Jesuit Art and Architecture in Europe

The European architecture of the Society of Jesus presents an extraordinarily varied picture, in which—speaking globally—local building traditions and stylistic developments took on a much more relevant role than did the international ties inherent in the complex organization of the Society.

— Gauvin Alexander Bailey

1.

2.

The Jesuits did not invent the Baroque, nor did they have a distinct style; yet they were among the greatest patrons of art in early modern Europe.

— Gauvin Alexander Bailey

Although scholars no longer speak of a "Jesuit style" in the arts, the Jesuits influenced critical changes in the style and iconography of devotional painting not only in Rome, but also throughout Catholic Europe—in places as diverse as Sicily, Greater Germany, France, Flanders, Spain, and Portugal. They also changed the way people used devotional art, by emphasizing its affect and didactic potential in a more systematic, sequential, and experiential way than had been attempted before.

Jesuit artistic activity was showcased in some of the most prominent institutions in Catholic Europe, including churches such as the Gesù in Rome and Saint Michael, the Michaelskirche, in Munich, and colleges such as the Collegio Romano in Rome and Louis-le-Grand in Paris. The Jesuits brought these spaces to life through the extensive fresco and altarpiece cycles that adorned their interiors.

These Jesuit art projects even addressed audiences far beyond those who actually entered the buildings. Thanks to their extremely active patronage of printmakers, the Jesuits distributed engravings of original Jesuit paintings and painting cycles to the four corners of the earth. From the very beginning, the Jesuits promoted devotional art and the use of imagery for they considered the visual arts to be key to the affirmation of Catholic faith. St. Ignatius of Loyola's most important contribution to the visual arts was without doubt the *Spiritual Exercises* (1548). One of the world's most enduring works of spirituality, this manual draws heavily upon imagery and the use of the senses, and its themes, subject matter, and sequential organization are one of the foundations of nearly all the early Jesuit painting cycles.

The Jesuits enhanced this devotional experience by harnessing emotion or meditative abstraction, and by drawing upon an arsenal of pedagogical erudition, thereby championing the return of humanism and the primacy of the liberal arts. Yet despite the astonishing unity of purpose in their painting cycles—and the Jesuits' persistent reputation as propagandists—the Jesuits did not force a particular theological view upon their audiences. Instead, their interior decorations emphasized free will and individual responsibility, and allowed each visitor a unique and personal experience of the divine.

Given the Jesuits' enthusiasm for the visual arts and their intensive involvement in the spiritual and educational life of Catholic Europe, it should come as little surprise that many late Renaissance and baroque artists formed close associations with the Society of Jesus. Some, such as Andrea Pozzo, Giacomo Corteste, and Daniel Seghers, were Jesuits themselves. Many more, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Pietro da Cortona, Peter Paul Rubens, and Baciccio, worked repeatedly for the Jesuits and their art and lives were often very personal expressions of faith.

— Gauvin Alexander Bailey in *The Jesuits and the Arts, 1540-1773* (Saint Joseph's University Press, 2005)

3.

4.

Figure 1.
The Miracles of Ignatius of Loyola, Peter Paul Rubens.
Oil on canvas, 208.7 x 154.1 inches.
Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.
This critical altarpiece for the Jesuit church in Antwerp represents one of the most important moments in the creation of Ignatian imagery in early baroque Europe.

Figure 2.
Garland with the Holy Virgin, the Infant, and Francis Xavier, Daniel Seghers, S.J. and Erasmus Quellinus II, Hamburg, Kunsthalle, 37.7 x 28.3 inches.
The most important Flemish flower painter of his generation, Seghers had studied with Jan Brueghel. After joining the Society in 1614 he refused to sell his works, and the Jesuits presented them as much-coveted gifts. Typically, the sacred images enclosed by the floral garlands—such as this one featuring Francis Xavier—took the form of false stone monuments.

Figure 3.
The most substantial cycle of Ignatius imagery from baroque Rome is the illusionistic corridor (1667–88) outside the saint's rooms at the Casa Professa the professed house, painted by the Jesuits Andrea Pozzo and Giacomo Cortese. These frescoes, which include scenes of Ignatius's life and posthumous miracles, appear within a framework of fictitious architecture that gives the impression of a perfectly proportioned hallway with vaults and pilasters on the walls, all the while disguising an ill-proportioned passageway that has only the most elementary architectural features.

Figure 4.
Roof of the crossing with false dome.
Sant'Ignazio, Rome, Andrea Pozzo, S.J.
An ingenious and inexpensive way of making up for a missing dome, Pozzo's false dome at S. Ignazio, an illusionistic painting, became a model for churches from Vienna to Beijing.

Figure 5.
Allegory of the Missionary Work of the Society of Jesus.
Rome, Sant'Ignazio, Andrea Pozzo, S.J.
Pozzo's undisputed masterpiece, this astonishing ceiling in the nave of the Roman church of Sant'Ignazio is a symphony of illusionism. The ceiling has a triumphal message, though what is here celebrated specifically is the Society's almost two centuries of missionary work around the world. Allegories of the four continents support the pairs of false columns flanking the center of the composition.

5.

Figure 6. ▼
Antonio Raggi, detail of two angels from the upper part of the left wall of the church of the Gesù in Rome. One of Bernini's chief collaborators for three decades, Antonio Raggi contributed the statue of the allegory of the Danube for the Fountain of the Four Rivers (1648–51) in the Piazza Navona in Rome and assisted Bernini in many of his major projects.

Jesuit Architectural Imperialism?

The idea that the Jesuits were intent on worldwide dominion was a conspiracy theory grounded in the undisputed success of the order worldwide and fueled by Jesuit involvement in virtually every sphere of social, cultural, and political life. The presence of Gesù-like churches all over the world—even those that by today's standards of resemblance would no longer be considered of the same design—lent force to the imperialist argument. The much-imitated Mother Church of the Society became central to the art historical narrative of the Jesuit Style, and later the Baroque. Even though easily disproved, the idea that the Jesuits invented and imposed a Roman style of architecture on the rest of the world became a central topos of and source of debate over the Jesuit Style, and of the Baroque style as organized by the Jesuits. Jesuit architectural imperialism essentially translated the fear of Jesuit political influence into architectural terms.

— Evonne Levy, *Propaganda and the Jesuit Baroque* (University of California Press, 2004)

Figure 7. ▲
Giacomo della Porta, facade of the Church of the Gesù in Rome.

Figure 8. ▲
Jacopo Barozzi, called Il Vignola, interior of the Church of the Gesù, Rome. In this detail of the crossing area, we see the ceiling paintings of Baciccio and stuccos of Raggi that were executed at the end of the 17th century.

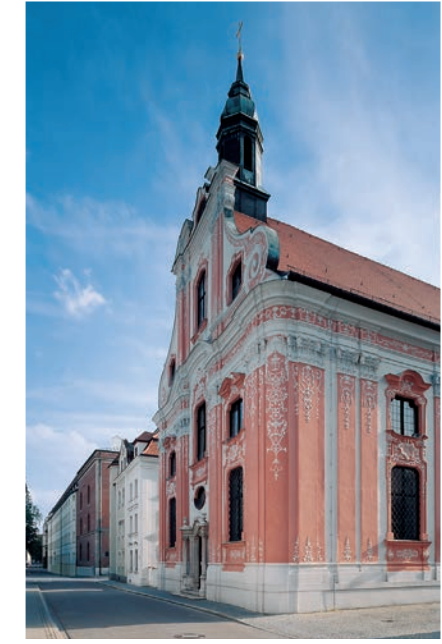

Figure 9. ▲
Exterior of the Oratory of the Congregation of St. Mary of Victory in Ingolstadt, Germany. Congregational halls, especially numerous in the province of Upper Germany, are among the most important architectural works of the German Jesuits, and were used for meetings of the Jesuits' Marian Congregations, a Jesuit form of confraternity or sodality.

Figure 10. ▲
Interior of the Jesuit Church of the Assumption (Mariä Himmelfahrt) in Dillingen, Germany. Built between 1610 and 1617 by Johann Alberthal, probably following a plan by the architect Matthias Kager.

Figure 11. ▲
Facade of the collegiate church of Saints Peter and Paul, Kraków, Poland.
One of the most dramatic examples of the Gesù's international influence, the facade of this Polish Jesuit church is based closely on its Roman model. Nevertheless, as in many Jesuit churches, details reveal important differences owing to the influence of indigenous styles.

Figure 12. ▲
Sanctuary of San Ignacio in Loyola, Spain, 1688.
Built to commemorate the birthplace of the Jesuit founder at his home in Loyola, Spain, this remarkable church is difficult to categorize in terms of Jesuit architecture.

Figure 13. ▲
Exterior of the Church of Sant'Andrea al Quirinale.
Bernini's masterpiece is the Jesuit novitiate church in Rome (1658–70).

Figure 14. ▲
Detail of the facade of the Church of Saint-Paul et Saint-Louis, Paris. Although not built by the Jesuit Martellange, the three-story facade divided into three sections recalls a 1625 project by Martellange, which also had three stories of superimposed columns and a narrow upper section crowned by a cornice.