

Setting the Stage: Theatrical Set Design Styles in the Renaissance and Baroque Periods

In the immense catalogue of contributors to the history of theatre, there are the predecessors of the modern proscenium, the actor-managers that eventually spearheaded the professions of director and stage manager, and the inventors of the limelight and the carbon arc lamps that eventually became today's LEDs and movers. When looking to theatre history to find the pioneers of painting, however, the first two names to come to mind are Sebastiano Serlio (1475-1554) and Ferdinando Bibiena (1657-1743). Serlio was an Italian architect of the early Renaissance who built upon the Ancient Greek ideas of Vitruvius; he compiled his opinions and ideas on architecture into a book entitled *Architettura*, which was the first architectural commentary to include a section on theatrical architecture and perspective settings for comedic, tragic, and satyric scenes. Serlio's work was also advanced by theatrical innovator Nicola Sabbattini, whose methods for concealing backstage equipment and machines involved masking and coverings. This effectively introduced even more painted scenery to the stages of the Renaissance, as Oscar Brockett notes.

Later, as the ideals of the Renaissance began to fade to the new artistic styles of the Baroque period, Ferdinando Bibiena and the Bibiena family became the top names in the world of theatrical painting and design. A student under the theatrical machinery innovator Giacomo Torelli, inventor of the chariot and pole scene change system, Ferdinando was appointed court architect in Barcelona in the year 1711 and helped to spread Baroque ideals across Europe's artistic circles (Brockett 243). As a whole, the Bibiena family designed theatre architecture across France, Italy, Germany, and Austria; Ferdinando is solely credited with the invention of *scena per angolo* (angle perspective), and influenced later members of his family to such a great degree that much of their individual designs are difficult to attribute to one single family member

(Mayor 29). Both the Bibienas and Sebastiano Serlio made immense contributions to the theatre we know today, and this paper will highlight the developments, technologies, and differences between the scenery and staging ideals of the Renaissance and Baroque periods as exemplified by Bibiena and Serlio respectively.

During the reign of the Renaissance, the peak of artistic expression was the ability to replicate the ideas of the Ancient Greeks. These included the firm concept of having specific staging and scenery for each of the three play styles: comedic, tragic, and satyric. These ideas were reinforced by the works of Vitruvius, from whom Sebastiano Serlio derived his architectural style. For the artists of the Renaissance, comedic scenes were always to be staged on a street, tragic scenes always in a palace, and satyric or pastoral scenes always in the forest or in nature. Below are examples of Serlio's designs for each of these scenes.

These scenes, which were based on the work of earlier artists of the Renaissance in addition to Vitruvius, were republished in later editions of *Architettura* and soon became the model for scenic painting and staging (Brockett 166.) These scenes were created with the method of forced perspective toward a single vanishing point and as such are very static and while very detailed, remain very two-dimensional. Francesco Marcorin, an Italian art historian, describes this one-point perspective method, explaining that "in such kind of perspective, all elements that are parallel to the picture plane are drawn as parallel lines, while all elements that are perpendicular to the picture plane converge at a single point on the horizon" (Thinking 3D). While the proscenium arch was yet to be a standard in most theatres at the time, most of the scenes designed by Serlio and other Renaissance period artists indicate the presence of one. Brockett states that "although Serlio mentioned no framing device for his stage pictures, downstage wings probably extended to the walls of the hall and a valance probably limited the overhead view to

preserve the illusion” (Brockett 167). Another notable aspect of Serlio’s designs is that they, in addition to the raked stage upon which they sit, present to the viewer a higher-than-normal view. Cecil Gould notes that “it is very noticeable that [Serlio’s designs] are always associated with a high eye-level. The painter looks down on a vista of tiled court which shows off the buildings surrounding it” (Gould 63). Gould also claims that these ideas of design were incredibly useful to Venetian painters and theatre artists who were interested in painting architecture after “a long period of landscape dominance” (Gould 63). Below are depictions of this design style as it would have appeared when realized in production of a comic scene.

Mario Carpo, author of *Perspective, Projections, and Design*, speculates that these two renderings may be two possible versions of the same comic set. Though the renderings are not in color, there is a record of the hues one might have seen in these paintings. Carpo explains that “the colours used are... intense and contrasting: violet for the simple house on the left, light red for the two small palaces on the right, [and] a yellowish grey for the upper arch” (Carpo 81). Though originally considered an innovation, as time passed the static nature of Serlio’s set design caused conflict between nondynamic backdrops and increasingly active acting styles (Mullin 30). Intermezzi were gaining in popularity and the two-dimensional background and cumbersome angle wings made scene changes an issue (Gassner 173). This led to evolving styles of scenic design and painting as the Renaissance gave way to the Baroque period.

Ferdinando Bibiena, who worked with theatre innovators such as Giacomo Torelli before becoming a court architect, is credited with the invention of *scena per angolo*, one of history’s most valuable contributions to scenic painting. This form of perspective, “rather than a single vanishing point... use[s] two or more vanishing points at the sides” (Brockett 243). Unlike previous designs, such as those of Serlio, Bibiena placed large structures near the center of the

scene and created asymmetrical balance in his works. The scenery of Bibiena also differs from that of Serlio in its sweeping grandeur, aversion to shadowing with direct front lighting, and including even the tiniest of details in order to adhere to the Baroque preference for extravagance. The image below, from Bibiena's own *L'Architettura Civile*, depicts the use of multiple vanishing points to create an image that is seen from an angle yet retains the correct dimensions and scale; the viewer is also at a lower eye level.

Another major change that Ferdinando Bibiena made in his designs was a departure from Torelli's concept that "the stage [was] an extension of the auditorium", a mindset that forced scenery to be built and painted proportionally to fit inside the space (Brockett 243). Bibiena introduced the possibility that the scenery, such as the tops of buildings, might end outside of the audience's view and therefore not be shown. This also in fact allowed for the appearance of greater grandeur since the sprawl of the show's scene was not fully visible and extended past the boundaries of the stage. Bibiena also advocated for the use of *quadratura*, a painting style already in use by artists needing to design on large and difficult surfaces such as walls or curved church ceilings (Thinking 3D), but advised that designing in the *quadratura* style on a theatre set must be tailored to the theatre itself. Bibiena warns the designer that "theatrical space is built with specific features... lighting is totally artificial, the stage is slightly inclined, and the view changes from seat to seat" (Thinking 3D). When employing these new methods and moving away from the two-dimensional designs of the Renaissance, Bibiena also altered the height of the viewer's eye level. Serlio's designs, as mentioned above, set the viewer's eye much higher than it might be if looking out over a real vista; Bibiena lowered the view and set the horizon line at a fixed point, "2 braccia from the ground," and places only the lines above the horizon line in perspective (Thinking 3D). This effectively put only the structures in the paintings in

perspective, and by keeping the “floor” parallel to the actual stage, made the tangible theatre building flow seamlessly into the painted backdrop.

Additionally, the angled placement of some flats, a method Serlio employed to add depth, was no longer needed, and flats or backdrops could be placed parallel to the back wall in the Baroque period (Brockett 244). Bibiena’s painting style was the epitome of early Baroque art, utilizing *chiaroscuro* and detailed imagery to portray depth, extravagance, and a sense of movement. This difference is the main contrast between paintings of the Renaissance era and those of the Baroque; Brockett observes that “Baroque art was extravagant, asymmetrical, and mingled rectangular and curvilinear space” (Brockett 244). The Baroque period did maintain some of the hallmarks of design instated during the Renaissance, however, notably a liberal use of columns. In the Baroque period, however, these columns became more detailed, carved, and curved than they had previously been, and decorative elements such as garlands were also added (Brockett 245). As if these incredibly detailed works of art were not already imposing enough due to their detail and depth, historians note that these painted murals, especially in the later days of the Baroque period, could measure 30 to 40 feet high and up to 60 feet across, stretching from wing to wing (Bibiena Family). The colors used in the scenic art of this period also appear to be much more varied and were utilized to create further depth and realism as opposed to the more simple Renaissance styles. Hues were mixed to create darker and lighter shades and shadows became much more prominent in Baroque work. Very few of Ferdinando Bibiena’s designs have been colorized; the image below at left is a suggestion of what it may have looked like and the image at right is a full-color rendering of a later design by Giuseppe Galli Bibiena, Ferdinando’s second son (Giuseppe Galli Da Bibiena). It can be assumed that the colors used in both designs were very similar due to the enduring style of the Bibiena family. As can also be seen in these

designs, the addition of the archway in the painting itself hints at the creation of the proscenium arch that would grow to become a staple of the theatre.

Based on the work of these two prominent designers of their ages, we as theatre historians can directly contrast the design and painting styles of the Renaissance with those of the Baroque. While Serlio's art and the style of the Renaissance valued two-dimensional structure with a raked stage, forced perspective with altered scale to imitate depth, and static images with direct front lighting, the Baroque period art as exemplified by Ferdinando Bibiena moved away from the Renaissance's *perspectiva artificialis*, or one-point perspective, the results of which were largely distorted, and introduced techniques such as shadowing, angle perspective, and balance that could make a simple flat wall appear much more dynamic. *Scena per angolo* allowed simple painting to mimic the realistic by letting the floor of the tangible stage seemingly blend into a pictorial rendering of imposing, grandiose buildings and nature scenes; these techniques would develop later into three-dimensional scenery that extended onto the stage itself as acting styles became more and more attuned to realism, and set the standard for high art in the world of the theatre for centuries.

Works Cited

- Bibiena, Ferdinando Galli. *L'Architettura Civile*, Foreword by Diane M. Kelder. Benjamin Blom, Inc, 1971. Print.
- Bjurstrom, Per. "Inigo Jones and Bibiena." *The Burlington Magazine*, August 1968, pp. 482-484. Web. 24 Apr. 2022.
- Brockett, Oscar G. and Franklin G. Hildy. *History of the Theatre*, 9th ed. Allyn Bacon, 2003. Print.
- Carpó, Mario and Frederique Lemerle. *Perspective, Projections and Design: Technologies of Architectural Representation*. London, England: Routledge, 2008. Print.
- Gassner, John and Ralph G. Allen. *Theatre and Drama in the Making*. Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin, 1964. Print.
- "Giuseppe Galli da Bibiena, an Italian Set Designer at Vienna's Imperial Court." *Italian Ways*, 16 Feb 2015. Web. 10 May 2022.
- Gould, Cecil. "Sebastiano Serlio and Venetian Painting." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* (1962) pag. 56-64. Web. 24 Apr. 2022.
- Hartnoll, Phyllis, ed. *The Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, 1st ed. Oxford University Press, London, 1972. Print.
- "How the Bibiena Family Transformed the Look of European Theatre with Their Larger than Life Baroque Aesthetics." *The New York Times*, 13 Jun 2021. Web. 10 May 2022.
- Marcorin, Francesco. "Ferdinando Galli Bibiena's Architettura Civile." *Thinking 3D*, 21 Feb 2018. Web. 10 May 2022.
- Mayor, A. Hyatt. "The Bibiena Family." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* (1945) pag. 29-37. Web. 24 Apr. 2022.

Mullin, Donald C. *The Development of the Playhouse*. Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1970. Print.