



Sunday – January 26, 2025

The Supernatural Beauty of a Rococo Church

Dear Thomas,

Many Sacred Windows readers will have heard of Baroque music, painting, and architecture, but **the term Rococo** probably draws little recognition, if it is known at all. Yet, Rococo is a unique and I would say a magnificent architectural style that lasted for the better part of a century in Europe.

Brief History

If I were to break a couple centuries of architectural history down into its widest categories, it might look like this (representative architecture in parentheses):

Early Medieval – 800-1100 AD (example: the Benedictine monasteries)

Late Medieval – 1150-1300 (**the French Gothic cathedrals**)

Early Renaissance – 1300-1450 (Florence's Duomo Cathedral)

Late Renaissance – 1450-1600 (St. Peter's Basilica)

Baroque – 1600-1700 (**the Palace of Versailles**)

Late Baroque/Rococo – 1700-1770 (see below)

[Historical Reference Point: American Independence, 1776]

Neo-Classical Period – 1770-1900 (Thomas Jefferson's Monticello and US Capitol building)

As I say, these are general categories, but even if you are not big on history, **the famous buildings from those periods** should give you a feel for what the major styles of those eras were like.

The Name Rococo

One of my favorite periods of architecture is the Rococo period, but it is probably the least known. And you might be wondering about the name. **It's a strange name**, which supposedly comes from French word for a type of shell-like building material called *rocaille*.

But my contacts in the art world gave me the inside story. Apparently, some French king once looked upon the new style for the first time and asked if it was Baroque, but he had **an unfortunate stutter** and the word came out as Ba-ro-co-co-co-co-co. So the name

stuck. He was the king, after all. At least, that's what I was told by extremely reliable sources. [Satire!]

Here is an example of **Rococo artistry from a secular building**. *Beautiful!*



Cultural Context

We also have to see Rococo in its cultural context. Although it is a term that largely applies to architecture and painting, not music, **some of the greatest musical composers of history** lived in that same period:

- Antonio [Vivaldi](#) (d. 1741);
- JS Bach (d. 1750);
- Georg Frideric Handel (d. 1759), among others.
- Mozart and Haydn came at the tail end of this period but are generally identified as Classical composers.

For all of these great masters, their most brilliant works were either **composed within or strongly influenced by the Late Baroque period**. I like to think of them as Rococo artists because of the sheer exuberance of their styles. *Exuberance* is a defining feature of Rococo as you'll see.

Incidentally, in England, **Thomas Chippendale** was working his magic in furniture during this same time period. The Encyclopedia Britannica says that "His name is synonymous with the Anglicized Rococo style." It's not hard to see evidence of that.



A Miracle Started It All

Although there are many examples of French, English, and Italian Rococo, I'd like to focus on the **Teutonic version of it**, which migrated from its place of origin in France to Southern Germany in the 1730s.

The parish church in the little Bavarian hamlet named Wies (pron. Vees in German) was the scene of a miracle in June of 1738. It is said that the monks of the nearby abbey no longer venerated a particular **ancient image of Jesus' Scourging at the Pillar**, so the wooden image began to shed tears as a kind of divine protest, I guess.



Well, as often happens in such instances, the little village became an **instant pilgrimage destination** for devout Catholics who were curious to see the miracle and venerate the image. They came from all over the German-speaking world and from as far away as Italy.



The original wooden church of the town soon became too small to handle the crowds. So the monks, who had previously neglected their poor Savior, suddenly recovered their lost piety and **decided to build a larger church** to financially benefit—uh, I mean, *to provide for the spiritual needs of the pilgrims*. Yeah, that's it.

They were likewise overjoyed when a couple of pilgrims were **miraculously cured of diseases**, which, in their mind, translated into more pilgrims.

The Magnificent Wieskirche

In the Baroque culture of the time, the monks must have reasoned to themselves that they would have to build **the world's most magnificent Rococo church** for these pilgrims despite it being located in the middle of a remote Alpine valley in southern Germany. A wonderful church, a holy relic, and a couple of miracles would assure a steady stream of pilgrimages for generations. What's not to like?

Actually, those astute monks were not wrong about that. The church's own [website](#) claims that **even today over a million pilgrims visit** the previously neglected Scourged Jesus every year. Wow!



Lo and behold, the Pilgrimage Church of Wies (called Wieskirche) was born. It was constructed between the years of 1745-1756 and was **entirely the work of two men:** Dominikus Zimmermann, the architect, and his brother Johann Baptist Zimmerman, the painter and decorator. These guys were artistic *wunderkinds*. (There I go showing off my German again).

Don't take my word for it. The Unesco World Heritage [website](#) describes the Wieskirche as **“a perfect masterpiece of Rococo art and creative genius,** as well as an exceptional testimony to a civilization that has disappeared.” The Zimmermans described it and one other church they built as *total works of art*. I think you'll see the logic behind these statements with a few pictures.



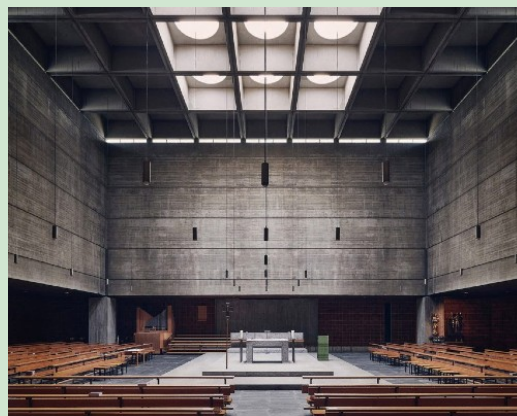
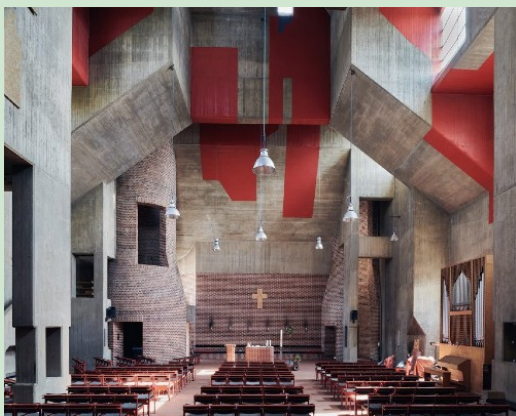


A Lost Religious Culture

The church is indeed “a testimony to a civilization that has disappeared.” Not only modern Germany but the post-Vatican II Catholic Church could not possibly build a **place of worship of this immensity and beauty today.**

In essence, a work of art like this flows out of a culture of faith-filled, *trained* artisans and clerics who understood **the need to nurture souls** with churches that were sacred windows into the divine. The Wieskirche certainly qualifies.

In a kind of hideous contrast, I did some research into modern German church architecture and found **two monstrosities** in the northern German city of Dusseldorf that would make the Zimmerman brothers spin in their graves. These are “churches”. *UGH!*



Key Rococo Features

But let's focus on the positive, shall we? What, specifically, defines Rococo? There is so much that could be said, but again I'll **boil it down to three things** that I believe most characterize the style:

1. **Curves** (particularly the “S” and “C” shapes),
2. Fluid movement in stone, and
3. **Exuberance** of color and decorations.

The curves certainly distinguish the style from the sheer lines of Gothic and the bold geometrical symmetry of the Renaissance periods.

There is a definite sense of balance and proportion in the Rococo style, but **the curves, the lines, and the decorations seem to be bursting out everywhere**, sometimes giving the impression that there are no clear separations between the different levels and sections of the structure.

As to exuberance, you can see that one form of art or another **decorates virtually every square inch** of the interior surfaces. The colors are not deep but intentionally muted and elegant in expression: creamy ivory, light and airy pastels, and lots of gold trim. Extravagant flourishes decorate everything including domes, ceilings, the tops of the pillars, and *even the sculpted wooden pews*.



The goal of the artists was to create a tangible, visible sense of the supernatural to the extent that is even possible. For that reason, Rococo is famous for its ceilings which seem to offer the worshipper **a view straight into the heavenly sanctuary**.

Some believe the exuberance of Rococo is a bit excessive, which is not entirely off the mark. It's anything but penitential, but this expression emerges from a devotional spirituality of **the simple, pious believers** whose day-to-day lives were often stark and lacking in color and heartfelt sentiment. I'll take Rococo any day over the modern brutalist defamations!



In this church, I particularly love **the six blue-and-white marble pillars** which frame the windows on either side of the sanctuary. The church has ten marble pillars in total, four of which support the sanctuary.

The floorplan is hard to see in these pictures, but **the overall shape is oval** in contrast to millions of straight-walled churches.



One Thing Missing—Maybe

The one element of church beauty that Rococo lacks is stained glass windows, but it's **hard to see how stained glass** would make any appreciable contribution to the elegance of a Rococo environment. It might even detract from it.

(Left: A traditional Latin Mass offered in another rococo-style church.)

Colored images in glass shine best in darker environments, but Rococo churches are made to be light-filled and jubilant. The intense colors of stained glass **would probably conflict** with the subdued color-coordinated art that decorates the walls and ceilings of these

churches.

In any case, every artistic style has its own personality, and **Rococo seems to be the ebullient and talkative youngest child** of the architectural family.

Future Pilgrim

I have never had the privilege of visiting the Wieskirche, but I look forward to going there someday. **Abbot Marianus Mayer, the church's patron and builder**, described his experience of this masterpiece in a way that makes it even more attractive:

"Hoc loco habitat fortuna, hic quiescit cor"
("Happiness abides in this place, here the heart finds peace").

I'm sure I couldn't have said it better myself.

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Blessings to you and your family in the New year and in the new liturgical year.

Peter Darcy

Traditional Latin Mass (unknown).



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