

Réalism

and seventeenth-century portraits

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Realism was not the prerogative of the Nordic schools in the seventeenth century as the French, Italians and Spanish also sought to depict daily life, and landscape as seen rather than as a product of their imagination. Relinquishing its role of pomp and decorum, the portrait thus examines the subject's soul and psychological makeup in its concern for a realism that goes beyond the mere portrayal of aspects of dress and society.

Genre Scenes

Taking their lead from the Flemish and Dutch painters found particularly in Paris in the district of Saint-Germain des Prés where they catered to a local clientele partial to genre scenes and still life, French artists began to tackle these themes, bringing to them their own interpretation which often set them apart from their Nordic models. Artists that spring to mind include the famous Le Nain brothers, Georges Michelin or anonymous figures such as the Master of Corteges or the Master of the Games. Yet the fact that some works are not clearly attributable to a particular school shows how rapidly styles and subjects spread, as well as testifying to the receptiveness to foreign influences. Thus the *Drawing study** (1625-50) remains an anonymous work that is variously thought to be French or Nordic on account of its subject matter – students drawing after plaster models (here a statuette cast after *Antinous* of antiquity). *Steam** shows maidservants doing the laundry and is more in keeping with the French universe of the Le Nain brothers (another version exists in the Wildenstein Collection) – it has some similarities with the genre scenes attributed to the Master of the Games, an anonymous artist working in France towards the middle of the century, but is weaker in execution (fig.1).



fig.1- The Master of the Games
Backgammon Players
Paris, Musée du Louvre

Portraits

The *Portrait of a Man** of the great sculptor, painter and architect Bernini (1598-1680), is probably one of the dozen self-portraits he painted (fig.2). This work displays Caravaggesque and Bolognese features of the 1620s and 1630s heralding the intimist, Romantic portrait with its tight framing conducive to a direct relationship with the viewer. Probably painted in the same milieu, but by a French artist who remains anonymous and who had spent time in Italy, the *Portrait of the Sculptor** (1625-50) is derived from Italian portraits of sixteenth-century artists and collectors with their contrapposto Mannerist compositions (cf. Salviati (1510-1563), Room 9). The model, holding an antique bust of Venus, is depicted in a very lifelike manner, devoid of idealization, in terms of expression and physical features. In Spain, artists fostered a fundamental naturalism, further fuelled by contacts with Caravaggesque painters at Naples (then a Spanish possession ; cf. Ribera, Room 11). This is attested by the haughty *Portrait of a Man** attributed to José Antolínez (1635-1675) of Madrid, but which may rather belong to the Seville school of Murillo (1618? -1682).

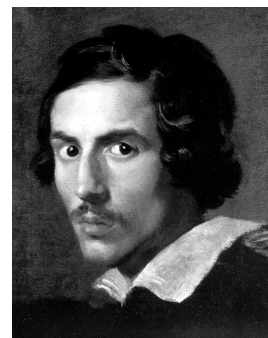


fig.2- Bernini
Self-portrait
Rome, Museum Galleria Villa Borghese

Landscapes

The monumental *View of Rome** provides a precise and accurate topographical image of the city after work on the Bernini Colonnade before St. Peter's Basilica; it can thus be dated to after 1657. At the same time, the lyricism of the cloud formations, the light of the rising sun and the powerful fanciful inspiration that animates the hills betrays this descriptive rigour. The painter may well be one of the many Nordic artists working in Rome. The joint influence of Salvator Rosa (1615-1673) – dramatism – and Philips Wouwerman (1619-1668) – light colours and low horizons – inspired the *Battle** by Pandolfo Reschi (1643-1699).

Room Bernini

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European Art from
the Fourteenth to
Eighteenth Century

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