**Was the Rococo art movement influenced by social or artistic contexts? (3000 words)**

**DRAFT VERSION**

**Introduction**

The Rococo movement (1730-1770)[[1]](#footnote-2) took place during a time of heightened religious and political tensions, as such it is only natural that these catastrophic reforms played a major role in the development of the Rococo. But to what extent was Rococo a result of these societal changes as opposed to the natural progression of art and expression.

In this essay I intend to explore the various movements that played out during this time and evaluate how much of an influence each movement played in the development of Rococo.

**The Similarities between Baroque and Rococo (Art)**

When talking about Rococo the first and most obvious influence would be the Baroque. As many corner stones of the style were first established by the Baroque movement (1600-1750)[[2]](#footnote-3). This point is all too abundant in the interior design featured in both periods. Case and point, the *Salon de la Princesse*, a Rococo interior from the Hotel de Soubise[[3]](#footnote-4). Which heavily features entwining curves glided in gold, that frame the walls of the palace in an elaborate display of grandeur. Not too dissimilar to the glided interiors of many Baroque Catholic cathedrals, with the only real difference between the two being the scale and intensity. As Rococo décor was a lot more reserved than Baroque. From this it is not too unreasonable for one to extrapolate that the Baroque movement had a substantial influence on the Rococo style, particularly in the interior design of the period.

**The Differences between Baroque and Rococo - Religion vs New Thinking (Social)**

As much as it is true Rococo interior design was influenced by the Baroque, so too is it that Rococo art was as much a reaction against the Baroque, as it was its successor. A point all too clear in Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s oil painting *The Swing* from 1767. A painting that exemplifies the natural playfulness of Rococo art through the use of natural light, calming colours, wide composition and flowing movement, all of which can be found within this painting. These elements help construct a romanticised garden scene that holds beauty and happiness above all else. A purpose quite apparent when one considers the way in which the subject matter (the lady on the swing) has been depicted. The lady in the painting seems almost scandalous, swinging about and knocking one of her shoes off, with her skirts blowing in the wind. An image that almost seems unbecoming of a lady of her presumed status. Given this fact, it is not too unreasonable to presume this painting has flirty, almost erotic undertones to it. Especially when you consider the revealing pose in which the artist has chosen to paint the lady in the painting in, leaning back with one of her legs in the air.

A stark contrast to the dark dramatic religious paintings of the Baroque. That aimed to spread and reaffirm the word of the catholic religion, against the tide of Protestant reformation that was sweeping across Europe[[4]](#footnote-5). A contrast apparent when you compare Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s *The Swing,* to Baroque paintings such as Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1620). A painting that depicts the gruesome beheading of Holofernes, as told in a story from the Old Testament. With this use dramatic subject matter, ambient lighting, saturated colour, and religious purpose, it could not be more clear the extremity to which Baroque and Rococo paintings differ. The reason for this goes back to the social context both movements took place during. Or more specifically the drastic change in social attitudes that were beginning to become more apparent during the development of the Rococo era. This change, of course being the Age of Enlightenment. A new way of thinking that sought the pursuit of freedom and happiness[[5]](#footnote-6). A way of thinking that is clearly reflected in the paintings of the Rococo period. This change in social attitudes is amplified by the dramatic juxtaposition found in the Baroque paintings that came before.

**Naturalism (Art)**

It is this new way of thinking that brought about naturalism, an artistic movement that played a major role in the development of Rococo. The term Naturalism can be used to describe two different movements that took place in art history, this first believing to have originated from 1672 when Italian art critic Giovanni Pierrot Bellori used it to describe art that had an emphasis on depicting the true to life[[6]](#footnote-7). A movement that can yet again be traced back to the move away from the biblical scenes of the Baroque. The second phase of naturalism happened much later in the 19th century, however it is this first phase I refer to.

Evidence of naturalism’s affect on the development of Rococo art, can be observed in the many botanical motifs featured in the architecture and paintings of the time in the form of shells, flowers, vines and leaves. Which often originate from Rococo paintings depicting the leisurely outdoor activities of the aristocracy, such as Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s *The Progress of Love: The Pursuit* from 1773. A painting that depicts a young suitor offering a rose to his would-be lady, a scene that is framed by an elaborate stately garden abundant with flowers, vines and trees. It is clear to see naturalisms effect on Rococo in this painting, by way of both the natural setting and subject matter. Which attempts to depict the everyday lives of the aristocracy. It is safe to say naturalism had a substantial effect on the development of Rococo, influencing the subject matter that artists choose to paint.

**The French Monarchy (Social)**

It is clear to see the influence the French royalty had on the development of Rococo, in particular the court of Louis XV. As without the french royalty the style might not have became as widespread as it was. A point illustrated by Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s *The Meeting (from the “Loves of the Shepherds”),* 1771–7. A painting that was commissioned by Louis XV for his last mistress, the Comtesse du Barry[[7]](#footnote-8). This painting features many aspects of the Rococo style that had become a staple of the era. Such as the carefree nature in which the subjects are posed and the garden setting in which this scene takes part in. Two elements that reflected the idealised court life the french monarchy and aristocracy sort. The fact that this was commissioned by King Louis is nothing more than a royal endorsement of this fantastical life style. An endorsement which would have encouraged the continued pursuit of this idealised life of privilege. Prompting the wealthy to adopt the style to seem more fashionable to appease the monarchy and further their own pursuit in climbing the social hierarchy. As such it is clear to see how this favouritism of the Rococo style by the french monarchy, had a huge impact on the popularity and capital investment in the style. And how it became entangled with the social hierarchy of the French court, securing its place as a symbol of power and influence.

**The Venetian School of Art (Art)**

The Venetian school of art is responsible for having a major influence on the stylistic development of Rococo. This can be seen through François Boucher’s, *Diana after the Hunt* oil on canvas from 1745. It is steeped in Venetian influences particularly from the works of Venetian painters, Giorgione and Titian[[8]](#footnote-9). Whom often depicted scenes of gods and goddess sat amongst an idealised landscape in a fashion quite similar to François Boucher’s, *Diana after the Hunt.* There is also evidently a strong influence in the way the women of the painting have been portrayed, nude draped in silk, and lounging about a peaceful green scenery. Something that has very clearly been derived from the Venetian School of Art’s use of eroticism, evident from Titian’s, *Pastoral Concert* (oil on canvas, 1509) that has a striking resemblance to Boucher’s *Diana after the hunt.* The use of light and how it is drawn also resembles Venetian art, with how it has been used in this painting to directly illuminate the women in the forefront. Meanwhile casting a shadow from the main subject onto the other subjects of the painting. This application can be observed in both Boucher’s (1745) and Titian’s (1509) paintings. Given all these similarities in these two examples alone, it would be no exaggeration to say the Venetian School of Art played a major role in the artistic development of the Rococo style.

There is also the added fact that during this time artists and painters were taught to follow the works of other artists. Encouraging them to practice by recreating pieces from artists who were considered masters of their time[[9]](#footnote-10). In by doing so, the school limited the creative freedom of new artists, prompting them to follow tradition when it came to both the subject matter of the painting and the technique used to create their work. A point evident in these two paintings, given the obvious similarities.

**Jean-Antoine Watteau (Art)**

Another major influence on the development of Rococo would of course be Jean-Antoine Watteau, an artist many believe to be the grandfather of the Rococo. Crediting him with being one the first to reimagine the Baroque style[[10]](#footnote-11). Developing the serious boding atmosphere of Baroque into something a lot more whimsical through use of pastel colours and romantised scenes of courtly life. Characteristics that would go on to become staples of the style.

One of his first works to reach such high acclaim would be his 1717 painting titled *The Pilgrimage to the Island of Cythera*, oil on canvas created for the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture[[11]](#footnote-12). A piece that would go on to set a precedent, coining a new genre of art *Fêtes galantes.* A genre that was characterised as depicting groups of elaborately dressed men and women engaging in leisurely activities[[12]](#footnote-13). Often surrounded by fantastical garden settings then blended elements of the mythological Baroque with Naturalism.

It is evident to see Watteau’s continued influence over Rococo art, particularly when you compare his work to that of other Rococo artists. Such as Jean-Honoré Fragonard and his 1755 oil on canvas, *The Musical Contest.* A painting that has a wealth of inspirations that can be traced back to Watteau. Such as the subject matter, which features eloquently dressed women accompanied by gentlemen who are seemingly clinging to women of both paintings. A display that has intimate connotes of love and lust, not out of place for the Rococo. The groups of both paintings are also surrounded by nature wrapped in sunlight, with a natural pastel colour scheme. With all these similarities, it is clear to see how much of an influence the works of Watteau played in the development of the Rococo. Even though there are some differences between the two paintings, such as the softening of application and brightening of colours seen in the latter painting by Fragonard. This is little more then a result of the style becoming more refined in its later years. And the fact that Watteau’s influence can still be heavily observed despite these refinements, is a triumph to the artist’s long lasting impact on Rococo.

**Francois Boucher and Eroticism (Art and Social)**

Though it is true Watteau was the first to lay down the foundations of Rococo, the style was then adopted and developed by many artists. One of the most influential of these artists was François Boucher, who was one of the first to entwine the style with eroticism.

One of François Boucher’s most influential paintings was his 1740 *The Triumph of Venus*, an oil on canvas steeped in mythological eroticism. A piece that perfectly depicts both the social and artistic backgrounds in which this artwork was created, whether intentional or not. As it mimics the grandiose stylings of the Baroque while combining it with the femininity of the Rococo, and the perceived promiscuity of the french aristocracy. The latter being something which many would cite as a reason for the growing resentment towards the nobility by the people of France[[13]](#footnote-14). And as such, this painting perfectly encapsulates the massive class divide that was becoming all to apparent towards the later half of the Rococo. However in spite of this, the works of Boucher would continue to play a massive role in the development of the Rococo, particularly the ever growing eroticism that started to become a fixture of the style.

An influence particularly apparent in the work of Jean-Honoré Fragonard, especially when observing his painting, *The Birth of Venus* (1755). A painting that was most likely inspired by Boucher’s *The Triumph of Venus (1740),* given the fact that Fragonard studied under Boucher for a considerable amount of some time[[14]](#footnote-15). The similarities in their work, particularly in these two paintings, is all too apparent. Evident from the similar use of formal elements and subject matter. The way in which this painting uses eroticism is very similar to Boucher’s work, depicting his subjects lounging around in the clouds, draped in silks and pearls that cover near none of the body. The effect of which being an idealised dream of erotic privilege and wealth, two things the french aristocracy strove to achieve despite surging tide of revolution.

Given all of these elements, it is undeniable that François Boucher played a major role in the development of Rococo, particularly in the wide spread use of eroticism that became a staple of the style. As such, it is clear that Boucher’s influence had both stylistic effects on Rococo, and on the wider social political environment that is reflected in his work.

**Colonialism (Social)**

Another major influence on the development of Rococo was colonialism. Which supplied most of the wealth that enabled the upper classes of french society to flourish at the expense of the lower. Evident in the summary of french royal spending from 1789[[15]](#footnote-16).This abundance in wealth amongst the upper classes allowed them to invest more in the arts, decorating their living spaces with elaborate Rococo interiors and art pieces. This in turn encouraged the continued uptake and evolution of the style, a point you can clearly see in the switch from Baroque to Rococo seen in the early 18th century, (time in which royal spending was beginning to hit its peak[[16]](#footnote-17)). Which demonstrated the move away from grandiose symbolism peddled by the Catholic Church, and instead towards the selfish decadence of Rococo. A change that was only able to happen as a result of the excessive wealth individuals of the upper classes possessed. An overspending that was later a contributing factor to the decline in the french economy and a spark of revolution.

Another way in which colonialism effected the development of the Rococo, was the influence it afforded the French monarchy. The French's various escapades in the North American territories had afforded them a certain level of influence both political and cultural. This spread western artistic influences and techniques across the globe. One such style that travelled across the Atlantic was Rococo. Which travelled in the form of engravings on printed books and furniture. Exemplified in the works of Thomas Affleck[[17]](#footnote-18), a cabinetmaker and craftsman born in Scotland who later moved to Philadelphia, the epicentre of American Rococo[[18]](#footnote-19). This enabled the style to spread even further and enjoy a greater influence on the artistic world. A fate that fuelled the continued monitory investment, and commercial exportation of Rococo. This high demand for the style allowed for its continued development and refinement.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, I believe both social and artistic contexts have played an equally significant role in the development of Rococo, as each movement is inexplicable intertwined with the next. In such a way that it is impossible to examine any based on their own merit alone. As is often the case with art, it reflects the society in which in was made, just as much as it influences the next generation of thinkers. For example, there would be no Fêtes Galantes without the Enlightenment, just as there would be no Enlightenment without Baroque. Though it may be true some influences were of a greater significance then others, the mains ones still fall on either side of the argument, them being Baroque and the French monarchy. In closing, it seems only fitting that such a turbulent time in history is reflected in the equally as convoluted history of its art. As what is art but a never ending paradox of ideologies and expressionism, ultimately peddled by materialism.

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