Antonio Verrio: An Italian Decorative Painter in England

Brett Dolman, Curator (Collections), Historic Royal Palaces

Old Royal Naval College: Painted Hall Autumn Lecture Series

9 November 2017

You're here today, I hope, to learn a little bit about the art of Antonio Verrio and how his career in England helped pave the way for Sir James Thornhill and his work here at Greenwich.

More on Thornhill later.

I'm going to start by spending 7 or 8 minutes creating a bit of context. With apologies for those that already know all of this, I think it is important to paint a picture of the artistic world of the 17th century, to get to grips with how this 'Wilder Sort of Painting' became the most fashionable way to decorate your palace, your country house, your Painted Hall … for a brief dizzying and dazzling period at the end of the 17th and early 18th centuries here in Britain – a country whose artistic reflexes have tended – on the whole and across time – to be more stubbornly classical or at least less overtly European and shamefully 'baroque'.

What *is* the Baroque ??

Baroque is a term coined by 18th and 19th century art historians to describe the prevailing style in Western European art from the last years of the 1500s through to the early decades of the 1700s. It embraces an approach to art that was florid and elaborate. A style that grew in reaction against the intellectual coldness of the Late Renaissance. But it also reflected the patronage of a Counter-Reformation Catholic Church eager to reach the public through large

expansive works of art that filled rooms with colour and brought theatre and storytelling to religious subject matter.

The Baroque approach was applied to painting, sculpture and architecture. It often combined elements of all three in a single interior space. Interior decorative schemes within buildings and the design of the buildings themselves were planned around a series of geometric shapes, setting up rhythms and relationships that made moving through these rooms and spaces an ever-changing dramatic encounter. It could be overwhelming, and certainly was often intended to be an assault on the senses and a reflection of the style, panache and bank account of the commissioning patron, whether the Church or a Prince.

All of this has also meant that the adjective ‘baroque’ is often applied to anything considered a little over-the-top stylistically, or to an over elaborate work of art, whatever the period. (The word itself is probably from the Portuguese *barroco* for a misshapen pearl). This is a negative term, and reflects later, particularly neo-classical, or Georgian and Victorian sensibilities about art, and a preference for simpler, less ostentatious design. This is unfair, I think, and gets in the way of appreciating the Baroque on its own terms. This was after all a particularly glorious century of artistic achievement. The Baroque was the age of Caravaggio, Bernini, Carracci; and Rubens, but also of Rembrandt, Vermeer and Velasquez.

The Baroque cultural movement also inspired developments in poetry and music. Orchestral embellishment, harmony and counterpoint in the latter; new rhythms and wilder imagery in the former that saw their own apogee in works like John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, a Baroque epic. The Baroque style effected transformations in urban planning, garden design and philosophy. Though – a word of warning – it is more than a little simplistic to label or to unify all artistic and

cultural change through a long historic epoch with one heading. There was as much dissonance as agreement between artistic movements and milieu during this period as any other. Palladianism, Mannerism, Classicism all co-existed, meshed with, challenged or absorbed the Baroque in the 17th century, and the term itself is, as we've said, very much a later art historical attempt to define … the undefinable.

All the artists I mentioned a while ago … Vermeer, Rembrandt, Caravaggio … are very different from each other. They interpreted the artistic trends of their day in individual ways … That's what makes them, individually, memorable.

But, there is, if we keep our present attention on the visual arts at least, an argument still for the existence of a pervasive Baroque style during the 1600s. The Baroque – particularly when it explicitly drew together architecture, sculpture and painting within a unified decorative scheme – *can* be spoken of and described as a tangible artistic period…

****

It all started, like most good things, in Italy. Baroque architecture was developed, promoted and perfected by Bernini and Borromini in the middle years of the 1600s. Renaissance forms were released from the strict control of rule books and architectural orders. The Italian grandees experienced new and grand interior spaces of circles, squares, ellipses, ovals and spirals all imposed upon each other, setting up rhythms of concave and convex curves, areas of light and shade, spectacular and complex viewpoints.

A palace or aristocratic *house* of any pretension was a sequence of courts, grand staircases, and reception rooms, often of increasing magnificence, full of architectural and geometric complexity, heavily decorated, with relief and free-standing sculpture, bursting in upon the

interior spaces. Painted ceilings and walls were highly illusionistic, full of light and dark, creating open skies where there had been a roof, high domed ceilings where there had been flat plaster …

Trompe l'oeil painting – literally meaning 'deceives the eye' – pretending to be a stone arch or column, or, in Italian, Quadratura – the opening up of entire walls in imitation of real space using perspective tricks and a unifed approach to the design of the architecture and decoration of the entire room.

.

Through this complexity shone a new and direct approach to storytelling. Inspired by the Catholic Church's need to appeal directly to its dwindling public, the style and narrative approach of painting in particular became more overtly populist, emotional, visceral. Poses and gestures became grander, more operatic, less ashamed. Artists particularly used the 'contraposto' – the 'counterpoise' or tension inherent in a body moving in different directions at the same time: bodies twisted in vibrant energy that evoked emotion, intent, power.

This was particularly the case in sculpture as well as painting. Bernini's works, more than any other sculptor, capture this 'freeze-frame' approach: a Biblical hero caught in mid-motion, each incident of carving delighting in the exuberance of human movement. Baroque sculpture invites being inspected from all sides, with multiple 'faces' available from different viewing angles, all often spiralling around a central axis. Theatrical elements were added too: sculptures became water fountains, hidden pipework encased within their twisting forms. Bernini was not only a sculptor, but a painter, an architect, a playwright, and a *stager of spectacles* where all of these artistic elements might be combined.

This is Bernini's *St Theresa* from the Cornaro Chapel in Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. This is St Theresa *in Ecstacy*. This is not, as the Victorians might have suggested, a rather vulgar marriage of religion and eroticism, but a passionate evocation of what *religious* ecstacy was meant to mean. This was the Catholic Church reaching out to its public and attempting to explain, or to sell, its interpretation of religious truth.

Michelangelo da Caravaggio was a very different sort of artist, a very different sort of man – as famous for the violent episodes of his life as his wonderful artistic creations. Nonetheless, Caravaggio is the artist most renowned for driving forward Baroque innovations in Italian painting. Fast living, dangerous, creative, unpredictable, Caravaggio exploded onto the Roman art scene in 1600 and was dead a decade later aged 39. More than any other artist, Caravaggio brought naturalism and theatre to religious art, particularly through his innovative use of *chiaroscuro*, the contrasts of light and shade.

This is a detail from his 'Death of the Virgin' of 1601 – 1605. Gone is the traditional, medieval, image of the Assumption of the Virgin, not dying but taken up to the Heavens in a glorious moment of spiritual celebration, but – in its place - a very bleak and human moment of tragedy. Indeed, of all the works of Caravaggio that I could show you, this one is not unusual in that it was rejected by his Carmelite patrons. It was not just the artist's alleged use of a prostitute as the model for the Virgin but the lack of theological correctness (that the Virgin didn't die in a traditional sense) that the patrons complained about.

This goes to show that the art world was not entirely dependent on, or the product of, the Counter-Reformation church, and that 'Baroque art' manifested itself in different forms and directions.

Different artists responded over the century in different ways. Artists competing for the same commissions also drove developments onwards to ever more dynamic pictures. Ultimately, the

Baroque movement spread throughout Europe, becoming more and more ornate, and to the New World, taken there by Jesuit missionaries and their architects and sculptors.

Closer to home, and more politically and theologically correct, Peter Paul Rubens, influenced by trips to Italy, was one of the artists that took the Baroque north. This is his 'Raising of the Cross' in Antwerp Cathedral. The key here is that Rubens has chosen the dynamic moment of the cross being raised, rather than the passive or spiritual moment of Christ on the Cross. The painting is full of movement, sculpturally twisted human forms, fleshy realism, light and shade. It's also key that the Church is making a connection here between the raising of the cross and the raising of the eucharistic host during Mass. This is an altarpiece, and it is reminding the congregation of Christ's real corporeal presence in the consecrated wafer – a key point of contention between the Catholic and Protestant churches.

Rubens, whilst in Antwerp in the 1630s, painted the canvases for another Painted Hall – the crowning glory of Inigo Jones's Banqueting House in Whitehall. The central subject is the Apotheosis of James I, with the King holding a sceptre with his foot on an imperial globe, being raised aloft by Justice. This was Charles I extolling both the virtues of his father, and his own belief in the divine right of Kings. As James I himself had said:
" *God gives not Kings the Style of Gods in vain, For on their thrones his sceptre do they sway"*

Rubens' Banqueting House could have heralded an era of baroque mural decoration in England in the middle years of the 17th century. But – of course – history had other ideas, and the Civil War of the 1640s, and the artistic conservatism of the Puritan Commonwealth and Protectorate of the 1650s, extinguished the flames of baroque art and its catholic associations.

But over in the continent, particularly in Italy, this style of art flourished, and it is in Italy where we first meet Antonio Verrio.

Antonio Verrio was born c1636 either in the Apulian city of Lecce or Naples, it is not clear which. Several works which can be confidently attributed to him exist in Lecce, and his first known signed painting, of about 1659-61, survives there in the Convitto Nazionale. He married a Lecce woman, Massenzia Tornese, with whom he had two sons, Cristoforo and Oronzio. In 1661 Verrio moved with his family to Naples, where he received documented commissions from the Order of the Jesuits. It is possible that he also worked in Florence, Rome and Genoa.

In the mid 1660s, Verrio moved to the region of Toulouse in France, where he decorated the new chateau of Pierre-Paul Riquet, the courtier-engineer responsible for the Canal du Midi. In Toulouse itself, Verrio painted religious subjects for various patrons, including *The Marriage of the Virgin* for the Order of the Barefoot Carmelites.

Verrio seems to have abandoned his Italian family when he moved to France, living as a libertine, and rapidly acquiring a reputation as a womaniser, which inspired an epigram, written by his friend, the dramatist Jean Palaprat:

> [A peint des raisins et des belles
> Quel diable de peintre est-ce là,
> Qui mange et qui fout ses modèles!']
> A painter of grapes and beauties
> What a devil of painter is this-
> Who eats and screws his models

In 1668, Verrio had a son, Jean-Baptiste, with a new wife, Françoise Dangely, an artist, who would later accompany him to England.

Around 1670 Verrio moved to Paris where he had more opportunities to develop his career. At the end of that year, he was commissioned to decorate the home of the newly married Pierre Brûlart, a member of the French aristocratic elite. He painted four ceilings, which include the myths of Bacchus and Ariadne, Morpheus and Endymion, and Minerva and the Arts. These are all typical mural themes themes which reoccur throughout Verrio's career at other locations. Further work followed, and in May 1671 Verrio petitioned the French Royal Academy for membership. But it was difficult, it would seem for a recently arrived foreigner to break into the closed circle of French artists who had access to royal patronage, and it seems Verrio was frustrated in his attempt.

France's loss became England's gain.

Early in 1672, Verrio crossed the Channel. Probably in the company of Ralph Montagu, later 1st Duke of Montagu, who had been until then the English Ambassador to France.

The England of Charles II's Restoration court was an entirely different place to the country governed by Oliver Cromwell in the 1650s.

The King had spent much of that period in exile in France or the Spanish Netherlands. He brought back with him from the continent a sense of European glamour. Or if you were a frustrated Puritan in 1660, an intolerable French taste for baroque extravagance, corruption, double-dealing, and women. Not necessarily in that order.

Looking at this another way, the reign of Charles II was a period of revolutionary experimentation. In science, in court etiquette and behaviour - and in art. The rulebook on how you were meant to behave at court and, consequently, outside court in the wider world (although this really only applied to the rich) was effectively torn up in 1660 and rewritten. Women in particular sensed new possibilities and freedoms, although their very identity was, we must remember, still elementally defined as inferior to men. They appeared on stage for the

first time, and, in country houses and at court, exercised a new control over household finances, matrimonial alliances and even political networks. Nell Gwyn crossed the social divide from the London brothels and public stage to the luxury of a house on Pall Mall. Partly this was because of the freedom offered by a licentious court where 'beauty' – in particular – was eulogised, praised and pursued: this 'Cult of Beauty' in part itself a reaction against the decidedly non-beautiful decades of war and violence that preceded it.

A world where 'being beautiful' could get you what you wanted.

This is the age of Sir Peter Lely 's languorous and sensual female portraiture for the beauties of Charles II's court – real women, like the royal mistress Barbara Villiers, Duchess of Cleveland, masquerading as goddesses and Christian Saints. Here she is as Minerva, and here – more provocatively, with her illegitimate son by the King, in a picture that is, in its composition and colouring, meant to emulate a representation of the Virgin Mary and infant Christ.

Not surprisingly, the Restoration Court readily embraced the theatricality and flamboyance of baroque art and architecture, so that it quicky became the dominant aesthetic in late 17th century England.
Sir Christopher Wren, Sir John Vanbrugh, and Nicholas Hawksmoor were its architects… Antonio Verrio, Louis Laguerre and later Sir James Thornhill its chief decorative painters. Each was different: Verrio – Italian and theatrical, Laguerre – French and intellectual, Thornhill, English and patriotic.

In England, Verrio's first patrons were the newly ennobled aristocrats who had helped manage Charles II's Restoration.

In the early 1670s, Verrio worked for Henry Bennet, created Earl of Arlington in 1672, who commissioned him to work at Euston Hall, Suffolk and in London, and by John Maitland, Lord Lauderdale. 1672 was a stellar year for Lauderdale: he was created a duke for his services to the crown, married the Countess of Dysart and moved into his new bride's house at Ham, near Richmond. Verrio's work at Ham, mainly in the Duchess' apartments consists of three ceilings. In the Queen's Closet, Verrio painted *Ganymede & The Eagle,* in the Duchess's Private Closet, *The Penitent Magdalene*, and on the coved ceiling of the White Closet next door, we meet *Divine Wisdom presiding over the Liberal Arts,* a subject he had already attempted at Brulart, and would do so again later at Hampton Court. The Ham murals are Verrio's earliest *surviving* work in England.

Verrio's work for this aristocratic clientele quickly established him as the artist in fashion.

Verrio's first royal painting was actually a large canvas painting of 1674, representing *The Sea Triumph of Charles II*. - in which his portrayal of the King seems to have been based on a miniature by Samuel Cooper, but transposed into a typically theatrical wish-fulfilment of the King's imperial, specifically naval, and also implicitly – it has been argued – virile power.

The Sea Triumph proved to be a successful trial piece for further royal assignments. The King, impressed, quickly 'denizened' Verrio on 5 May 1675, and commissioned from him the enormous project to redecorate the north range of Windsor Castle. This took nine years and included twenty painted ceilings and three staircases, the King's Chapel, and St George's Hall, for which he was paid a grand total of almost £8000. Almost all of this was swept away by George IV – whose rebuilding of the Windsor Castle State Apartments destroyed all but 3 ceilings in the 1820s.

Windsor was a massive project, the most extensive Baroque mural scheme painted in England at the time, and one for which Verrio had to employ several assistants, including an apprentice

and a grinder of colours. Among them were Gerard Lanscroon, later a major artist in his own right, and the flower painter Antonio Montingo, the gilder René Cousin and the carver Grinling Gibbons, who collaborated frequently with Verrio. The Test Act of 1673 forbade the employment of Catholics, and so special warrants had to be issued in order to permit the artists to work. The list of exceptions for 16 Nov 1678, included 'Anthony Verrio and Frances d'Angely, his wife, and Jean-Baptiste and Francis their sons … Verrio's housekeeper and three women servants'.

Charles II's Windsor project aimed at transforming the King's principal non-metropolitan palace into an English Versailles, in homage to and in rivalry with Charles's first cousin, Louis XIV, whose unprecedented campaign of royal building and artistic patronage advertised his magnificence, divine authority and his cultural supremacy. At Windsor, as at Versailles and the Louvre, mythological assemblies of gods and goddesses competed to laud the restored Stuart dynasty and especially the King and his Queen, Catherine of Braganza. In the Queen's Audience Chamber the Queen is drawn in a chariot towards a temple of Virtues, while in the Presence Chamber she is seated with the four Cardinal Virtues under a canopy, as the figure of Justice drives out the forces of Evil.

Meanwhile, St George's Hall featured an 110-foot long royal history lesson, with Edward III greeting his son, the Black Prince, hero of military campaigns and conquest against the French in the 14th century, while in St George's Chapel Verrio depicted *Christ Healing the Sick*, a barely concealed metaphor for the Stuart monarchy's own declared powers of miraculous healing, celebrated through the regular ritual of the 'Royal Touch'.

By the time the Windsor series had been completed in 1684, Verrio had been appointed ' Chief and First Painter to the King' in succession to Sir Peter Lely, who had died in 1680, with a salary of £200 a year, exclusive of commissioned work.

Verrio's murals, often overlooked and frequently derided by later Georgian, Victorian and even 20th-century writers, was highly praised at the time. The diarist, John Evelyn, a regular visitor to the Castle wrote in 1679, 'I visited that excellent painter Verrio, whose works in fresca in the King's palace at Windsor will celebrate his name as long as those walls last'. Time and the capricious building programmes of future monarchs have not been kind to Verrio at Windsor, but his work survives in quantity and quality elsewhere.

Verrio was continuously employed throughout the 1670s, 80s and 90s, not just at Windsor but up and down the country too. For William Herbert, 1st Earl of Powis. he decorated the Grand Staircase of Powis Castle in the 1670s. The painting – unusually oil on canvas and perhaps painted in London and then transported to Wales – may represent the coronation of Charles II's queen, Catherine of Braganza, but is freely adapted from Veronese's Apotheosis of Venice, to which Verrio has added a typical assembly of Olympian gods and goddesses.

In the early 1680s, Verrio could be found painting *Apollo in his dawn chariot* in the Saloon at Moor Park in Hertfordshire, the home of James Scott, Duke of Monmouth, the King's oldest natural son.

Also in the 1680s, Verrio, with the assistance of the young Louis Laguerre, undertook the largest easel painting he ever made. The work was originally intended to commemorate Charles II's patronage of the Royal Mathematical School at Christ's Hospital. This gigantic painting – its 86 feet long - made in three parts, designed to be hung in the Great Hall, was unfinished when the King died in February 1685. James II allowed Verrio to continue the work, which was modified to include James' portrait in place of his brother. The final version shows James sitting on the throne, giving audience to the Governors, masters, boys and girls, with at his feet, amusingly, King Charles' favourite spaniel. Charles' portrait is represented in a medallion on the right hand side of the King.

But its Verrio's work at Burghley for Sir James Cecil, the Earl of Exeter, between 1686 and 1697 which rightly, I think, stands as Verrio's most impressive surviving masterpiece.

Lord Exeter engaged Verrio to decorate the suite of State Rooms, later known as the 'George' Rooms – the State Dressing Room and its Jewel Closet (in 1686) and the Drawing Room, Great Drawing Room, State Dining Room and Saloon (from 1690-4). This is the Saloon known as The Heaven Room – a tour-de-force of baroque trompe l'oeil effects and quadratura illusionism, and a riot of colour and mythological detail. The walls illustrate the story of Venus and her lover Mars caught by Vulcan's net, in the presence of a mythological dictionary of assembled gods and goddesses, falling out of the ceiling and clambering all over the painted fictive architecture. As an 18th-century guidebook described,

"To describe each particular figure, which Verrio poured forth upon the ceilings of Burghley House, would be, in fact, to write a new Pantheon, or a complete history of all the heathen gods."

Verrio's final work at Burghley was the Hell Room ceiling (1696-7) - later transformed into a staircase, with the walls painted by Thomas Stothard in the early 19th century. Verrio has painted the mouth of hell as the gaping jaws of a titanic cat, with all the innumerable tormented souls writhing within. This is an astonishing piece of emotive theatre, even today. The typical Burghley visitor of the early 18th-century, equipped with a deeper knowledge of classical mythology, might spend hours searching the ceiling, picking out their favourite characters … Identifying the fate of Tityos, perhaps: who – as punishment for his attempted rape of Leto - was stretched out and forced to have his liver eaten by vultures for all eternity … ,Or, finding the nightmarish vision of death itself, pausing to consider their own life choices, and their own chances of finding Salvation – in the sun-drenched sky of Heaven – or Despair – inside the fiery mouth of Hell.

While at Burghley, Verrio belonged to the ‘Honourable Order of Little Bedlam’, Lord Exeter’s drinking club. His host indulged his expensive tastes – according to his contemporary, the writer Daniel Defoe – and gave him ‘a coach and horses, and equipage, a table, and servants and a very considerable pension’. He was also a regular client at *The George* in Stamford, where he kept an open table. Verrio’s occasional feuds with the Burghley Housekeeper and female household servants who spurned his lecherous advances, have become the stuff of anecdotal legend. The artist was not adverse to including portraits of his friends and his enemies (and indeed himself) in his paintings. There are similar stories following Verrio at Windsor, and elsewhere, but the Burghley archives are the most detailed. There, Verrio reportedly fell out with Lord Exeter’s cook, and painted her in the fourth George Room as Plenty, giving her four extra breasts.

Back at the royal court, Verrio had been retained after Charles II’s death in 1685 as ‘Chief and First Painter’ by James II. Commissions for royal portraits and murals at Whitehall Palace and further work at Windsor followed, His last work for the Stuart monarchy survives in the Royal Hospital at Chelsea. This institution, founded by the King on the model of Les Invalides in Paris, was begun to designs by Sir Christopher Wren in 1682 and largely finished by the time of the King’s death. The interior decoration continued under James II. This included the large mural painting in the Great Hall containing the equestrian portrait of Charles II, begun in 1687 but not finished when King James fled the country during the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The strict imposition of the Test Act under William III and Mary II, which barred Catholics from court office, again, lost Verrio his court patronage. The work at Chelsea was completed by Henry Cook. Verrio lost his post as Chief Painter to John Riley and Godfrey Kneller, and was effectively paid off.

This did not put Verrio out of work. As we've seen, Verrio was busy at Burghley for most of the 1690s, and also at Chatsworth, home of Lord Exeter's brother-in-law, William Cavendish, 4th Earl of Devonshire. Devonshire was a key figure in the accession of William III for which he was granted a dukedom in 1694; he was also an important patron of the arts. In the late 1680s, Devonshire commissioned William Talman to make major alterations to Chatsworth, and employed Laguerre and Verrio to decorate the new rooms. Verrio completed the Great Stairs, Great Chamber, and a series of medallions in the Gallery and the Chapel altarpiece, between 1691-2. His principal ceiling is in the Great Chamber – later known as the State Dining Room – where *The return of the Golden Age*, with Vices defeated by Virtues, is depicted in honour of William and Mary. Verrio, it seems, despite being Catholic, and despite this accusation being thrown at him by later historians, had no particular religious moral compass that stopped him working for the heroes of the Protestant Revolution. Before too long, William III found a way of re-employing him at Court.

Verrio resumed his royal duties in 1699 – restoring his own work at Windsor and creating new designs for the Chapel, to incorporate the image of King William.

Meanwhile, building works for the King's new palace at Hampton Court were nearing completion. By 1701 Verrio was in residence there and that year decorated William's new riverside Banqueting House (£500), aided by the gilding specialist Peter Cousin (about £80), who was paid separately for all the elaborate frame and scrollwork. The ceiling shows *Minerva surrounded by the Arts and Sciences*. This was one of Verrio's favourite designs, as similar earlier versions exist at Brûlart, Ham House and Chatsworth. Here, the figure of Sculpture holds a bust of William himself. The bust is absent from the preparatory sketch for the ceiling, (which survives in the collections of the V&A), perhaps suggesting that it was added as a request from the King, who is now, in the finished version, placed centre-stage in the design,

leaving his Banqueting House guests in no doubt whose virtuous and noble patronage they needed to thank for their good fortune.

Around the walls, Verrio painted stories of the loves and lives of the Olympian gods told by the Roman poet, Ovid, in his widely read *Metamorphoses.* The choice of content, together with the baroque racy style of execution, challenged later 19th-century residents of the Banqueting House, when it had been turned into a Grace-and-Favour home: In 1864, Miss Baly, a Victorian lady of refined sensibilities, complained to the Lord Chamberlain:

"I find very objectionable the large undressed figures in the frescoes on each side of the fireplace and venture to suggest that they should be either draped or clouded in such a manner as to render them appropriate decorations for a drawing room. Lady Rennett [Baly's predecessor] had large bookcases which entirely concealed them."

The next phase of the Hampton Court commission now began in the palace itself. For the Great and Little Bedchambers in the King's Apartments (£400 & £200), Verrio created intimate designs appropriate to the setting. In the larger of the two rooms, Verrio painted the story of Endymion, the shepherd adored by the Titan Goddess of the Moon, Selene, and granted eternal youth by Zeus, but placed in a state of eternal slumber. Endymion lies in the arms of Morpheus, God of Dreams while Selene ascends from her nocturnal mystic rendezvous with Endymion in a cave, surrounded by some of their offspring.

In the Little Bedchamber, Verrio painted Mars in the lap of Venus, the literal disarming of War by Love.

Both bedchamber schemes can be read as William's memorialising of his wife, whose active role in the early building works at Hampton Court before her death in 1694 would have been readily recalled as William attempted to finish the King's Apartments. Surrounded by her favourite birds and roses, William – the great warleader – is pacified by the love of his wife in the Little Bedchamber, and now, when he sleeps, dreams every night of his lost love in the Great Bedchamber. There are no surviving sketches for either room, but it is tempting to believe that William retained an active interest in the design or even the choice of theme. At the very least, it would have been difficult to look at such stories and not personalise them.

Early in 1702, Verrio commenced his most ambitious project at Hampton Court, the King's Staircase (£1600). This vast design covers three walls and a ceiling, leading up from the main ground-floor entrance to the King's Apartments to the King's Guard Chamber. Verrio, in a typical piece of trompe l'oeil reminiscent of his own work at Windsor and Burghley, and directly influenced by earlier Italian models, transformed this interior space into a columned courtyard, open to the sky. It is based on a selective reading of what is (for us) a pretty obscure classical text, Julian the Apostate's The Caesars, and extended to embrace a wider iconography that associated William III with Alexander the Great and Hercules, and with Apollo.

The Caesars is a satire. It describes how Romulus, the founder of Rome, assembled a great throng of Roman emperors at an Olympian banquet. The Gods decided that many of them did not deserve divine approval and decided that everyone should instead compete for a seat at the empty table. During what might be termed 'Round One' when 350 years of imperial pretensions are paraded in front of the banquet, many of Rome's rulers are quickly dismissed or dispatched, accompanied by caustic comments about their reputation and conduct from Seilenos, the Olympian court jester. 'Round Two' is a battle of wits between the finalists: Julius Caesar, Octavian, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, Constantine and Alexander the Great, who has

been introduced as a late non-Roman addition by Hercules. Each is given a chance to argue for their own merits; Marcus Aurelius gets the most votes on the basis that he is the wisest, - and least full of his own importance.

Verrio has simplified all of this and altered its focus. It is Alexander who seems to be the victor in this composition, with the figure of Victory standing beside him, while the figure of Justice descends towards the Roman emperors, with a flaming sword and bridle; it's as if Verrio is recording the moment in Julian's text when Seleinos turns to Romulus and challenges, 'See now whether all these Romans can match this one Greek.

Julian the Apostate himself sits at his writing desk on the south wall of the King's Staircase. This is Emperor who sought to return Rome to its pagan past, after the assumption of Christianity by Constantine. Rather than the villain, however, by the 1690s, Julian had been rebranded as a kind of 'pagan witness of Protestant Truth' – fighting against the Roman Church and the forces of Catholicism, just as the Protestant armies of William III were engaged in continental Europe, not forgetting that William's own assumption of the English crown was based on the need to protect the Protestant revolution in this country.

As a monarch *invited* to rule as part of the constitutional revolution of 1688 and because of his marriage to Mary Stuart, daughter of James II, William was not as free as earlier kings to bombastically declare his divine authority. Perhaps this is why Verrio's mural is not quite as triumphalist as it could have been.

Which hero is the greatest ? It is not for William, but the Gods to choose.

This debate is reinforced by Verrio's choice of composition on the north wall. Here, he has abandoned Julian's text and instead painted an implicit homage to the benefits of William's 'Glorious Revolution'. At the top, Apollo, in his rôle as God of Music, sits amidst the Muses, the

inspirational goddesses of the arts - a common baroque theme. Here they are also joined by the Gods and Goddesses of Nature and Agriculture, of Flowers and of Spring, of Fruit and Rivers, amidst a display of expensive gold plate. This, then, is William's case for inclusion at the banquet of the Gods.

William can therefore be seen in Verrio's King's Staircase as four separate people. He is Julian the Apostate, ridding the world of Roman Catholicism; he is Hercules, paragon of virtuous strength, he is Alexander the Great, a heroic general fit to be mentioned in the same breadth as all glorious English generals of the past, and he is Apollo, presiding over a new era of plenty.

William was particularly keen to be seen as a triumphant military leader and pacifier, particularly after the signing of the peace of Ryswick in 1697. The grisaille work, below Verrio's principal schemes in the King's Staircase, showing painted scenes of military victory and trophies of war, lead the visitor through to the display of real weaponry in the King's Guard Chamber. Godfrey Kneller's enormous William III on Horseback dominated the King's Presence Chamber, and introduced William as the true British heir of Imperial Augustan Rome - in as much as the painting owes its design and iconography to Roman depictions of victorious emperors like Marcus Aurelius. Triumphal tapestries were also part of the design vocabulary, with scenes from the lives of Joshua and Hercules adding spiritual and mytholigical weight to William's claims.

Hercules, indeed, is everywhere at Hampton Court. He appears as one of a pair of statues in the gardens alongside Mars, while Louis Laguerre was employed in the 1690s to paint twelve gilded grisailles featuring the labours of Hercules on the outside of the building Fountain Court, which housed the new royal apartments … roundels which are framed by oranges and lionskins. Caius Cibber's pediment for the main façade of the new East Front of the palace represents Hercules, with Britannia, trampling on the Catholic church and her associated vices of Superstition, Tyranny and Heresy.

In other words, Verrio's murals are an intrinsic part of the political and religious messaging of the whole decorative scheme at the palace. This should not surprise us. Baroque art was, as I've tried to describe, all about the marriage of architecture, sculpture and painting to achieve an aesthetic and symbolic language that your early 18th-century courtier would have understood.

But - William III died at Hampton Court in March 1702, after a fall from his horse, with Verrio's work unfinished. Queen Anne authorised the completion of the Staircase, but the rest of the coved ceilings, between the Staircase and the Bedchambers, still waiting Verrio's paintbrush were abandoned and left blank. So, Verrio's scheme is incomplete, and there is no documentary evidence for establishing what messages the missing scenes for the walls and ceilings of the rest of the State Apartments may have been intended to deliver.

There are a few clues …

There is a drawing in the British Museum of a king bearing an olive branch, attended by figures representing Justice and Humility, and being offered a crown: it seems perfectly possible that this is an unexecuted idea for one of the other rooms in the King's Apartments, perhaps the Privy Chamber. Other drawings have occasionally emerged in the auction rooms, which may or may not have a link to Verrio's work at Hampton Court, or at Windsor, for William III.

Verrio's final surviving scheme at Hampton Court, and indeed his final mural scheme anywhere, was for the 'Great Room' – the principal room in the Queen's Apartments – completed for Queen Anne between 1703-5 (£1400?). Another marble hall open to the sky, with the paintings on three walls masquerading as tapestries. Verrio portrayed Anne as Britannia, venerated by the Four Corners of the globe, and as Justice, crowned by Neptune and Britannia, with George of Denmark playing a supporting role as the Lord High Admiral. The whole scheme recognised Britain's emerging dominance over land and sea, a process

catalysed during the time it took Verrio to paint the room, with the 1704 victories at Blenheim and Gibraltar.

Verrio's image of Anne as imperial personification of Justice, raised in triumph even above the gods, is the artist's final response to the challenge of representing and projecting the authority and majesty of a royal patron. Whether working on a single canvas, as with his Sea Triumph of Charles II, or on a complex narrative argument stretched over several ceilings, as at Windsor for Charles II and Catherine of Braganza, and at Hampton Court for William III and afterwards Queen Anne, Verrio was the master of translating royal propaganda into illusionistic art.

By 1704, Verrio's career was in decline. Plagued apparently by failing eyesight, and no doubt by his advancing years (he was now in his early 70s) the paintings in the Queen's Drawing Room may have ended up being completed by his assistants. The *London Gazette* of 5 December 1704 reported that Verrio was "blind through obstructions of the optic nerves, and brought to death's door by a distemper called the gout in the head" but had been cured by Sir Thomas Clark. Writing in the 1720s, George Vertue listed Verrio's assistants at Hampton Court as Gerard Lanscroon, Nicholas Scheffers and 'Catinat' (probably Giovanni Battista Cattenaro). Certainly, whilst Verrio petitioned the Queen for more work, no further commission was forthcoming and the artist was pensioned off again. He died at Hampton Court in 1707.

Verrio's fine self-portrait now in the National Portrait Gallery collection, probably dates from the same period. Although this work provides little evidence of a decline in his powers, he added the self-pitying inscription 'Ecco Antonio, O' il povero Verrio' – a lament for the end of his career as a court painter. Shortly before his death, he began a portrait of Sir Christopher Wren. This was subsequently completed by Kneller and Thornhill and is now in the Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford. It neatly brings me back to Sir James Thornhill, and almost to the end of my talk, but presents a final topic of discussion.

Thornhill's rise to artistic prominence is the subject of another talk later this month, so I won't dwell on his career here. Suffice to say that he followed Verrio into royal service, aided by a patriotic and political battle to find a British artist to rival the small army of French and Italian painters – Verrio, Laguerre, Antonio Pellegrini, Sebastiano Ricci – who had dominated the world of mural painting in Britain up to this point.

But Thornhill's relationship with Verrio is worth more than just a footnote.

Thornhill studied Verrio's work and working practices and in particular the terms of his royal service. According to the former's letter of 24 August 1717 to the Commissioners for building the Royal Hospital at Greenwich:

'Signor Varrio was paid for the whole Palaces of Windsor and Hampton Court, ceilings, sides, stairs, and back stairs, 8s per foot, which is £3-12-0 per yard, exclusive of gilding, had wine daily allowed him, lodgings in the Palaces, and, when his eyesight failed him, a pension of £200 per annum, and allowance of wine for his life'.

Artistically, Thornhill borrowed motives and ideas from Verrio's pencil and paintbrush, in the same way that Verrio had followed the work of French and Italian mural painters.

In 1715, in the Queen's Bedchamber at Hampton Court, the room right next door to Verrio's Queen's Drawing Room, Thornhill painted a ceiling - for the new Hanoverian king George I - representing the Abduction of Cephalus. This is another myth of love with a theme of sleep that complements Verrio's work at the palace in the King's Great and Little Bedchambers. Thornhill has also borrowed some ideas and elements from Verrio's Drawing Room, including the green monochrome festoons, the shells and the pattern of the double triumphal arch, the angels around the coves and the large pinkish curtains.

Earlier, in 1711, Thornhill had completed a smaller ceiling in the Chapel for Queen Anne, and there is some evidence too that Thornhill worked alongside Verrio at the end of his career at Hampton Court …

A drawing attributed to Sir James Thornhill, which appeared at auction a few years ago, shows a central circular design of a triumph, framed by figures representing the four quarters of the globe, and crowned by William and Mary's royal coat-of-arms. This may well be an unrecognised design for a ceiling at Hampton Court, and raises the interesting question of Thornhill's involvement.

Evidence for Thornhill at the palace, before his first official engagement there for Queen Anne in 1711, already comes from a small group of sketches at the British Museum. One or two of these appear to be copies from Verrio's finished schemes, with notes of how much Verrio charged. But there is also another design – which did not find its way on to the walls of Hampton Court (or anywhere else), similarly inscribed 'Varrio' with a scale, featuring what appears to be a Roman triumph. Finally, there are also four drawings which explore the same themes as the Queen's Drawing Room, but with different design suggestions.

Whether or not, Thornhill worked directly for Verrio or merely studied his examples (and payment terms) his artistic dependency is clear …

Here, in the Painted Hall at Greenwich, beneath Thornhill's masterpiece, William III and Mary II may appear centre-stage as very British and Protestant heroes, leading the British fleet to victory over Spanish ships and a literally down-trodden Louis XIV, but the artistic language of the ceiling, its iconography and its aesthetic, is essentially European. And it's a style of art that came to this country first with the arrival of Antonio Verrio in 1672.

The English Baroque evolved over the next four decades, to become the artistic medium of choice to celebrate or promote the achievements of the nation's generals, its kings and its

queens. Typically, it drew on the enormous and entertaining canon of stories about the Olympian gods and goddesses of Greece and Rome as a way of advertising the similarities between Charles II and Apollo or William III and Hercules. Verrio, as the artist who served successively and successfully four English monarchs from Charles II to Queen Anne, was at the vanguard of this artistic fashion. His schemes were admired at the time, copied across England by lesser artists, and his style and vocabulary adopted by his successors at court.

And so, a final word and appeal. People who saw these ceilings when they were first painted were meant to be impressed, both by the general artistic spectacle (and assumed budget) but also by the layers of meaning and iconography that sat behind the subject matter. This is difficult for 21st century audiences to appreciate, as we are ill-versed in classical literature, baroque symbolism and later 17th- and early 18th-century political and religious history.

I hope that I've shed some light on their context and meaning by way of exploring the life and career of Antonio Verrio. Next time you visit Hampton Court, or Chatsworth or Burghley, please give these wonderful paintings times to work their magic. Ignore, for a moment, the neo-Palladian charms of later Georgian architecture with its straight lines and symmetry, its discipline and its simple virtues. Embrace, if I could be mildly controversial, your inner European, and learn to love the colour, energy, mischief, naughtiness and exuberance of these Wilder Sorts of Paintings.

.