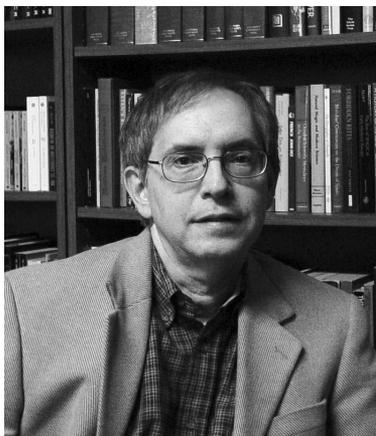


Oscillating Trends: A Reflection on the Status of Seventeenth-Century Studies Today

Interview conducted by CARRIE L. RUIZ
Carnegie Mellon University

In accordance with our journal's mission and in line with our last issue, this year *Transitions* has formulated a special number devoted to the seventeenth century. Under the theme *Artistic Excess during Absolute Monarchy: Franco-Iberian Views on the 17th Century*, the articles included in this number examine the literary and artistic relations between France and Spain throughout the latter part of the *Siglo de Oro* or the *Grand Siècle*. In order to gain further insight into this time period and its status in today's academic world, we have interviewed Frederick A. de Armas who is Andrew W. Mellon Professor in Humanities and Professor of Spanish and Comparative Literature at the University of Chicago. Professor de Armas has published numerous works on the Spanish Golden Age from a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective. Among his most recent publications are *Writing for the Eyes in the Spanish Golden Age*,



Professor Frederick A. de Armas

Quixotic Frescos: Cervantes and Italian Renaissance Art, and the co-edited volume *Hacia la tragedia áurea: lecturas para un nuevo milenio*.

While the trend in the universities across the United States in the past years has been to merge Golden Age and Medieval Studies under a general banner—Early Modern Studies—we have also seen a recent focus on the exploration of the Baroque in conferences, interdisciplinary projects, and in general publications. However, this phenomenon is not limited to the academic arena. For example, this month the Spanish newspaper *El País* pointed to the plethora of museums (Madrid, Bilbao, London, México City, Los Angeles and Indianapolis) that have begun the season with exhibits on the Spanish Baroque. This newspaper article speaks of a “revival” of the Baroque. What factors do you think contribute to this recent trend? Is it limited to the Hispanic Baroque?

The term “trend” reflects a current direction, one that is always shifting. We know quite well that coastlines bend, rivers meander and conversations move from one topic to the next. Once something is forecast as a trend, change is inevitable. So, I tell my graduate students to be aware of trends, but not to be guided by them. You may begin your studies thinking that a current trend is what you should be working on, only to discover five or six years later that something else has replaced it. So, it is best to work on what you are really interested in, not what is in fashion. Scholarly work should help you know yourself and your world better; it should reflect your interests and passions. I tell them: your dissertation marks your interests and is the basis for your future work. Choose wisely and not with an eye on the market. Follow your own line of inquiries, while conversing with a community of scholars.

You mention the trend to merge Golden Age and Medieval. I can immediately point to a minor shift in this tendency. At the University of Chicago we not only did not merge Spanish medieval literature with Golden Age. We have a medievalist, a Golden Age specialist and are seeking a second person in *Siglo de Oro*. This will serve to reinforce a flourishing program in Early Modern Studies in the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures. In Italian, we have one Medievalist and two Renaissance faculty members. In French, we have one Medievalist and three Early Modern specialists. Given our strength in these fields, we just started a Ph.D. program in REMS within the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures. Graduate students who enroll in this program will be able to study Early Modern literatures and cultures across the romance languages. Could this be the start of a new trend?

As you clearly show in your questions, there have been numerous exhibits on the Spanish Baroque in the recent past. But what strikes me is not so much the “Baroque” but the “Spanish” part in the title of exhibits outside of Spain. In the past, few featured the art of the peninsula, with the exception of those that focused on four or five canonical figures: Goya, Dali, and Picasso. Sixteenth-and-seventeenth-century Spanish art had been relegated to perhaps two key figures, El Greco and Velázquez, while scores of fascinating painters of the Golden Age remained undiscovered by the general public. The time has come when the art world will re-discover Spain; it will also encounter the neglected work of Golden Age painters. A year ago, I was delighted to be invited to give a keynote at a Symposium at Duke University which celebrated an amazing exhibit held at the Nasher Museum from August 21 through November 9, 2008. Entitled “From El Greco to Velázquez: Art during the Reign of Philip III,” this exposition used the two great artists as bookends to acquaint the public with many of these unknown painters: Vicente Carducho, Juan Sánchez Cotán, Gregorio Fernández, Juan Bautista Maino, Francisco

Ribalta Luis de Roelas, and Luis Tristán. There is no question that the works exhibited both in Boston and Durham had a major impact on the audience. These forgotten painters were talked about as the public realized that many of Velázquez techniques and effects were being used by others before him. Discussing Francisco Ribalta and his impact on the work of Lope de Vega, I pointed to techniques that could be associated with what some call the Baroque: art within art; the use of the five senses to expand the experience of art; the uses of mirror and canvases to problematize point of view; the theatricality of the scenes; and the play of light and darkness, a chiaroscuro that conjoins the mystical and the quotidian.

Baroque is an artificial term, of uncertain origins, that has come to represent the very act of representation. Here, the world has become a stage, and everything, from a sermon to a gesture, from a courtly conversation to the display of a collar or a necklace, thrives in theatricality. Each member of society fashions herself, wears an outward self, displays forms of comportment for other members, while all act as if they are being scrutinized by an imaginary spectator, be it a more and more distant or demanding God or an ever-vigilant enforcer of customs and mores. Very much like its uncertain origins, and its protean nature, the very term Baroque is unstable. It goes in and out of fashion, and can mean this or that. I remember how many years ago, in graduate school, we debated Jean Rousset's work on the French Baroque, delving into Circe as representative of metamorphosis and the peacock as symbol of ostentation—both connoting a feast of the senses in both art and literature, one where outward change was at its center. But Baroque was more than a style, it was also an experience. We later learned through Yves Bonnefoy that it was a crisis of man alone in the world, the anguish of the void. We also turned to a volume that applied Heinrich Wölfflin *Principles of Art History* to Spain. We asked if Darnell H Roaten and Francisco Sánchez y Escribano's book transgressed against the separation of the

arts when it applied Wölfflin's five principles of the Baroque to Spanish Golden Age Theater. Today we thrive in interdisciplinarity and such a book would be far from provocative. To this day, the term Baroque as applied to seventeenth-century Spain has had many proponents. As is well-known, José Antonio Maravall, opposing Américo Castro's notion that the Baroque was an inoperative concept, saw it as part of a political program tied to absolutism and to Castile's hegemonic desire. More recently, for example, Javier Aparicio turns to its theatricality and ornamentality; Fernando R. de la Flor, shows how it is imbued with an epochal anxiety, a spiritual melancholy; and David R. Castillo points to the *horror vacui*, the utilization of all possible arts in any representation, as well as the nothingness behind the Baroque mask of the self. Although Maravall sees the Baroque as a somewhat broader period, many associate it with the last seventy five years of the Golden Age. It refers more to Calderón de la Barca than to Lope de Vega; more to Gracián and Quevedo than to Cervantes.

And yet, many today reject the term Baroque as a mere period style, and would prefer to see it as a form that can be renewed time and again. Thus, Eugenio D'Ors has pointed to the Baroque as a historical constant from classical antiquity to the modern; Jacques Lacan, whose style is consistently called baroque, calls on the Baroque to explain why the goal of pleasure provides tortured forms; Bruce Burningham connects Cervantes' Baroque with postmodern culture; Nicholas Spadaccini and Jenaro Taléns, discussing the popularity of a seventeenth-century Jesuit manual in America today, claim that it corresponds to present notions of how to manipulate appearance so as to capture the heart and the will of others; and the title of Gregg Lambert's recent collection announces: *The Return of the Baroque*. Thus it seems that the Baroque is with us today. In its many forms, it includes Neo-Baroque writers and contemporary theorists.

Turning back to the seventeenth-century, the Spanish-

American Baroque has Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz as its epicenter. While some link her to Calderón de la Barca, others prefer to show that influences did not just move from Europe to America, but also vice versa. The continuing conversation, like trends, shifts this way and that. While we think that transatlantic cultural relations may be the latest fashion, there are those who are pointing to Asia, to the Philippines, to Japan in order to show how a greater world was impacting Spain and the rest of Europe during the *Siglo de Oro*. I always like to tell my students of a little-known play written around 1600 by Andrés de Claramonte. *El nuevo Rey Gallinato* takes place in a hybrid geographic space that mixes western South America (Peru, Chile) with Southeast Asia (Pegú, Cambodia and the Philippines). Gallinato becomes king of a faraway kingdom, while the text praises the empire while pointing to some of its foibles, including the insatiable thirst for gold and for new converts. Praise of the new lands carefully conceals criticism of hegemonic enterprises. It is not so much the Baroque that is at play in all these moves; more importantly, the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries bring together new geographies, new cartographies, and new heavenly dispositions as subjects of exploration. Indeed, the mingling of the new and the old, of Renaissance re-visions and ancient authority creates a frisson out of which new literary and cultural forms arise. While the Europe of 1603 watched with fear and hope the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter and was enthralled by the prophecies of Albumasar, an astrologer from Baghdad, it also puzzled at the appearance of a new star in 1604. How can something arise in a realm that is beyond generation and corruption? Out of such events, Shakespeare, Della Porta, Campanella, Calderón de la Barca and Lope de Vega fashioned works that delved into the very nature of the human in a universe which was becoming more and more puzzling and complex. While at first such discoveries were joyous, they eventually lead to dissolution of authority and disillusionment with the search for truth. They

also led to a proliferation of possibilities, to an impossible search, to a freedom that for William J. Bouwsma signals the waning of the Renaissance. For others it points to the Baroque.

What enables the appearance of the Baroque? Can we speak of recent socio-economic factors as an additional source for the Baroque “revival” that we are currently experiencing?

I think Baroque arises when there is unbearable strain in social and political relations, when the joy of discovery turns into puzzlement and then to crisis; when harmony is undermined by the unknown; when a society turns its back to the beautiful to foreground the grotesque and the gaudy; when Venus is in exile; when we seek to fill the emptiness and strain of connections with vacuous new forms—seventeenth century ceremonial turns now into Facebook and Twitter; when the transcendent becomes invisible as presence gives way to the mask. It is true that some would point to Bernini’s *St. Teresa in Ecstasy* at the Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome as the perfect example of this period. Its very theatricality does point to the Baroque, and yet, Bernini does seek to represent Teresa’s awaiting mystical experience, albeit using a Cupid with a golden arrow. I think that Hillis Miller came close to pinpointing one key element of what we may call the Baroque. I would like to include a quote here: “Baroque poetry in France, Italy and Spain, like architecture, painting and sculpture of the period, is characterized by a constant multiplication of motifs, all unstable, all in motion, all melting into one another . . . a kind of theatrical surface detached from any solid reality. In such poetry natural objects twist, curve, and distort themselves as if to express a violent effort to reach something which remains beyond them.” Striving for the highest, the Baroque loses its way in performance. It twists and turns trying to reach the heights of Olympus, the presence of a deity. But it all comes

down to form. In Spain, the mystics had to follow the authority of the Church and allow their experiences to be scrutinized in order to survive suspicion of heterodoxy. Mystics gave way to street prophets who proclaimed a coming apocalypse as the dreams of Lucrecia de León came to be noticed by the Inquisition. The last century of the empire, with new ministers and *privados*, attempted to hold back decline. But this was not to be. The Count-Duke of Olivares had to divert the public (and the king himself) with divertissements as the projection of power became more of an image than a reality. The Palace of the Buen Retiro, not in its architecture, but in its feasts that combined all the arts, became a locus for what some call the Baroque. And perhaps the Baroque calls upon us today, when once again the projection of political power by a country mired in debt may turn into a mirage; when the new sophisticated means of communication produce more chatter than insight; when the electronic era allows such communication to be overseen as through a new kind of *panopticon*. It is a time when authority seems void of content yet is enforced in subtle ways; it is a moment when there is so much left to be said, that the saying is lost; it is a time when even art is lost, trying to find new forms. Everything is unstable, everything is in motion and we know not where we are headed. The Baroque comes to life in a crisis of ethics, of belief, of direction. There is no trend except the Baroque proliferation of trends to adorn the void.

I much prefer the term Renaissance. It was not imposed on the past, but arose from its own milieu. Already in the 1430s Alberti, although admitting that nature had tired and failed to produce new geniuses, hints that a new revival is coming; that the light of the ancients will again shine on Europe. Giorgio Vasari, reviewing the art that emerged since the Middle Ages and had culminated in figures such as Leonardo, Raphael and Michelangelo, pointed to *rimascita* or rebirth, of a Renaissance in art. Over the years I have never ceased to be amazed at the relations between Italy and Spain in the sixteenth-and-

seventeenth-centuries. Over two hundred years, Italian sojourns were de rigueur for Spanish poets, painters and thinkers from Garcilaso de la Vega to Cervantes, and from Quevedo to Velázquez. They went to Italy to marvel at the ruins of a glorious past and at the new artistic and literary creations. From the elegance, poise and wisdom of the ancient figures depicted in Raphael's *The School of Athens* to the shimmering splendor and floating beauties of spring displayed in Botticelli's mysterious *Primavera*; from the captivating rhythms and structure of Petrarch's sonnets to the playful verses describing cavorting knights and enchanting dangers of Ariosto's epic; and from the longing for idealized nature in Sannazaro's *Arcadia* to the nostalgic vision of the Court of Urbino in Castiglione's *The Courtier*; the culture of the Italian Renaissance was suffused with beauty and grace, with an other-worldly yet human perfection, with the dignity of man and with touches of "magic" that set it apart from the rest of the world. Long after the Counter-Reformation banned and forbid the infectious paganisms of the Renaissance, the culture of the period was still viewed and imitated by European intellectuals, including the Spanish. In Spain, the constraints of the Counter-Reformation made of Renaissance Italy a space of relative freedom. Even though, starting with 1559 Spanish students were forbidden to study abroad so as not to be contaminated with reformist or pagan ideas, Spaniards flocked to the Italian peninsula. But there is a second and more important reason why Spain was a particularly intriguing place from which such admiration for Italian culture would ensue. After all, if we view a map of Italy during this period, we can see that more than half of the peninsula was under Spanish rule. The colonizing power, as a rule, is the one that imposes its artistic forms on the colonized. But Italy was at the center of culture. It would seem that during the early modern period, we have an inversion in the flow of culture. Thus, one of the many aspects that I have yet to explore is how Spain, as the colonizing power, reacted to its own cultural belatedness. In

one of my book projects I am beginning to study how, during the second half of the sixteenth and first half of the seventeenth century, writers sought to appropriate, to own Renaissance Italian art, and how this imperious ownership allowed them to manipulate the Renaissance vision. As the light and harmony of Raphael moved into Spain, it became shadowed, re-framed, ornamentalized, fractured. Pastoral, picaresque, byzantine and other fictional forms framed Italian art so as to conquer it. Each ekphrasis, each description of Botticelli or Titian was surrounded by a text that transformed the Renaissance style into something new. Even the Titians hanging in the many Spanish palaces acquired new contexts. Thus, the Renaissance became shadowed as it continued to survive in Spain. It is this mutation that fascinates me. We can call it the waning of the Renaissance, the Age of Cervantes, the Age of Calderón, or the Baroque. I will simply point to Ovid, and show how a metamorphosis tends to occur at moments of conflict, shock; at a time when constraints are placed on the beauty of nature and form. While we may speak of today's culture as Baroque, Vasari asserted that as forms are exhausted, a new Renaissance is yet to come.

As a scholar who is actively involved on both sides of the Atlantic, what differences do you perceive around the notion of the Baroque between the US and Europe, in particular in relation to Spain and France?

While in reference to Spain the term is often used for the period of imperial decline, in France it is often applied to a time when the country gains ascendancy under Louis XIII and Louis XIV. Classicism and Baroque are so closely intertwined that it is hard to delimit their territories. Seventeenth-century French literature foregrounds the classical rules in theater as well as decorum in the representation of character, and *bienséance* in comportment and etiquette, thus espousing a more classical style. At the same time, its flagrant theatricality, the

orchestrated moves, the posing and declaiming achieved such a height of performativity and artificiality that it tumbled into Baroque excess. There is something that both France and Spain have very much in common when approaching the Baroque. Larry F. Norman, in his *The Theatrical Baroque* points to the interrelationship between the arts as key to the French Baroque. Spain also foregrounds the link between the arts as this quality is foregrounded in essays such as Lía Schwartz's "Linguistic and Pictorial Conceits in the Baroque: Velázquez Between Quevedo and Gracián." While in Spain the relations between the arts often uses the technique of *ekphrasis* or pause in the narrative to describe an art object in a novel, poem or play, in France, the more common device in theater is that of *hypotypose*—putting an absent scene before the eyes of the audience.

In your studies, you have pointed to Spain's relationship with Italy and the Low Countries as a means of dissemination of ekphrasis in the Iberian Peninsula. Is there a place for France in these studies and in relation to Spain?

There is a place for France. First, as I have mentioned above, French theater, according to many critics, prefers the use of visual writing, *hypotypose*, to that of *ekphrasis*. However, it may be possible to detect fragmented ekphrases in these visual episodes. Secondly, most studies to date show how Spanish literary materials pass over into France and are imitated and transformed by authors such as Boisrobert, d'Ouille, Pierre and Thomas Corneille, Nanteuil, Hauteroche and so many others. At the same time, Spanish art was not particularly in fashion in seventeenth-century France. There were, however, translations of many Spanish texts into French. What I think would be a very interesting area of study is the analysis of how the ekphrases encountered in the Spanish texts are translated into French. How do French writers react to these insertions of

Italian and Spanish art? Third, as Larry F. Norman and others have shown, French painting uses techniques from the theater—an excellent example is Laurent de La Hyre *Panthea, Cyrus and Araspu* where the figures are arranged as if they were characters in a play. Since Spanish theater was so influential in France, could some of its scenes or techniques have seeped into French painting in a reverse ekphrasis?

How would you describe your experience teaching Baroque texts to U.S. students both at the graduate and undergraduate levels? What do the Baroque and the concept of ekphrasis allow U.S. students to do?

As noted above, I prefer to approach the Spanish Golden Age through the Renaissance. Perhaps the most popular course that I teach is the one devoted to *Don Quixote* and the visual arts. This course introduces students to the centrality of Spanish texts in the study of Early Modern European cultures. While Spain is at times set aside as distinct from the rest of Europe, the course takes up how Cervantes' novel is deeply connected with the continent, and with Italy in particular. Cervantes' Italian sojourn led him not only to the literature of the times (Ariosto, Boccaccio, Dante, Della Porta, Petrarch, and Tasso), but also to the art and architecture of the Italian Renaissance. By formulating links between Cervantes and the Italian Renaissance through an interdisciplinary approach, students learn to work in different media. In addition, the texts acquire a new life since students today respond more readily to a visual approach. Ekphrasis allows me to discuss how the art of the Renaissance survived in the Spanish Golden Age, becoming authoritative, a mark of distinction. It also enables the class to explore how, even though Spain's exerted much political influence in Italy (and large sections of the peninsula were under Spain's rule), the cultural authority did not reside in the "colonizer." Through this and other courses I help students to trace the changes and

mutations of Italian art through descriptions in Spanish literary texts. The words that frame the ekphrasis enclose certain aspects of the Renaissance, surrounding them with a strong Counter-Reformation and imperial ideology. The play between images and texts open a space for diverse interpretations.

There has also been a rise in transatlantic studies, why do you think that this interest did not occur earlier? Could we say that there is a growing tendency to value comparative studies? Although currently many US universities are eliminating their Comparative Literature Departments, there is an increasing number of positions within Language Departments that seek professors with a comparative, interdisciplinary or transatlantic approach. Is this the model for the future?

Again, trends are always changing. What is here to stay is a vision of possibilities where new comparative configurations will keep emerging. Although some Comparative Literature programs are now being absorbed by English due to the financial crisis, I know that at the University of Chicago we have both a very strong Comparative Literature Department and a Romance Languages and Literatures Department where we seek faculty that are not just interested in one culture. As I mentioned above, we have just established a new Ph.D. in Renaissance and Early Modern Studies within Romance Languages and Literatures. As for transatlantic studies, this is but one configuration. There are many others. We have, for example a Western Mediterranean Workshop 1450-1750, which is housed in our Department.

We are all aware of the division that exists among some scholars, on both sides of the Atlantic, in regard to the approach to literature. In many cases, this prevents scholars from considering the studies done by their international colleagues. What is your view on this

conflict? Do you foresee a radicalization of this division? Is there a way of closing the gap or reaching a middle ground?

I have always been a proponent of increased communication between scholars from both sides of the Atlantic. I am comfortable in both environments and I hope that we can lessen the divide by accepting each others' work as part of a continuum of studies that will further our knowledge. Each side has its value and perhaps its excesses. Meeting in the middle, doing more work with European colleagues and inviting them to our schools, we are bound to enrich our visions. I will simply point to two important events. First, a book that was recently published in Spain: *USA Cervantes*. Essays from thirty-nine scholars residing in the United States and written in Spanish are presented in ways that will engage all of us in a much needed conversation. Secondly, the Spanish CONSOLIDER has for the third time in its history given a major grant to the Humanities. Twelve research teams from Europe will use the funds to work on Spanish Classical Theater. Among these Europeans researchers, there are at least nine Americans.

Just one last question to finish the interview. Paris or Madrid: which of these two cities would you call home first if you were to leave Chicago?

Paradoxically, Paris would be my quixotic city, the city of the imagination. I remember traveling to Paris some twenty years ago, carrying with me Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*. In Paris, I followed in the footsteps of the conspirators, tied to the Knights Templar. I walked through churches, narrow streets and immense museums finding in almost every corner a bit of history, a taste of mystery. Melancholy days of drizzle and gray never obscured Notre Dame nor did they diminish my desire to listen to Sunday concerts at a church in the Isle Saint Louis. Dinner at

the *Auberge de la Reine Blanche* (much better back then) would be complemented with thoughts of how Louis IX used the island as a retreat from the world. It is truly a treat when the University of Chicago sends me to teach in Paris these days. We have a campus right next to the University of Paris VII, and we stay in little apartments that face the Seine. A few blocks from the new national library, the location is ideal for a scholarly sojourn. I take students to the Louvre, down the glass pyramid into a world of art that defies the senses. It is imposing, overwhelming, beyond words. While there, though, I think of Madrid and the Prado Museum where art seems more attainable, closer, and more intimate. Paris may be my imagined and quixotic city, but Madrid is more like a home away from home. The fountains of Cibeles and Neptuno, the shady and ample boulevards invite the traveler for a daily walk. Theaters often feature performances of plays by Lope or Calderón, while bustling streets preserve the mysteries of old. Close to the Plaza Mayor we can still find the site where the great and yet forgotten poet, the Count of Villamediana, was mysteriously murdered – some say by orders of the King. His life and works fascinate me. Although considered a Baroque poet, his Italian sojourn brought a quiet luminosity to his mythologies. Not so far away is the House of the Seven Chimneys, home of the English Ambassador in the seventeenth century. It was here that the disguised Prince of Wales, the future Charles I of England came, all the way from home, to woo María, the Spanish *Infanta*. This marriage was not to be. But Charles was able to return to London with magnificent gifts which included paintings such as Titian's *Pardo Venus* and many by other Italian masters. As Jonathan Brown reminds us, Charles overreached himself when he asked for Titian's mythologies. But he returned home with knowledge of art and a desire for collecting instilled on him by Philip IV. Today, art is everywhere in Madrid: the Casón del Buen Retiro reveals the frescoes of Luca Giordano; the Reina Sofía exhibits Dalí and Picasso; the Thyssen has marvelous medieval art, but you can also view art

by Van Gogh and Degas among others. The National Library houses a staggering collection of manuscripts and features many exhibits. In the late afternoons, after a day at the library or the museums, I like to sit at the Café Gijón, and watch the passers-by. Not so long ago, famous writers would frequent the place: Buero Vallejo, Pérez Galdós. I smile, settle down, and feel at home communing with a wondrous past.

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