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Looking Up: Discovering the Characters, Chronology, and Complexities of Baroque Italian Ceiling Art



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Abstract

Italian Baroque paintings and their iconography are fascinating topics beloved by many art historians and aficionados. While there have been many resources published about the frescoes and paintings in Italy, particularly their iconography, this information is not as readily available to students and the public as one might expect. This is due in part to the sheer volume of paintings, as well as the fact that much of this information is only available in specialized bibliography. My research brings this information together into an easy to use digital format, thereby providing a publically accessible teaching tool for undergraduate students and the general public. For a research fellowship in the summer of 2016, I chose four ceiling paintings from prominent buildings in Rome, Italy; namely, the Palazzo Barberini, the Palazzo Farnese, and the church Santa Maria Maggiore in order to create iconographic maps using the platform Neatline. The paintings chosen were *Divine Providence* by Pietro da Cortona, *Divine Wisdom* by Andrea Sacchi, *The Loves of the Gods* by Annibale Carracci, and the Baptistry painting in Santa Maria Maggiore, artist unknown. I conducted fieldwork in Rome photographing the frescos and giving greater physical context to the paintings and observing lesser-known details. I also assembled the iconography from a variety of dispersed sources, paying particular attention to the lesser-known and often unpublished symbolism of minute features in the paintings, especially non-iconic details. Using DSLR photography, Omeka hosting, and Neatline, I created digital interactive maps of these ceilings that allows the viewer to hover over different parts of each ceiling and learn the different characters, icons, and other interesting features, while also providing additional information on the buildings and artists in a traditional website format. The resulting maps provide scholarly knowledge in a digestible format that is simple to use and engaging for non-specialists.

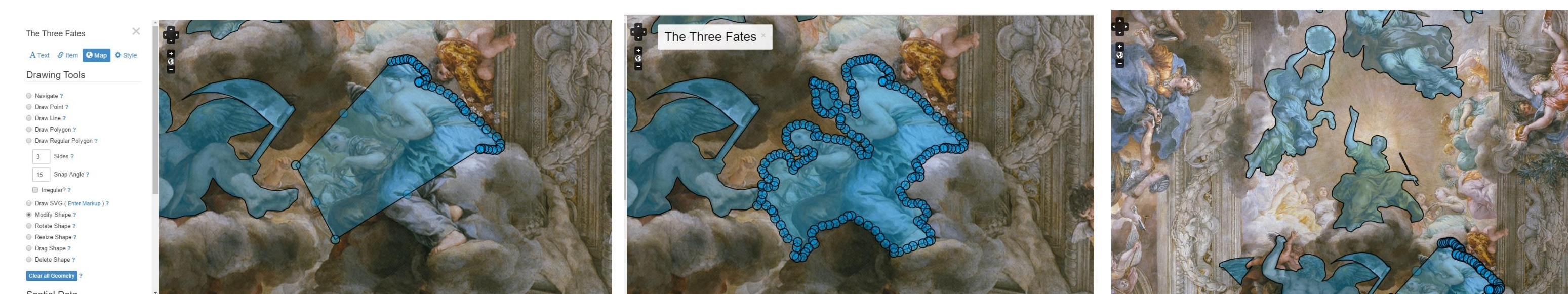
Locations, Artists, and the Baroque Era in Italy

The Baroque period, typically defined from 1600 to 1750 BCE, was an era of extravagant and dramatic art that Christian, Roman, and Greek themes and characters to create specific allegories. Painting highly detailed, allegorical frescos on ceilings became a trend during this era and is evident in the many painted ceilings throughout Italy and especially in Rome. These ceilings paintings were used by the powerful and wealthy to showcase themes or attributes they felt were important to their status in the community.

I choose four different ceilings paintings in three different locations in Rome to provide a brief survey of the types of ceiling paintings being done during this period. *Divine Providence* (by Pietro da Cortona) and *Divine Wisdom* (by Andrea Sacchi) are both located in the Palazzo Barberini, which at the time was owned by the Barberini pope and his family. *The Loves of the Gods* is attributed to Annibale Carracci and is located in the Palazzo Farnese, at the time in possession of the Farnese family. The baptistry fresco in the church Santa Maria Maggiore does not have an official title and the artist is unknown.



Clockwise, starting at the top left: *Divine Wisdom* in the Palazzo Barberini by Andrea Sacchi, *Divine Providence* in the Palazzo Barberini by Pietro da Cortona, *The Loves of the Gods* in the Palazzo Farnese by Annibale Carracci, Santa Maria Maggiore Baptistry fresco by unknown artist.



The process of outlining a figure in the platform Neatline. Here I detail the process used to outline the Three Fates and showed them in context of other figures in the ceiling painting *Divine Providence*.

Allegories of Ceiling Paintings

The key element that ties together each of these paintings is that they were painted on ceilings, which force the viewer to crane their neck upwards in order to view the work of art, and also symbolize an overarching presence of the allegorical references in each of the paintings. *Divine Wisdom* is a collection of personified attributes (Strength, Eternity, Beauty, Holiness, etc.) that surround Divine Wisdom seated on her throne, which is decorated with likenesses of lions, bees, and depictions of the sun. Love and Fear overlook the scene from above, with the Earth in a prominent place beneath the personifications.

Divine Providence is focused on the central, haloed figure of Divine Providence, with many references to religion and attributes important in Christianity part of the central panel. The surrounding panels and medallions showcase different scenes from Greek and Roman mythology. *The Loves of the Gods* is split into many different scenes from Greek and Roman mythology. It is notable that in this painting used the technique of painting frames and other decorative elements to separate each major scene instead of having the different characters interact as they do in other ceiling paintings.

The Santa Maria Maggiore Baptistry painting is a collection of framed depictions of Isaiah, King David, King Solomon, and Moses; interspaced by images of less well known priests, all surrounding the Virgin Mary in ascension at the center.

Process

After visiting each site in person to gain valuable contextual knowledge and photographs, these images were gathered into collections on Omeka and paired with information regarding each fresco. The online software Neatline was used to outline and map different characters, objects and scenes in each painting, label them accordingly, and attach additional pictures and text explanations to each item. Finally, the Neatline exhibits were launched on the Hope College Art History Omeka site, and became publicly available to those wishing to learn about Italian Baroque ceiling paintings.

References & Acknowledgements

By conducting this research and creating this tool I have been able to further the education of students and others interested in art history during the Baroque period into an important and interactive group of paintings that hold a unique bond: they force us to look up. I would like to acknowledge the Mellon Scholars Summer Research Fellowship at Hope College for providing the grant needed to conduct this research and Hope College for providing a place to conduct much of the research. I would also like to thank Dr. Heath of the Art History department for her guidance and input into this project.

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