Absolute Power and the Aristocratic Style
Chapter 21 – Discussion Guide

Age of Absolutism (17th-18th Centuries)

- Absolutism – a political theory asserting that unlimited power be vested in one or more rulers.
- Divine Right Kings – rulers who believed to hold their power directly from God.

Rulers as Patrons of the Arts

- Classical Baroque – a hallmark of French Absolutism & Louis XIV.
- Aristocratic Style – flamboyant, lavish, luxurious, elite, Baroque theatricality and grandeur.
- The Arts worked to serve the majesty of the crown and flourished as an expression of the majesty of the ruler of the wealth and strength of his domain, and to legitimize and glorify the power of the ruling elite.
- Rulers commissioned magnificent monuments in architectural history, epitomizing the wealth, absolute authority and artistic vision of a privileged minority. They reflected Baroque theatricality and grandeur.
  - Versailles (Louis XIV)
  - Imperial Mosque (Monument to Safavid wealth, commissioned by Shah Abbas, Persia.)
  - Taj Mahal (Shah Jahan’s mausoleum to the memory of his favorite wife who died while giving birth. This stands as a tribute to romantic love.)

The Academic Style in Painting

- Neoclassicism – the mind must prevail over the passions. The revival of classical style and subject matter – became the accepted style of academic art.
- Poussin & Academic Style - revered Raphael, Classical & Renaissance style, lofty subjects from Greco/Roman mythology and Christianity.
- The Grand Manner - Artists should choose only serious and elevated subjects (such as battles, heroic actions, and miraculous events) drawn from classical or Christian history, and reject crude, bizarre, and ordinary subject matter. Artists should make the physical action suit the mood of the narrative, avoiding, at all cost, the gross aspects of ordinary existence and any type of exaggeration. They should present their subjects clearly and evenly in harmonious compositions that were free of irrelevant and sordid details. Restraint, moderation, and decorum should govern all aspects of pictorial representation.
- Aristocratic Portrait –flattered aristocratic patrons and served as allegories of royal authority. Aristocratic portraits differ dramatically from the portraits of the Dutch Masters. Whereas Dutch artists investigated the personalities of their sitters, bringing to their portraits a combination of psychological intimacy and forthrightness, French artists were concerned primarily with outward appearance and enhancing the themes of authority and regality.
- Velazquez – “Las Meninas” – Group portrait that comments on the relationship between the perceived and the perceiver. All figures are gazing at the royal couple standing outside of the picture space in the very space occupied by the viewer. The painting becomes a “conceit,” a metaphor, that provokes a visual dialogue between viewer and viewed, and between patron and artist.
Protestant Devotionalism

- In England, the Netherlands, and northern Germany, Protestants were committed to private devotion rather than public ritual, churches were stripped of ornamentation, and the mood was more somber and intimate.

- Protestant devotionalism shared with Catholic mysticism an anti-intellectual bias, but Protestantism shunned all forms of theatrical display.

- In Northern Europe, Protestants valued personal piety. Pietism, a 17th century religious movement that originated in Germany, encouraged Bible study as the principal means of cultivating the “inner light” of religious truth.

- The King James Bible – 1611 English translation of the Bible. The new translation of Scripture preserved the spiritual fervor of the Old Testament Hebrew and the narrative vigor of the New Testament Greek. Like Shakespeare’s poetry, the language of the King James Bible is majestic and compelling, concise and poetic in its imagery and rhythm. Both the King James Bible and the writings of Shakespeare had a shaping influence on the English language and on all subsequent English literature.

John Donne – English Literature of the 17th Century


- Developed the sermon as a vehicle for philosophic meditation.

- Meditation 17 – Donne pictures humankind as part of a vast, cosmic plan.

- Holy Sonnets – Donne’s religious poetry.

- Donne’s used “conceits” – elaborate metaphors that compare two apparently dissimilar objects or emotions, often with the intention of shocking or surprising.

- The conceits of Donne and other 17th century writers borrowed words and images from the new science, so critics called this type of writing “metaphysical.”

- Metaphysical poetry reflects the baroque affection for dramatic contrast, for frequent and unexpected shifts of viewpoint, and for the dramatic synthesis of discordant images.

- Donne’s rejection of conventional poetic language in favor of a conversational tone represents a revolutionary development in European literature.