French Baroque

Jules Hardouin Mansart is named chief royal architect, responsible for such town-planning projects as the Place des Victoires and the Place Vendôme in Paris	1699	
Jules Hardouin Mansart constructs the Church of the Invalides in Paris	1680–91	
The Prix de Rome is established, awarding a period of study at the Roman branch of the Académie Royale	1674	
Construction of the palace at Versailles, begun by Louis Le Vau and completed by Jules Hardouin Mansart	1669–82	
A competition is opened for a design to complete the Louvre; Gian Lorenzo Bernini submits designs, but the commission goes to Louis Le Vau, Charles Le Brun, and Claude Perrault	1664	
Louis XIV purchases the Gobelins workshops for furniture and tapestry-making in Paris	1662	Charles Le Brun becomes chief painter to Louis XIV and supervisor royal artistic projects: the palace at Versailles, the Gobelins workshops and the Académie Royale; at the Académie, he establishes history painting as the highest form of art
The Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture is founded in Paris	1648	
Five-year-old Louis XIV succeeds as king of France, assuming full powers in 1661	1643	
	1639	Georges de La Tour, is named painter to Louis XIII
René Descartes publishes his *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, opening the Age of Enlightenment	1637	
	1629	The Le Nain brothers – Antoine, Louis and Mathieu – are active in Paris
	1627	French landscape painter Claude Gellée, called Claude Lorrain, settles in Rome Simon Vouet, active in Rome, is made chief painter to Louis XIII, introducing the Caravaggesque Italian Baroque style into French painting
Nicolas Poussin is active in Venice and Rome	1624–40	
Armand Jean du Plessis, duc de Richelieu, a cleric in the service of Marie de' Medici, becomes Cardinal Richelieu	1622	
	1620–30	Peter Paul Rubens is active at the French court

In contrast to the boisterous dynamism of Italian Baroque (see pp.286–89), French Baroque art sought dignity and refinement: instead of openly flaunting the rules of Classicism, artists worked within them. They turned to ancient models – whether architectural settings, postures or costume – to provide the gravitas and prestige necessary for France's image of absolutist power.

The painter Charles Le Brun and the finance minister Jean Baptiste Colbert centralized art production in France, adopting Baroque Classicism as the official style of Louis XIV and the new Royal Academy of Art. Nicolas Poussin's *Death of Germanicus* (1) epitomizes the ideology of the Academy, which directly incorporated the writings of this French painter active in Rome. Poussin (1594–1665) rationalizes despair by surrounding the Roman general with figures lined up as though on a sarcophagus frieze and sets the action inside an unadorned Graeco-Roman building. This composition recalls the stately Alexandrine meter used by contemporary French poets or the lilting melodies of the Florentine-born composer Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632–87). In fact, music theory inspired Poussin later to codify a system of colour modes; his choreographed contrast of reds, gold, white and blue [illegible] epitomizes the solemn and harmonious style, founded on a perception of [illegible] which was subsequently called Poussinesque, the best known movement within French Baroque painting.

But not all French treatments of Classical themes are moralistic or cold. In *Landscape with an Imaginary View of Tivoli* (1642), Claude Lorrain (1600–82) silhouettes an ancient temple and a horse and rider and retinue crossing a bridge against a warm sunset, evoking a sense of nostalgia for a lost, idyllic past that anticipates the *fêtes champêtres* of the Rococo painter Antoine Watteau (1684–1721; see pp.260–61). In his portrait of *Louis XIV* (1701), Hyacinthe Rigaud (1659–1743) merges French political ideals with Classical motifs. The king's balletic *contrapposto* stance, with one leg bent and the other straight, flaunts his skill as a nimble dancer despite his advancing years, and his abundant hair and sweeping drapery derive from Hellenistic sculpture (pp.242–43), endowing him with princely virtues.

Bubbling beneath the facade of French Classicism was chaos: poverty, famine, religious wars and schisms within the Catholic Church that threatened to tear the country apart. Artists such as Georges de La Tour (1593–1652) and Lubin Baugin (*c.*1612–63) revealed the power of vernacular piety, which focused on intense, personal forms of mysticism. In de La Tour's *Magdalene with the Smoking Flame* (3), light radiating from a single candle illuminates the woman's modestly clothed body, the skull (*memento mori*) and the Bible, signalling her humility. De La Tour expresses the power of contemplation through an artificial source of light, which burns as intensely as the passion of Mary's devotion and enables an exploration of light and darkness that is both visual and symbolic. Baugin's painting of the *Dead Christ with Two Angels* (2) also expresses a quiet grief. Divine light reveals Christ's abstracted figure, brightening the dark tomb and inviting the faithful to mourn his death while two angels quietly weep.

1 Nicolas Poussin, *Death of Germanicus*, 1627–28
Oil on canvas, 148 × 198 cm / 58¼ × 78 in
Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minnesota

2 Lubin Baugin, *The Dead Christ with Two Angels*, *c.*1645
Oil on canvas, 150 × 178.5 cm /59 × 70¼ in
Musée des beaux-arts d'Orléans, France

3 Georges de La Tour, *Magdalene with the Smoking Flame*, *c.*1640
Oil on canvas, 117 × 92 cm / 46 × 36 in
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California