In the 17th century a style of art known as Baroque developed. It was especially well suited to large scale pictures—the kind of painting you would expect to find in a church or palace. There was most demand for works like this in Roman Catholic countries such as Italy, Flanders and Spain. Painted ceilings were very fashionable at this time. The artists painted stone structures so cleverly, that from the ground they look real. The figures are also painted as though seen from below and appear to be floating through the air. This effect is known as “illusionism”.

The paintings of Caravaggio influenced painters all over Europe. He used strong contrasts of light and shadow to make his paintings more exciting. He often made the people and objects in his pictures seem to burst out of the frame. In the one above, Jesus (in the middle) has just surprised his companions. The hand of one and the elbow of another seem to come out of the picture at you.

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Classical landscapes

Two French artists, Claude Lorraine and Nicolas Poussin, spent most of their working lives in Rome. Many of their paintings show the hills and plains around Rome. This type of painting is known as a “classical landscape”. The figures are tiny, Roman ruins are often included, and the colours are soft greens, blues and browns.
The Flemish painter, Peter Paul Rubens, worked in Italy as a young man. He learnt a great deal there. When he returned to Flanders his work was in such demand that he employed other artists to work in his studio and had teams of pupils and assistants. Often he did very little of a painting himself, but supervised each stage of the work.

Many of Rubens' paintings are on big canvases and are full of life. He developed a very dramatic, free way of painting, using big, energetic figures. This painting is called "The Battle of the Amazons".

Rubens was often used as a diplomat by his patrons, who included the rulers of France, Spain, England and Flanders. Here he presents Charles I of England with a painting from the King of Spain, who wanted peace with England.

At the Spanish court

In Spain, the most famous painter of this time was Diego Velazquez. He worked at court and painted many portraits of the king and his family. This one is of the young princess Margarita and Velazquez in his studio.