, <https://journals.openedition.org/rief/6523>, last accessed 25. 1. 2022.

grow from the sky (ROUSSET 1968: 242), the regular order is turned into pure chaos through a simple process of reflection of sky upon the water's surface. Although it might seem merely a world of pure fantasy, it has its unsettling undertone. In a place where all known order is turned upside down, there is also no certainty and no stability.

The notion of *a world turned upside down* brings us to another pivotal quality of both fluid mirrors, and their still counterparts. They not only offer an instable image of reality; they inevitably reverse it (from left to right). Water surfaces produce an even more enhanced effect adding to the reversal of the captured scene, the upside-down projection of the reflected reality. The age which witnessed profound spiritual political and economic upheavals, reversals and sometimes cancelations of the established order, embraced the theme of the 'world turned upside down' as one of the important *topoi* of its literature, philosophy and visual arts. As Jose Antonio Maraval so cogently pointed out, the preexisting concept of the 'world turned upside down' gained a great force in the Baroque (MARAVALL 1986: 152–154). It was particularly evident in that great fantasy of Baroque age, de Quevedo's *Suenos*, that presented to the reader, like watery mirrors in Baroque gardens, a completely inverted image of reality. His contemporary Sigues de Figuera famously wrote that the *common style of this world was to see things functioning upside down* (MARAVALL 1986: 154). Such utter reversal of established order also inspired elaborate exhorting paintings by Jan Steen who used the disorder in a domestic setting project greater ideas of the chaotic life and calamitous governing of the state.

It will be impossible to close our discussion on liquid and still mirrors, on reflections and distortions, without a painting that is a visual essay on vanity, fragility and the reality turned upside down. Although Caravaggio followed the well-established iconography of the classical myth, he created his own deeply unsettling rendering of the tale of *Narcissus*, (1597–99) presently at Palazzo Barberini (Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica) (GREGORI, CHRISTIANSEN, DEMPSEY, SPEAR 1985: 265; LANGDON 1998: 256; WARWICK 2006: 18).<sup>13</sup> His contemporaries like Claude le Lorain, Nicolas Poussin, Peter Paul Rubens, Franciscus de Neve, or Francesco Furini all placed the scene and its protagonists, Narcissus and Echo, in the familiar bucolic setting with the glimmering stream or lake at its center. Following their Renaissance predecessors they use the Arcadian setting to transport the warning of the futility of self-love and the destructiveness of vanity. However, Caravaggio made a pivotal change. In this painting Caravaggio created a pictorial equivalent to fluid mirrors and moving portraits that Habert de Cerisy, Le Moyne, Desmarteles or Cervantes invoked in their works. He distilled the mythological narrative depicting only the protagonist and his reflection. There is no bucolic ideal, no escaping Echo and the tragic waterside death. What the protagonists are left with is intense external and internal process of reflection both united in a perpetual flux. As obsessed and absorbed as Narcissus from the original myth, Caravaggio's protagonist is so utterly lost in his own likeness that it is difficult to discern who is the real Narcissus and who his liquid double. They both emerge from the undefined

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<sup>13</sup> Palazzo Barberini, Inv.no.1569, <https://www.barberinicorsini.org/en/opera/narcissus/>

dark background that makes them equally ethereal and illusory to the beholder and also further erases the confine between the real world of Narcissus and the ephemeral watery realm of his reflection. Almost as an emblem of the Baroque worldview, Narcissus stands for the absolute inseparability of the worlds of reality and unreality, of the certainty and a dream.

### Liquid Architecture

From the rushing streams and waterfalls of Arcadias in the shadow at the beginning of the paper, from shipwrecks and deluges denoting the disquiet and dismay of this troubled age, through still and liquid mirrors, our discussion of water in the Baroque culture ought to be transported from the visual and poetic arts into the reality of the garden.

Although the presence of water in the garden was already of pivotal importance in the Renaissance, it gained a particular significance in the Baroque (HUNT 1986; SAMSON 2012). From the first Medici villas in Poggio e Caiano or Bomarzo, or the famous grounds of Gonzaga's Palazzo del Te in Manua, and the spectacular fountain designs of Villa d'Este – the water was a main constitutive element of a garden. Only with the inclusion of water, the garden could act as a microcosm of the world over which its owner had the power absolute, a principle analogous to the idea of *Wunderkammer* taking shape at the same time (HUNT 1986: 73–83). As it was the case with the first collections, the gardens of the age had to reflect both visible and invisible worlds of the macrocosm, to equally contain the images of reality and fantasy. For that reason, numerous statues of classical deities populated the Renaissance gardens and its waters became the dwellings of the Poseidon and the water nymphs (HUNT 1986: 42–59). Furthermore, some gardens presented the great display of the monstrous, disturbing and the grotesque such as in the Parco dei Mostri in Bomarzo, the tradition we saw transported into late Baroque in Villa Palagonia in Bagheria. The concept of the garden as microcosm was established as early as the 15<sup>th</sup> century and its aim was to create the image of the world in miniature, to reinvent 'a veritable universe, a place where heaven and earth would mingle (HELLER 1978: 386).' In such a concept, the water signified not only one of the world's elements and also offered the possibility of a great decorative display – from artificial streams and lakes to the elegant fountains it embellished country abodes of the Renaissance princes.

The Baroque age brought on a fundamental change to such understanding. While the concept of the garden as a microcosm of the world prevailed, the water claimed a much more important role than in the previous centuries. Although it retained its initial symbolism of one of the elements in that condensed image of the world confined within the walls of the garden, the water was employed and even celebrated for the same characteristics that we commenced our discussion with. It was mutable, ambivalent, an agent of perpetual movement, but above all it was reflective. Possessing these qualities, the water could be used to express concepts previously absent from the Renaissance garden – the notions of power absolute and the worlds of everlasting change. Unlike its use in the painting and

poetry of the age, the water in the Baroque gardens and fountains rarely carried the notions of transience, of ephemerality and death. Its use was reserved for the glorification of power, equally mirrored unto infinity in the pools of Versailles and in the resplendent waters of Peterhof, Reggia di Caserta and Nimfenburg (YONG 2005: 37–85).

The employment of water, and not only its symbolic application was considerably transformed in the Baroque age. While in the previous centuries it was present in the garden mainly through grand reflective pools (Pratolino, Giardino di Bobboli, Palazzo del Te) or elaborate wells and fountains, in the Baroque culture the water was given a much more dynamic role. From Bernini's highly dramatic designs, to elaborated water theatres and even water organs – the water in this age became an equal artistic medium to that of marble or bronze. The fountain was no longer an ornate 'frame' for the inclusion of water in the garden, the water was converted into an 'active' component of garden design, an element that was engaged into the equal dialogue with other components of the contemporary garden (CONAN 2005: 1–37). Moreover, unlike in the Renaissance age, in the Baroque it was the water that shaped the garden. Fountains, water theaters and grottoes were used as focal points, while *paretres d'eau* created by grand canals, cascades and artificial waterfalls charted the main axes and defined the space of the garden.

Even more importantly, the role of water was to put the surrounding sculpture and architecture into motion, to grant movement to the otherwise immobile artworks, and not the least to induce the sense of marvel into the spectator. In the age that was seen as a period of constant change, and the glorification of movement as a direct embodiment of time, the ability of water to animate its surroundings was explored to the very limits of this liquid medium.

A novel dynamic use of water was nowhere more evident than in that profoundly complex design by Gianlorenzo Bernini for the *Fountain of four Rivers* (1651) at Piazza Navona in Rome (WENTWORTH RINNE 2010). During his long career, this *amico delle acque* as Bernini often called himself, created a considerable number of fountains that celebrated water's dynamic powers (the *Fountain of the Triton*, *la Barcaccia*, *the fountain of the Bees...*), but his creation for Piazza Navona became, as Charles Avery eloquently named it – *a non plus ultra of fountain design* (AVERY 1998: 198)

Intended to be an illustration of the papal authority under pope Innocent X, the Fountain of Four Rivers merges two great talents of Gianlorenzo Bernini – his interest in theatre and spectacle design, and his ability to induce movement in any sculpture whether made of marble or bronze. This imposing papal project had a practical and a political side. It celebrates the reconstruction of Acqua Vergine (the Roman aqueduct) that brought more water to the city of Rome and ended in the fountain of Piazza Navona, and was supposed to overshadow magnificent fountains that Innocent X's predecessor and great patron of Bernini, Urban VIII constructed in Rome. Ultimately it was to glorify the omnipresent power of the Catholic Church under the pontificate of the current Pope (WENTWORTH RINNE 2000: 183–205). With the allegories of the four great rivers representing the continents of the known world (Europe, Asia, Africa, America) and the presence of their symbolic



animals denote this fountain as the emblem of papal authority *urbi et orbi*. Bernini's knowledge of the arts of spectacle and the theatrical effects is best epitomized in the construction of the core of the fountain where the seemingly fragile rock barely supports the monumental Egyptian obelisque at its summit. Underneath this precarious structure everything is pure movement. The figures of the river gods placed around the rock seem to be moved by a unified force. Their sweeping gestures and flying limbs carry the beholder in a swirling rhythm around the crags and edges of the great 'rock' at the centre. But the most prevailing sense of movement and the true power of the fountain comes from water itself. It sprouts and gushes from all four sides of the fountain falling with a overwhelming thunder into the basin bellow. The *Four Rivers Fountain* possesses a great ability to manipulate the movement of its beholder. Its impressive size captures the attention of every observer approaching the fountain from the entrance to Piazza Navona. Once the viewer is drawn in, the fountain then seems to 'lead' him/her in a circular motion from one allegory of the river to the other – the effect that Bernini first created in his Borghese mythologies. The circling of the beholder is further enhanced by the movement of water that replicates his seemingly unending ambulation. Therefore, the ever-present glittering of the water sprays, and the constant reflection of the rays of light in the great pool at the base of the fountain create the effect of a monumental and powerful motion, as powerful as the pontificate of Innocent X.

This novel status of water as artistic medium was reflected in the proliferation of treatises on hydraulics and garden design as well as in new professions – *jardinier* or garden designer and the fountain designer, a profession that Bernini was so proud of (AVERY 1998: 179). While Carlo Fontana, as his name already denotes, was definitely one of the most successful architects of the late Baroque, he was among the most prolific fountain designers after Bernini and published a treatise on hydraulics. This manifests how the new command of water did not rest upon the design, but depended heavily on great technical advancements in hydraulics that took place in the seventeenth century. Beside Roman architects and sculptors, the artists and engineers that really reached the apex in their mastery of fountain design and the manipulation of water of the age were, indisputably French (EHRlich 2005: 131–183; BARIDON 2008: 98–108). From the famous Pierre Perrault's *De l'origine des fontaines* (1674), to Antoine Joseph Dezallier d'Argenville's *Theorie et Pratique du Jardinage* (1709) these treatises place the importance of water at the centerstage of garden design, often naming it *the soul and the life of the gardens* (GARRIGUES 2001: 386). From its position as one of the four elements, the water in the Baroque became the most important element of the garden, the central feature in the microcosms of absolutism.

The new knowledge in hydraulics could not be understood without these treatises, the discussion of the Baroque waters could never be complete without the mention of Versailles (1668) (BARIDON 2008: 21–37). It was the construction of the gardens of Versailles that gave the necessary impetus into further development of hydraulics and engendered a great number of replications throughout the Baroque world.

Although a proper analysis of the use of water in the gardens of Versailles would merit an entire book, here one ought to discuss only the most important and innovative elements

of its design. The main feature of Le Notre's treatment on water in the gardens of Versailles was its sheer monumentality. Never before were water basins and canals so grand and fountains so numerous (BARIDON 2008: 98–108). For this impressive endeavor, an entire infrastructure of water supplies had to be built in order to supply the gardens with water. For its construction, an entire army was employed and the hydraulics that operated its vast system of fountains, canals, cascades and water theatres. The gardens presented the ultimate identification of the absolutist power with the relentless powers of waters. Moreover the gardens and its waters of Versailles became the supreme stage for power where numerous festivals and spectacles of state were organised. Even the passage of Louis XIV through the gardens was connected with water, with fountains activated upon the arrival of the king. This aspect of the Versailles waters was embedded in practicality as much as in the ideology of political presentation: the water supply could not feed all the fountains at the same time so the gradual activation was needed, and the movement of the king that miraculously commanded the movement of water became a desirable allegory of the supreme power.

In Le Notre's design, the waters of Versailles were employed to manifest the power of the King and the State, or the King as State, in different forms and through diverse symbolism previously discussed in this paper. It encapsulated, like many waters of the Baroque world, *the flux of things in their perpetual becoming* (TURNER 2005: 224).

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ОМИЉЕНИ ЕЛЕМЕНТ ОВОГА ДОБА –  
КОНЦЕПТ ВОДЕ У БАРОКНОЈ КУЛТУРИ

Резиме

Изразиту флуидност барокног доба најбоље изражава један од природних елемената, онај коме је флуидност одувек била у самој бити, а то је вода. У барокној култури вода је уистину била свеприсутна: текла је кроз велике морске ведуте холандског XVII века, мрешкала се у виду моћне метафоре барокне поезије и, надсве, била је оваплоћена у посебном виду течне архитектуре барока. У пројектовању фонтана, могло би се рећи да је барокна уметности достигла једну нову уметничку форму која је за свој настанак подједнако користила мермер и бронзу као и само кретање воде. Вода је у XVII веку била главни актер формалних вртова и истовремено је била симбол моћи али и амблем микрокосмоса света.

Ипак, вода није била само омиљени природни елеменат барокне културе због симбола моћи који је у себи носила, она је такође била и метафора пролазности, кратковекости живота и нашег смртног постојања. У то доба вода није била изједначавана само са флуидношћу већ и са флухом, са самим временом.

Кључне речи: вода, барок, пејзаж, течна огледала, фонтане, пролазност, барокна поезија.