



## Art History

Summarizing Rococo

Name:

Section:

Score: \_\_\_\_/5

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Directions: Read the following article about Art of the Rococo period and come up with short summaries of the designated paragraphs. Your summaries should be about 3-4 sentences.

### Art of the Rococo Period

1720-1760

1

After the death of Louis XIV (1715) and with a new king, Louis XV, there was a new zeitgeist and a fresh taste of art. The French had been setting the trends, and while Baroque art originated in Rome, Rococo art originated in France in the 1720s, then spread across Europe where they was a fascination with French art and culture. The French set the standards for what's en vogue and in a total monopoly made France the centre of fashion in the 18th century. But it went out of control in this very fashion-conscious society where they braved discomfort and sometimes pain pursuing absurdly flamboyant fashion. Déjà vu? Yes, because you still see painful fashion every day when you walk the streets of any major city. Consumption of luxury was booming and the nobility sought status symbols in their ludicrous and laughable styles. Despite all the efforts of critics and caricaturists of the Rococo era, ridiculous fashions prevailed. Rococo art had an aristocratic artistic taste, hence it was embraced by citizens of other countries who had been imitating French aristocrats. The growing upper middle-class (the rich of non-noble ancestry known as the bourgeoisie) also started imitating the French aristocracy (noble by birth) in fashion and lifestyle, whose appeal and influence was equivalent to today's celebrities. Perhaps Rococo paintings were that era's tabloid photographs meant to leave an impression on the gawkers, so they'd mutter to themselves, "aha, that's how the rich live!"

2

People's relationship with extreme fashion has not changed, but in our modern time-starved society you do not have as much time available, as was the case for French aristocrats in the 1700s. If you are a modern wealthy woman, you can very quickly adorn yourself with high-end branded apparel like Louis Vuitton, Givenchy or Christian Dior; you effortlessly slap on a dress or jeans and slip into casual yet expensive shoes – a little makeup, a few accessories and call it an outfit. Even if today's women are not comfortable, they can easily pretend to be comfortable in their own styles of choice. Back in the 1700s, fashion was a much more complicated process. French aristocrats did not work, men and women equally took part in the absurd fashion of the time that reflected their shallowness. Fashion was not for everybody, but for the wealthy. For those living in opulence and luxury, plenty of time and money could be spent, so they'd stay "à la mode". Women would happily dedicate many hours every day to their appearance, some went as far as changing their dresses four or five times a day. Dresses were getting ridiculously wide and hairstyles were growing outrageously tall. A typical woman could look up to 3 times larger than a man. Some added to their elaborate hairstyles pearls, feathers and even tiny model ships and some wore horse-hair wigs. In the department of fashion, like everything else, being competitive is only human nature, even if it meant taking on a comical look, that's why French women's skirts kept on getting wider. Panniers caused inconvenience for most women in public places, so much so that armless chairs had to be around for those women in giant bell-shaped dresses. Can you imagine a trip to the toilet while trapped in such a massive dress?!

3

Rococo art is associated with Louis XV and Madame de Pompadour, as they became purveyors of style. She turned herself into an arbiter of fashion, a connoisseur, and a patron of the arts. Never before, a royal mistress patronized the arts in such a manner. The royal mistress's well-known patronage of Rococo art made her synonymous with that art style. Her commissioning of numerous portraits of herself harkens back to Louis XIV's patronage of the preceding art period decades earlier, Baroque art. At the French Revolution, Madame de Pompadour was seen as an icon of Rococo frivolity and a symbol of the degenerate culture, spending money that's not hers, the taxpayers' money on her ravenous shopping appetite for clothes, furniture, and art. However, it's unfair to single out only Madame de Pompadour, because all of the privileged elite, those

portrayed in Rococo paintings, led lives mainly funded by the backbreaking taxes collected from downtrodden peasants. That was the ugly reality you never see in the beautiful Rococo paintings, the tragic dark side behind the light-hearted leisurely outings.

Rococo art did not reflect the political and economic reality of the times, even though you could read it between the lines, as explained above. You only see the pre-French Revolution days when life was grand and time was aplenty. It was an art movement that was not preoccupied with the working class, and you are not likely to find them represented in Rococo paintings.

4

Rococo art was far from political, as it never carried any serious message; heck, it doesn't even have a message. Just like critics of cheesy bubblegum pop music feel nostalgic towards older music, most probably, Rococo art critics reminisced about the good old days of great art, such as the Baroque art of Louis XIV's era or Renaissance art. Ironically, the frivolity of the Rococo style is symptomatic of the indifference of the royalty and aristocracy who were largely silent as their nation slid downwards. It's also ironic that while the French political dominance was vanishing before their eyes, their dominance became confined mostly in the sphere of art and culture. Although, Rococo art has never been characterized as revolutionary or great art, some of the criticism was aimed at the subject matter and how it disregarded the domestic and international circumstances, be it the fiscal fiascos and the suffering of the peasants, or the overseas political failures. Leading their luxurious lives, they wouldn't let those "minor" issues ruin the general mood. Wrath against the aristocracy boiled under the surface and by the time the party was over (i.e. the French Revolution), special privileges were withdrawn from all nobility, and equality was preached among all citizens. There is no question that Rococo is a true art, nevertheless it's ostensible that it's a style created to be mere eye candy, to simply please the spectators.

This art style perfectly exemplifies the French high society's taste at the time, summed up in the words of Emilie du Châtelet, 1706-1749, aristocratic French scientist, mathematician and mistress of the famous writer Voltaire: "We must begin by saying to ourselves that we have nothing else to do in the world but seek pleasant sensations and feelings."

5

The taste of aristocrats dictated the artistic style of Rococo. As the way of life in France evolved, more elegant homes were built. A demand arose to decorate the walls and interiors of spacious mansions and châteaux. Serious Baroque art of days past is not fit to decorate the intimate and casual homes. House owners, as always, competed in decorating their houses, and that included commissioning paintings representing themselves flaunting their wealth, for example, garments are painted in a manner to emphasize their affluence. Hence, the pre-revolutionary art of Rococo, with its shallow subject matter, offers a unique glimpse at life of the French upper class. Because trouble had been brewing, these are the last decades of the grand life for French aristocracy. Rococo, mainly for interior decor, became a fad with the French aristocracy and the market expanded for paintings featuring pastoral fairylands and courtship scenes.

6

Rococo art had no place for patriotism or piety. No place for morality, saints or heroes, paintings were neither didactic nor devotional. Instead here is what you'll find in Rococo paintings: outdoor scenes, picnics and pastoral settings, graceful lovers and game-playing, naughty behaviour with a sense of humour, a sensuous mood and veiled eroticism. You'll find graceful lovers in amorous encounters and provocative poses, but you won't find much that's thought-provoking or intellectually stimulating. You won't find paintings that will challenge you, only those that are meant to delight you, beautiful people surrounded by beautiful scenery. Often described as frivolous because it served no purpose beyond pleasing the eyes and its main *raison d'être* ("reason for existence") was only decoration.

When you view Rococo paintings and judge the wealthy by their arrogant, lush and indulgent lifestyles in their own age of decadence, be sure to also see the innocence of happy parents and children and the grace of elegant lovers.

7

In Rococo art, some culture critics saw very early "disturbing" signs of women's sexuality spiralling out of control, particularly among some rebellious women in the aristocracy. Bear in mind that women's slightly erotic portrayal was probably exacerbated by male painters catering to the pleasure of male aristocracy, hence women were depicted as lust objects, tempting sirens and libidinous goddesses.

During an era where France was the epitome of flamboyance, and when everything was elaborate from furniture to hairstyles, those paintings captured the ideal embodiment of the Rococo spirit where the upper

classes were preoccupied with their own amusement and luxuries while the common folk lived in misery and the nation kept on losing territories in places like Europe and North America. The Rococo movement illustrates all of the problems in France as they edged closer towards a historic revolution. That art style never came back to life and the artists who were well-known Rococo painters couldn't make it in post-Revolutionary France, as Rococo was forever a symbol of decadence. The everlasting distaste for Rococo art never faded. You can visualize the revolutionary peasants in the violent riots of the French Revolution ransacking castles and châteaux, destroying any decorative items they come across including, and especially, Rococo furniture and paintings.

*"Rococo Art Movement." Identify This Art. N.p., 2014. Web. 06 Dec. 2014.*

*<[http://www.identifythisart.com/art\\_history/art-movement/rococo-art-movement/](http://www.identifythisart.com/art_history/art-movement/rococo-art-movement/)>.*

Summaries:

Paragraph 1:

Paragraph 2:

Paragraph 3:

Paragraph 4:

Paragraph 5:

Paragraph 6:

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