

Baroque, Chocolate, and the Discovery of the New World

by Don Rutherford Cardinal Johnson, RFSPE



(Photograph by Rayona Eben)

The Baroque era was a time of exuberant, twisting, turning, and exploding artistic expression.¹ The style of the Renaissance was released and left with no bounds, free to explore on its own. That new, exciting, intriguing concoction from the New World—chocolate—seemed to find its home in this new environment of Europe. Such as, perhaps, almost anything else in history, it was not without its controversies or queries as to proper use. Yet, chocolate managed to weave its way into the very fabric of European society—starting at the top and, in due course, working its way down.² Just as art was not meant to be enjoyed passively, but rather actively sought out and engaged by the viewer, chocolate seemed to flow across Europe and cover all of society. The Baroque made it possible.

I. The Baroque, Counter-Reformation, and Discovery

The Baroque era began as an instrument of the Counter-Reformation, using art to combat the Protestant opposition to the Catholic faith, and it was fueled by New World expansion. The discovery of the New World by Christopher Columbus and his crew under charter from Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain—whether or not others from outside the Americas may have arrived first—was ultimately responsible for the eventual trade and interaction between Europe and the Americas. It quickly became an oceanic version of the Silk Road, allowing for the trade of goods, the flow of money, and the exchange of ideas. Chief among the goals of the Most

Catholic Monarchy of Spain and of the Papacy was to bring the Catholic faith to the peoples of the New World. The results of the interaction of Europe with the New World may not have been perfect, but truly the same can be said about interactions between people in Europe, as well as those that existed in the Americas before the arrival of the Europeans—and even those that take place around the world today. Though its consequences are still being debated to this day, it is indisputable that the voyages of Columbus and subsequent voyages of discovery changed the world forever. They helped to solidify the Renaissance and its establishment of the modern era and supported the launch into the Baroque and ever-new eras of growth, discovery, and advancement.

It could be said easily that the Baroque was a decadent time, but not one of hedonism; for there were, indeed, still rules. The decadent nature of the era masks its origins as the artistic wing of the Counter-Reformation. One could be forgiven for thinking at first sight that it is counterintuitive for the Catholic faith to promote something that seems to be an even stronger example of those “decadent excesses” in which the Protestant movement accused them of indulging. Yet, there was a method in the madness. More so than in Renaissance art, the lives, struggles, thoughts, emotions, and realities of everyday people took center stage in much of Baroque art. Even the most high of society and even religious figures were often depicted with a stark, humanistic realism that created a connection with the viewer.³ Since the Baroque was designed to showcase the glories of the Catholic faith to the people and encourage them, thereby, not to convert to Protestantism, it is not surprising that the various art forms of the Baroque sought to engage people of all levels of society.⁴ Perhaps that focus on everyday people, coupled with a focus on the humanity of the upper classes, helped to diffuse chocolate through all ranks of society—and at a rate likely faster than without the Baroque.

II. Chocolate, the Baroque, and the Counter-Reformation

Chocolate was introduced to Europe, of course, by Spain. It is no surprise that the Catholic religious orders from that most Catholic of monarchies played a major role in diffusing chocolate to Europe.⁵ It would appear impossible not to associate chocolate with Catholicism and the Counter-Reformation, though, like the Baroque itself, chocolate still managed to find itself in Protestant lands.⁶

III. Heritage and the Spread of Chocolate—Lasting Influence

Given the role of Catholic religious orders in disseminating chocolate to Europe, it is no surprise that chocolate and the Catholic Church itself became intertwined. The Italian peninsula, the venerable birthplace of both the Renaissance and the Baroque, took to chocolate enthusiastically. The many sovereign nations that comprised Italy at the time adopted chocolate through various means, particularly as culture and customs spread from state to state by marriages, alliances, and commerce.⁷ Tuscany, for example, was ruled by the Medici, a family that was not only an innovative and enthusiastic consumer of chocolate but also a producer of several popes, including Leo X—arguably the first Baroque Pope, since he started the main opposition to Protestantism with the excommunication of Martin Luther.⁸ Later, Tuscany was ruled by the Austrian Habsburgs, among others.

Today, the legacy lives on in several modern successors. Among those, the Anglo-Italian Imperial Patriarchate, as modern heir to the Burgundian House of Arles and the Spanish Houses of Ivrea and Barcelona in Imperial Italy, maintains a special historical link to the discovery of the New World. Isabella of Castile y León was of the House of Trastámara, an illegitimate but recognized branch of the House

of Ivrea. The House of Ivrea was ultimately of ancient Burgundian origin, ruled parts of Italy, and provided several Kings of Italy in the Holy Roman Empire. It was also descended from the House of Arles in Burgundy, which provided rulers of various parts of Italy in addition to Kings of Italy and Vice-Kings of Italy and the Holy Roman Empire. Bosone of Arles—King of Lower Burgundy and Vice-King of Italy, one of the founding fathers of the heritage of the Imperial Patriarchate—was an important figure in that line. From Italy and Burgundy, the line went to Spain and ruled as Kings of Castile y León and Emperors of all Spain. Their descendants would launch European expansion to the New World. And Pope Leo X, not only the first Baroque Pope but also principal founder of the heritage of the Imperial Patriarchate, was a keen supporter of the early age of discovery. It was the beginning of a new global network that continues to expand today. Indeed, thanks to their legacy, the global ministry of the Imperial Patriarchate spans not only its historic European territory, but also North and South America.

IV. Baroque Consumption of Chocolate

Given the Baroque's birth as a weapon and expression of the Counter-Reformation, perhaps the staunchly Catholic states, including those in Italy, saw consumption of chocolate as an overt statement, albeit a cultural one, of the Catholic faith. Indeed, perhaps they even saw it as their religious duty (and certainly not all duties need be onerous). Perhaps, therefore, it could even be said that chocolate was the first "soul food."

In the beginning, chocolate was consumed, in a broad sense, in the same way that it was consumed among indigenous populations of the New World, i.e., as a beverage. One key difference is that the Europeans often added sugar as a sweetener in addition to honey, the latter being common in both Europe and the New World.⁹ Tastes differed then, as they always seem to have done, and some preferred thicker chocolate while others preferred thin, perhaps

foreshadowing the modern choice of milkshake thickness.¹⁰

Though tastes differ, what is fashionable and in taste is often defined and determined by those in power or positions of influence. It was no different with chocolate. That Their Most Catholic Majesties in Spain developed a liking for the product of their new territories played a definite role in the popularity of chocolate in the Spanish court and elsewhere, for one must often be induced to try something new; and popular, powerful people often help in that regard.¹¹ King Philip IV (House of Habsburg), for example, had chocolate as part of his morning routine—and he was, indeed, a creature of habit.¹² The fashion of the sovereign, in due course, becomes the fashion of the nobility; which, in turn, is often adopted in one form or another by the middle classes and eventually reaches the lower classes, even if it has morphed a bit by that point.¹³

Along with this exciting new decadence came a new set of tableware intended to be used for its serving and consumption—an unsurprising outcome, given that its use primarily began with the royal household and aristocracy. The chocolate grinder was one such product that was really a necessity. A glazed and decorated ceramic container known as an *jicara* was used as the vessel from which the chocolate was imbibed. Keeping with the ceremony of the era, chocolate even gained its own special serving tray known as the *mancerina*, which took its name from the Spanish aristocrat who made it popular, the Marqués de Mancera, Viceroy of Peru.¹⁴ Indeed, chocolate developed a cultural importance and life all of its own, which is embodied by the famous painting entitled, "Chocolate Girl," around 1744 by Jean-Étienne Liotard. Among other roles, Liotard was a painter to the Imperial family, and he completed several paintings of chocolate service and consumption themes.

Chocolate was also believed to have medicinal qualities and was even exempted from Friday and Lenten fast/students' requirements.¹⁵ It was

believed that chocolate not only was a tasty treat but also could cure a surprisingly vast array of diseases, maladies, and ailments. However, the death of composer Henry Purcell was blamed on “chocolate poisoning,” a mystery that was memorialized in a dramatic work entitled, “Henry Purcell: Death by Chocolate.”

V. A Lasting Legacy

Chocolate and the Baroque seemed like a match made in heaven. Chocolate found, in the exuberance of that era, a happy home. Without the religious zeal, which started at that age of decadence, chocolate might not have achieved as

strong a foothold for the European population. It is, of course, admittedly speculative, but nonetheless logical. As the Catholic nations of Europe spread their faith to the New World, they were likewise influenced by that New World delicacy—chocolate. In time, chocolate conquered the hearts and minds of Europe, and more effectively, perhaps, than the European powers conquered the colonies. It is a legacy that is not without its ups and downs over time. As the Baroque waned, so, too, did that most Baroque of substances—chocolate—suffer a decline.¹⁶ Yet, chocolate proved resilient and showed a permanence which is still present even today.

NOTES

1. Waldemar Januszczak, *Baroque! From St Peter's to St Paul's* (London: BBC, 2009), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00j7nqm>.

2. Sophie D. Coe and Michael D. Coe, *The True History of Chocolate* (New York, NY: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2013).

3. Januszczak.

4. Ibid.

5. Malon Massot-Cladera, Francisco Pérez-Cano, Rafael Llorach, and Mireia Urpi-Sarda, “Cocoa and Chocolate: Science and Gastronomy—The Second Annual Workshop of the Research Institute on Nutrition and Food Security (INSA): 9 November 2016,” *Nutrients* 9, no. 2 (2017): 156, doi:10.3390/nu9020156.

6. Januszczak.

7. Coe and Coe.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Massot-Cladera, Pérez-Cano, Llorach, and Urpi-Sarda.

11. Bianca M. Lindorfer, “Discovering Taste: Spain, Austria, and the Spread of Chocolate Consumption Among the Austrian Aristocracy, 1650–1700,” *Food and History* 7, no. 1 (2009).

12. Martin Andrew Sharp Hume, *The Court of Philip IV: Spain in Decadence* (London: E. Nash & Grayson, 1910).

13. Coe and Coe.

14. Massot-Cladera, Pérez-Cano, Llorach, and Urpi-Sarda.

15. Coe and Coe.

16. Mara P. Squicciarini and Johan Swinnen, *The Economics of Chocolate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). [Ω](#)

“Chocolate is a perfect food,
as wholesome as it is delicious,
a beneficent restorer
of exhausted power...
it is the best friend
of those engaged
in literary pursuits.”
— Justus von Liebig