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Spanish Golden Age  
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### The Spanish Baroque Period: Skepticism and *Desengaño*

**Objectives:** Students should be able to:

- Understand what an artistic period is.
- Understand the influence of social and intellectual milieu on a work of art.
- Differentiate the characteristics of the Spanish Baroque period from the Renaissance.

**Materials Needed:**

- Overhead or digital projector
- Images of a Medieval painting
- A Renaissance painting (Michelangelo's Sistine chapel for instance)
- Baroque paintings (Velasquez's Las Meninas, Holbein's The Ambassadors)
- Copies of *El retrato vivo* (is there a translation?). Copies of *La vida es sueño* (*Life's a Dream*) are readily available in translation, but the play is significantly longer.

**Activities:**

- Warm-up/Hook: Ask the class if they feel there are any differences between the way they think and the way their parents think. What are some examples of the way our generation sees the world differently? Class discussion, 7-10 minutes.
- Introduce the notion of a period: The history of human thought and achievement is often divided into periods where thinkers and their works have similar characteristics and ideologies. In a given period there are connections between the different disciplines: science, philosophy, religion, visual and literary arts. Lecture and discussion, 5-7 minutes.
- Show paintings: development in visual representation can illustrate changes in the overall ideology of a society. Begin briefly with an example of a **painting from the middle-ages** to show lack of depth and perspective. Then show a **Renaissance painting** from one of the masters. Renaissance paintings look much more realistic because they paint using models of real people and they apply the concept of perspective. This is an example of how science influences art—the artistic technique of perspective painting comes from a better understanding of the science of sight. In Renaissance painting, the figures are very idealistic—God and men are celebrated through art. Then show some **Baroque paintings**. Holbein's The Ambassadors plays with the notion of perspective by applying two different perspectives. This causes part of the painting to seem distorted, which illustrates that perspective is an optical trick. Then show Las Meninas. This painting also toys with perspective and the conventional notions of representation. It is

full of ambiguity. We are not sure what the subject of the painting is. It also questions the relationship between the viewer and the painting. Presentation and discussion, 15 minutes.

- Baroque Conventions: The origin of the term “Baroque” is uncertain, but it has come to be associated with distortion. A baroque pearl is misshapen, elliptical. It is best to understand the Baroque as a reaction to the Renaissance. Go through list of contrasts between the Renaissance and Baroque periods (see *The Renaissance World Before and After the Skeptical Crisis* (adapted from a presentation by Matt Ancell) located at the end of this lesson plan. In the Baroque period people become skeptical of Renaissance ideals. This skepticism is represented in Spanish art through the notion of *desengaño* or disillusionment. This functions on the assumption that most people experience and think about reality in a naïve manner because they are tricked by conventional ideologies, they are *engañados*. Individuals become enlightened through moments of disillusionment, when they experience something that is out of place in the system of their ideology. The new experience forces them to reevaluate and modify their world view. *Desengaño* is also commonly used as a device in Spanish Golden Age theater.
- A famous example of *desengaño* is found in the most well know Spanish Golden Age play—*La vida es sueño* (*Life’s a Dream*). In the play, Basilio, the King of Poland and an astrologer, has read in the stars that his son will bring war and doom to his kingdom. In order to avoid this fate Basilio has his son, Segismundo, placed in prison as an infant and raised far from the city. Once Segismundo has grown, Basilio decides to give his son a chance as the ruler. He has Segismundo’s jailer drug him, dress him in prince’s clothing, and bring him to the palace. When Segismundo awakens in the palace, he thinks he is dreaming. Prince for only a day, Segismundo already begins to show his bad temperament—he ends the day by throwing one of his servants out of the window, killing him. Regretting his decision, the King has his son drugged once again and taken back to his prison. When Segismundo reawakens in his prison he comments on how he had dreamt that he was the prince, but that it had seemed so real. This play makes us question whether or not what we experience on a daily basis is reality or merely a dream, thus achieving disillusionment, since most people believe their senses. This type of skepticism is based on the philosophy of Rene Descartes, who comments that all our life could be a dream. Descartes’ major works, *Meditations* and *Discourse on Method*, were produced in the 1630s, about the same time that Calderón produced *La vida es sueño*.
- Lecture and discussion, 15-20 minutes.

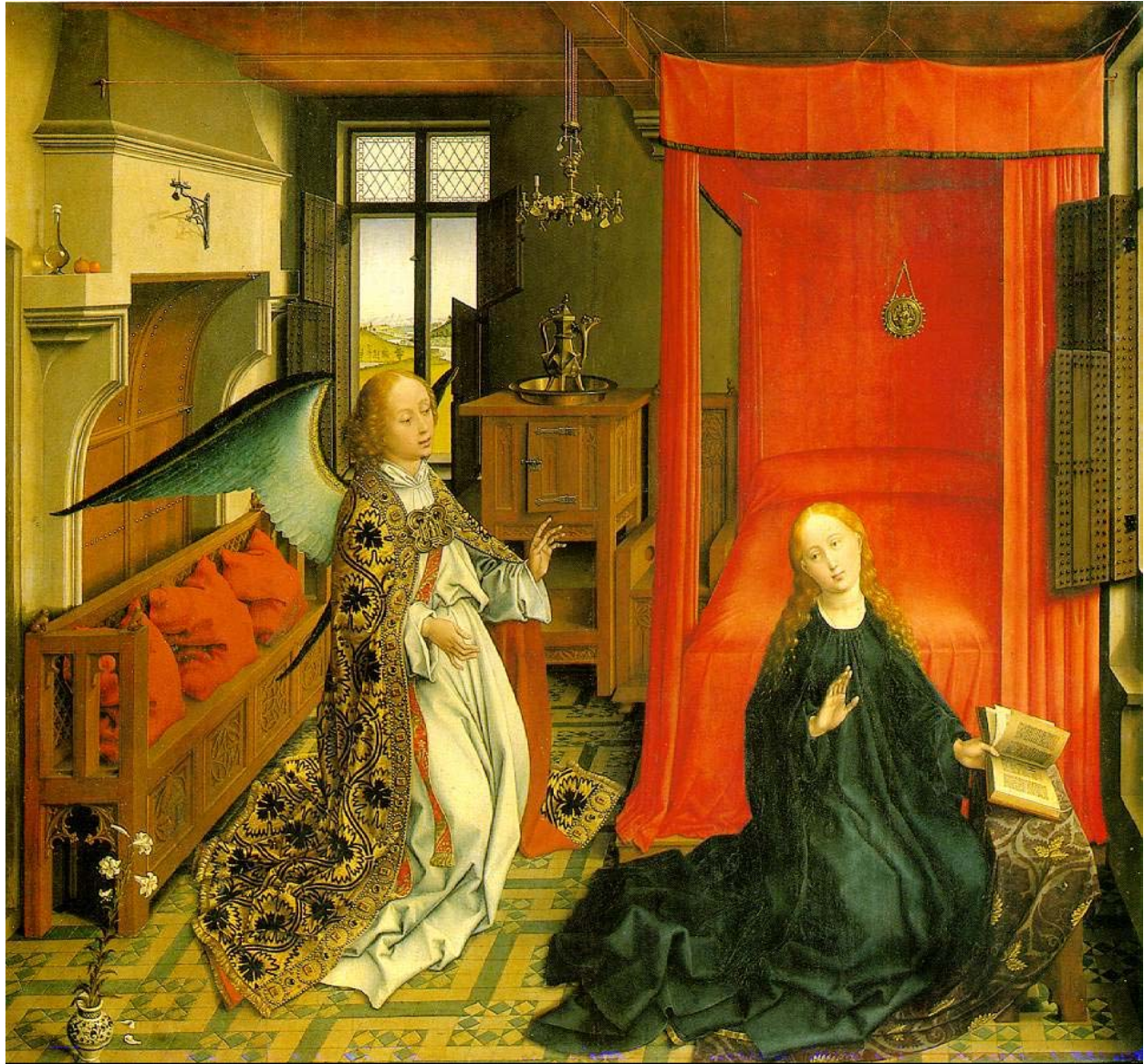
**Assessment:** See if the students can identify period specific characteristics in the paintings that they analyzed. Elements of the paintings:

- Van der Weyden’s Annunciation is a transitional piece in between the Medieval Period and the Renaissance. It has a very traditional medieval subject matter—the angel announcing Mary’s immaculate conception. Medieval art is mostly based out of the Bible and almost always didactic. These figures look fairly plain

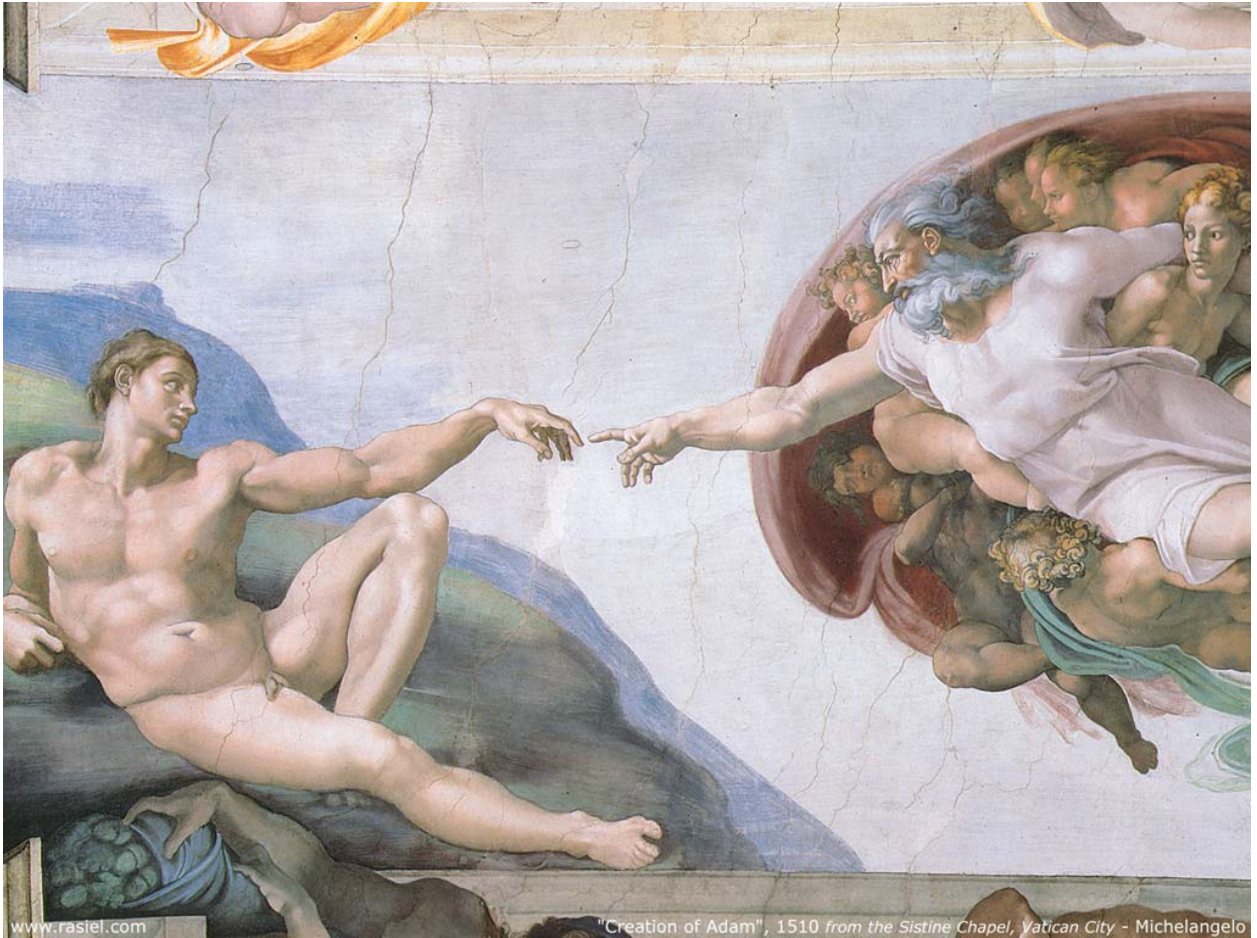
and they are in unnatural poses. Artists of this period are beginning to develop the techniques of perspective and representing textiles in paint, but here it is obvious that these are not yet perfected.

- The Creation of Adam and The School of Athens are very clear examples of Renaissance art. There is an abundance of natural looking light. The positions look more natural, though the body types are highly idealized. As we see in the School of Athens, perspective painting has been perfected—the image has depth. It also shows that it is now acceptable to paint non-biblical subject matter. The Golden Age of Greece becomes a popular subject in the Renaissance.
- Caravaggio is one of the most well known baroque painters. In these two paintings he uses a technique called *chiaroscuro*, where the base for the painting is black instead of white. This causes an extremely high contrast. The subject matter for both paintings is also biblical, but it is with a new twist. In the Calling of Saint Matthew, we do not see the Savior's body; he is a disembodied arm and head. His hand points limp—a position similar to that of The Creation of Adam. In the Supper at Emmaus, the Savior looks very androgynous (he has feminine features). In this painting Caravaggio toys with perspective; the basket of fruit looks like it is about to fall out of the canvas and the man's arm also seems to breach the boundary. We see that the fruit is beginning to rot, something we would never see in the Renaissance. In both, the figures look anything but idealistic; these scenes could have taken place in any local bar.
- Diego Velazquez studied the works of Caravaggio as he developed his own style. He also applies the *chiaroscuro* technique. Velazquez's most famous painting, Las Meninas, is very characteristic of baroque tendencies since it is a painting about painting (Velazquez is the artist in the painting). This reflexivity transfers to the stage, since plays about plays or theatricality were also common (as were plays about painting; see *El retrato vivo*, *El pintor de su deshonra*, etc.). As Caravaggio, Velazquez also toys with perspective—art experts find no less than three vanishing points in Las Meninas, which is a cause for debate in the art community. The central character in the painting, La Infanta, seems like she was just posing for a portrait, but at the instant of representation all the figures seem to be in a moment of surprise; in other words, this is not traditional portraiture posing. They even seem to be in motion. Las Meninas is full of ambiguities: Where is the vanishing point? Who is the main subject of the painting? Who is in the mirror? What is Velazquez painting? Since these questions have no definite answers, they challenge the way we view painting and reality in general—this is an element of *desengaño*.

**Homework:** Read *El retrato vivo* and write a one-page response about characteristics of the Baroque Period in the play. If it can't be found in English, try Calderón's *Life's a Dream*, or for shorter reading (another *entremes*) try Cervantes's *Retablo de maravillas*, which should be readily available in translation.



Van der Weyden's Annunciation: Late Medieval/Early Northern Renaissance



Michelangelo's Creation of Adam (from the Sistine Chapel):  
Italian Renaissance



Raphael's School of Athens: Italian Renaissance



Caravaggio's Calling of Saint Matthew: Italian Baroque



Caravaggio's Supper at Emmaus: Italian Baroque





Diego Velazquez's Las Meninas: Spanish Baroque

# The Renaissance World Before and After the Skeptical Crisis (adapted from a presentation by Matt Ancell)

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1. **Renaissance:** A *static* and *fixed* world, the same as it was ordered by God on the day of creation/after the Fall. A world in which every existing thing corresponds to the divine idea that begat it, and which defines and guarantees its *true* meaning and *essential* nature. An *orderly* world of *harmonious* appearances.

**Baroque:** A *mobile* and *changing* world, an apparent chaos of random, seeming arbitrary phenomena: a world with no clear or certain relationship to God or a divine order; therefore, a world whose *true* meaning and *essential* nature is unstable and unknown. A *disorderly* world of *contradictory* appearances.

2. **Renaissance:** Human reason is a noble, efficacious instrument of knowledge—the veritable image of God in humanity—representing the world as it truly is as God originally created it.

**Baroque:** Human reason is a fallible, capricious faculty, moved by passion, prejudice, appetite and illusion to create false images of the world that pander to human egoism and desire.

3. **Renaissance:** The inventions of reason—ideas and words—are functionally *identical* to the things they represent.

**Baroque:** The inventions of reason—knowledge and language—only accidentally describe real things in the world: words and ideas are wholly *distinct* and even *opposed to* things as they really are.

4. **Renaissance:** The best literature observes certain *conventional forms*, using as a standard of excellence the writings of Italian and Latin authors.

**Baroque:** Literature either *ironizes conventional forms*, or adapts them to different purposes, or adopts/creates new ones.