
UNIT 5 ART, CULTURE AND SOCIETY*

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you should be able to:

- identify the main elements in cultural production during the period under study,
- relate this cultural production to the social and political changes during this period,
- see the continuities and changes between the earlier cultural trends; and how these paved the way for later developments,
- know the important names in art, architecture, music and literature during this period,
- be appreciative of the diversities in cultural trends across Europe,
- have a broad idea of the intellectual and social milieu of the period, and
- have some idea of society and its gradations and to understand why some of the advances in intellectual and cultural production expanded, yet excluded vast sections of people, and varied across classes.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

All aspects of life in any particular period of history are linked with each other. In relation to art, culture and society, the Renaissance art and other forms of cultural expression were rooted in the changes taking place in society during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In this Unit, we will carry forward this understanding to study the linkages between the general historical developments of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century and the kind of art, literature,

music and the society that prevailed during this period. When you read this Unit, you will also see that when we talk of the prevailing dominant trends in art and culture, these mostly pertained to the trends in elite culture, which has been the focus of art history and the study of culture in general. We will take care to point out the limitations of its prevalence and also have something to say about what was happening in the field of popular culture.

By the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there was also a wide divergence between social and political developments in western and Eastern Europe, and features of Central Europe too were not the same in, for example, Austria and Hungary and Turkey. These had some bearing on the art, culture and society in these regions. England and the Continent too were not identical in the kind of literature and art produced, although there were some commonalities, and we will refer to some of these common aspects and differences.

Although the study of continents other than Europe is outside the scope of this Unit, we will at least point out to you that other parts of the world were not bereft of art, culture and societal changes. There has been a tendency in historiography to view the West as pointing the way towards advance of humankind, with other continents trailing behind; not just in economy but all elements of civilization. Although the idea of the West 'civilizing' the countries they conquered has now been discredited, there is still a bias in considering the West as leading the way – in the forms of cultural expression that we are going to talk about here. We will try to disabuse you of some of these stereotypes and prejudices.

Moreover, changes in society and culture do not occur overnight. Some of the trends that were introduced and flourished during the Renaissance continued into the seventeenth century, while many new aspects that became the hallmark of the culture in the era of the French and Industrial Revolutions of late eighteenth century can be traced to artistic expressions during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century.

In other words, culture and social expressions during this period were as complex and varied as real life was. The period covered forms a transition between the Renaissance and the Modern world created by the French and Industrial Revolutions, but is also significant in its own right. We have read something about this in our Units on the English Revolution and the Scientific Revolutions of the seventeenth century: you would note that they have been termed revolutions despite the continuities they represented or restored.

Since there are separate Units dealing with intellectual and political thought and with the Scientific Revolution and also the demographic changes and family and class relations, here we would speak only of the formal aspects of cultural expression: the arts, literature, music and architecture. Among these too we would be selective, discussing trends and mentioning only some important names and works to underline these trends. We will focus on one or two art forms in one or another region to illustrate our arguments rather than all aspects of cultural production in each country, the purpose being to familiarize you with the broad significant trends.

5.2 THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND CONDITIONS OF DIVERSITY

The developments in art and culture during the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth century derived from the cultural arts forms of the Renaissance in Europe and from the social and political changes of the period we are looking at. In England, the turbulence and contestations of the English Revolution and the Civil War ended with the Restoration, which, as we saw restored some things and replaced or changed others: a new stable 'order' was created, with Parliament as the major location of power and an ascendant new gentry and bourgeoisie at the helm of affairs. The literature of the period can be seen to reflect this, with Shakespeare, for example, straddling like a colossus across this marker and reflecting the shifts in English drama and poetry, along with many others. The decline in Crown patronage, the growth of private enterprise and the Reformation, irrevocably changed the conditions of cultural production.

In France, the triumph of Absolutism and the Court culture under Louis XIV and XV and its mercantilist policies were decisive conditions under which artists worked and survived. France, particularly Paris and Versailles, became in many ways the cultural capital of Europe, and its cultural influence was felt across Europe, among the artists and intellectuals and also in the Courts of other rulers.

The decline of Spain and Italian states after the sixteenth century, and shift of economic activity from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic affected patronage of literature and art in these countries in a major way. Italy, for example, no longer remained as lively as it did during the fifteenth and early sixteenth century, and the different states of Venice and Rome show different cultural influences, based on the political and economic of the seventeenth century in these States.

The prosperity of the Dutch trade, growth of textile production and the flow of wealth into Holland, and migrations of the persecuted Huguenots from France, were major factors in the emergence of the Dutch school of painting, considered the most significant in Europe during the seventeenth century.

The area we know as Germany today had not yet become a nation state. It remained divided into small states ruled by princes, was far from the seaports, and the middle classes, even as they began to develop in this period were small petty bureaucrats in the service of princes or shopkeepers, school teachers. Aristocratic culture was, therefore, still dominant, and the influence of French Court and French universities was prevalent among the higher landed aristocracy, based on land or officialdom. The earlier impulse of the German Renaissance, very significant in the German states during the sixteenth century, was lost through the Thirty Years War and its consequences, which involved almost every European country in the region.

The Austrian Empire was multinational, serfdom had still not been abolished in Central Europe and in the entire region the culture continued to be aristocratic, with huge gaps between the elite and popular culture. In the Russian Empire, such "Westernization" as was encouraged was in the fields of science and technology rather than ideas. Serfdom was the basic feature of the social structure and the Tsar had more absolute powers than anywhere in Europe. Turkey was another such region. In short the economic and political changes that came with

the decline of feudalism and the entire Renaissance had still to be experienced or its impact felt in these societies. Therefore, the changes in culture that emerging capitalism and bourgeois middle class development saw in Western Europe did not extend to Central and Eastern Europe, where culture remained far more elitist, confined mostly to the aristocracy, influenced and educated in the cultural centres of Western Europe. Germany too became an influence here, but that was only from the nineteenth century. The cultural resources of Central and Eastern Europe were therefore partly indigenous and autonomous, and partly received from Western Europe. But in the period we are looking at, the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth century, before the French and the Industrial Revolution, the influence of Western Europe was minimal, even among the high landed aristocracy.

Given all this, there was huge divergence between the culture and thinking of the ruling classes or the educated, and the predominantly rural popular culture. The gap was least in England and most perhaps in parts of the Russian Empire. There are also new developments in styles and content of cultural production from the beginning of the period under discussion until the decade before the French Revolution, which we will mark as we go along: just as it was in politics and in society in general. Court societies remained, yet the new social classes like the bourgeoisie made their presence felt, in art and culture as much as in politics.

5.3 COURT SOCIETY AND THE BOURGEOISIE: ASPECTS OF CULTURE

European court society had always been geographically and socially multi-centred, but from the mid seventeenth century the cultural dominance of the French Court at Versailles was obvious: fashions, the French language and painting and architectural styles began to be imitated or adapted in all courts across Europe. It was a life style that shed many of the patterns of cultural expressions of the traditional nobility and in the process adopted many new elements that came as a result to trade and commerce and knowledge of other regions of the world, as well as of the wealthy bourgeoisie. Although it was the bourgeoisie that aimed at adopting the life styles of the aristocracy, but in the process the cultural ambience and aspirations of the entire privileged sections underwent a change. The late seventeenth and the eighteenth century were crucial in this transformation of elite culture: family heritage and title, wealth and patronage constituted its building blocks. Court manners and etiquette, wigs and their styles for men, wire supported dresses for women to give these a flare, private salons of patronage became models.

But the 18th century was an age of secularization of arts in a much deeper sense than the 17th century, when art broke away from the realms of the Church and the Court to clearly secular moorings and a modern cultural space in many of the cities of Europe. The flourishing Universities and expansion of education, outside the dominance of the Church, was an important factor. It was an age of great social churning. Rude points out that although the “eighteenth century was not a ‘golden age’ of the arts or an age of literary giants like the century before”, yet “it was an age of extraordinarily fertile artistic and literary activity of which the second half is perhaps more remarkable than the first” (*Rude*, p. 139). The late seventeenth century had the dominant cultural influence of the Versailles Court,

while the eighteenth century brought the bourgeois world into greater focus. By the end of the 18th century the general populace began to have presence in the art and literature of the period. Popular culture felt the influences of the time, as communication channels opened through market, trade and commerce, and growth of towns.

5.4 VISUAL ARTS: ARCHITECTURE, PAINTING AND SCULPTURE

Louis XIV set the scale for art patronage and purpose, and therefore, size. All the arts were used “for the purpose of glorifying the French monarchy”. The capital was built at Versailles, with a grand palace and from 1664 onwards festivals of music, drama and ballet were organized there. The palace architecture itself set a style, as did painting, especially portraiture, which other courts imitated. This overarching influence began to have other inspirations towards the mid eighteenth century. Both art and music were sponsored and patronized largely by courts and by the Church. Towards the 18th century the ideas of the *philosophes* began to permeate the world of culture. Freedom for artists, as for ideas, began to be championed by some and there developed a culture of art and literary criticism that helped shape public tastes in the arts and letters. There was a trend towards secularization of culture, even as the Church continued to be a major patron.

5.4.1 Artistic Styles

There were many artistic styles during this long period, from mid-17th to the mid-18th century, that got reflected in the various visual arts: Mannerism, Baroque-Classical, Rococo and Romanticism. They are reflected somewhat in literary styles too.

As Arnold Hauser tells us, “**Mannerism** is the artistic expression of the crisis which convulses the whole of Western Europe in the sixteenth century”. After the invasions of Italy, and whose effects continue to be felt till the 17th century, the Renaissance art was transformed and many of the Renaissance artists themselves reflected this crisis and change in art forms towards the end of their work life: for example, the later works of Michelangelo and Rafael. Renaissance art had been characterized by a sense of proportion and space: mannerism, derived from the word style in Italian, reflected an exaggeration and distortion of these elements, sometimes in a sophisticated way as to produce beautiful works, especially by the masters. But nevertheless, proportion as adherence to natural surroundings (a characteristic of Renaissance art and architecture) was disturbed.

What followed, particularly under the patronage of 17th century courts, was the courtly **Baroque** style, characterized, by grandeur, scale, drama, vitality and movement and exaggerated emotional exuberance, reflected in all the arts of the time. The settings are extravagant; there is dramatic use of colour, and high contrasts of light and shadow, light and darkness. There is also a tendency to blur the distinctions between different art forms and to create harmony in the arts and music after the end of religious and social discord and wars of mid sixteenth to mid seventeenth century. The inspiration for baroque art was the influence of the Roman Catholic Church and its patronage in order to combat Protestantism, and the Spanish and French kingdoms also Roman Catholic states.

The **Rococo** style that developed out of the baroque, further elaborated on the design elements, particularly emphasis on excessive decorativeness and ornamentation of the interiors, use of pastel colours, and a return to asymmetrical patterns. It mainly differed from the baroque in being “light, airy and decorative”, reflected a degree of secularization in the arts and preferred smaller scales than the grandeur of baroque.

Romanticism was characterized by its emphasis on return of naturalism in the arts, and is a development of the 18th century. It marks the beginnings of industrialization and urbanism, emphasis on reason and science and the new social contradictions, which evoked in certain sections of the intellectuals of the period a nostalgia or love for what had been lost and an advocacy for emotion and passion as drivers of human endeavour.

5.4.2 Architecture

The baroque first appeared in Rome during last quarter of the 16th century, from where it spread to Germany, Sweden, Poland, Spain, Portugal and Latin America under Spanish domination. The idea behind it was harmony and reconciliation of conflicts and therefore grand presentation to the people of the power that engulfed the populace. It became immensely popular and evoked wonder and awe. Its buildings consisted of churches, palaces, squares and fountains, all of which are central to courtly culture. There were also ornate opera houses constructed all over Europe.

Absolutism gave further impetus to monumentalism in architecture and in the arts. The capitals were designed to reflect monarchical authority, symbolizing power of the State, and on which royal armies could parade and on which stood government buildings and royal residences, and barracks for the royal armies.

In terms of style, the baroque was combined with a restrained classicism, signifying sophistication along with grandeur. Royal Academies of Art were established, following that in France, that influenced and commanded the classical rulers that sculptors and painters were to be guided by. Le Brun, an artist of the time, was made in charge and soon instructions were given regarding what was to be taught in the academies and the styles that must be encouraged. The Germans and Austrians added their own original features. St. Petersburg was a blend of Italian classicism and Russian decorative motifs.

In this combination of baroque and classicism, the “sculptor-artists conceived of their buildings as ‘total’ works of art in which sculpted figures and elaborate wall and ceiling paintings were not so much decorations as integral parts of a highly complex artistic concept”. The Church of St. Charles Borromeo in Vienna, built by architect JB Fischer von Erlach (1656-1723) in the first half of the 18th century is a prime example. The architects and painters collaborated with each other in such buildings. Many architects were sculptors too. Bernini was a significant name in architecture.

The rococo style too originated in France, during the reign of Louis XV and spread to the German and Italian states, particularly in the rebuilding of the German monasteries, abbeys and churches. The richness of design in these was in keeping with the rococo and became widespread as a church building style across Europe. England was an exception, where the country houses were modeled

on the building styles of Venice rather than Rome or France, being far more modest. Their town squares were likewise not so large and grand.

5.4.3 Painting

In painting and sculpture too, the artists during the course of the 17th century were largely dependent on Court, nobility and the Church. Absolutism in painting is most starkly reflected in paintings depicting the figures of monarchs in glory, again following the pattern set by Louis XIV in France. Much of the painting in the baroque buildings was done as decorations on walls and ceilings of palaces and churches. The 18th century changed the scope and types of use of painting. The artist became known through his canvas, not as part of the architectural scenario.

Towards the early 18th century, Greek and religious themes began to be combined with and then gave way to new motifs deriving from everyday life and portraits of the nobility and other wealthy persons. Life styles of court society and nobility, as different from a focus on the grandeur of monarchs became new subject matters of painting. The visual arts became more social in character, even as individuals and portraits began to be painted or sketched, and also smaller in size. Dresses, cultural artefacts and settings depicted today tell us a great deal of the 18th century society. The paintings were now installed in galleries or on walls of houses, and were done with more freedom in terms of colour and individual choice of the artist rather than conventional patterns. Portraits were popular, and almost all the significant artists did portraits. The subject matter of paintings was quite varied. In styles, the artists wavered between tradition and freedom. Reproductions became popular and many artists were involved in doing them.

The first public art exhibition was organized in Paris in 1737. The French painter Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721) was the first to reflect this trend in his works, not only as regards the subject matter but also the decorative and small scale representative of the rococo style. Francois Boucher made some erotic paintings, Honore Fragonard did portraits and pastoral scenes, J.B. Greuze was influenced by Dutch painters and depicted domestic life, Joseph Vernet did seascapes and harbors and scenes of nature. David (1748-1825), a significant painter represented republican values and self-sacrifice. Hogarth (1697-1764) in England portrayed the everyday life in England, also adding humour and satire in his depictions. Goya was an important painter in Spain, also displaying conflicts and social life with some satire. The Venetian artists were wonderful with colour and shade and give us a good picture of the lagoons of Venice. In the German states, after an initial period, the artists were influenced by the romantic wave. In Russia there was influence mainly of the French styles, combined with depictions of Russian landscapes and peasant life. In general, the artists wavered between tradition and freedom.

In Netherlands (Holland), the trajectory was somewhat different. Dutch prosperity of the seventeenth century, deriving from its trade and commerce, saw the emergence of a 'Dutch School of painting' that reflected the lifestyles and tastes of the Dutch middle classes. There emerged a market in art dominated by the port of Amsterdam and its wealthy merchants. The painters depicted urban and rural landscapes, and everyday Dutch life, human emotions and domestic scenes within homes, and excelled in the blend of light, shadow and colour. Portraits and still life were also significant. The important Dutch painter was Rembrandt

(1606-69), who in addition to these also painted religious and mythological subjects. He was son of a miller and grandson of a baker, and became famous only posthumously. He also did several self-portraits.

5.5 MUSIC

Throughout the 17th century the opera was the predominant form of music and Italian musicians were the most celebrated in Europe. The first public opera house was also built in the Italian city of Venice, and thereafter flourished in all capital cities. Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643) was the greatest composer of this century. The opera, because it verbalized music, was akin to poetry and drama and directly appealed to emotions and therefore had audiences from both the elite and common people, with separate seating arrangements. It was extremely popular in Italy with huge audiences, but apart from a few other countries it remained an entertainment attended only by the elite. It coincided with the baroque style of art and music and continued well into the 18th century.

However, towards the 18th century, “the taste for music also moved beyond the constraints of court, ecclesiastical, and noble patronage.” (*Merriman*, p. 356). Operas were the main forms in the 17th century, and were performed in the opera houses constructed by the monarchs around their palaces or the churches. A second form was chamber music performed in the salons of the wealthy, and had small number of performers. It was music for intimate private listening, patronized by the wealthy. To begin with all composers were Court composers. The music compositions were called quartets and concertos. Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), a German composer and musician of the Baroque period, was a towering figure remembered for his Brandenburg Concertos and the Goldberg Variations, and also his vocal music. Antonio Lucio *Vivaldi*, the Italian Baroque musical composer, was best known for his ‘The Four Seasons’ and his sonatas and concertos for the violin.

The 18th century in general was a century of giants: Bach, Handel, Mozart, Haydn and Gluck. In the first half of the century there were two main forms, the Opera continuing from the seventeenth century, and religious music that consisted of cantatas and oratorios. New musical instruments too were evolved and became widespread: the piano from the harpsichord in 1711, the flute in 1750 and then the clarinet. Small concertos continued to be played, but increasingly there were larger professional orchestras with symphonies and more instruments, and concerts attended by larger audiences from the upper and middle classes. Music came out of the chambers to music halls. These changes occurred during the lifetime of the above-mentioned composers, whose work was quite varied through their musical careers: they all composed operas, quartets, concertos and symphonies for big orchestras.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) How the changes in art were related to socio-economic conditions in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries?

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- 2) Describe the main artistic styles that emerged between mid-seventeenth and mid-eighteenth century.

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5.6 LITERATURE

An audience for literature grew with the growth and expansion of literacy and printing presses across Europe. While written literature remained confined to the literate, drama performances of plays transcended these barriers, and within written literature there was considerable variety to suit the varied tastes and intellectual and societal gradations. Existing forms of literature were transformed in both style and content in the second half of the 17th and 18th century, as society and cultural tastes evolved in keeping with the expansion of Europe and the enlightenment ideas and the scientific revolution, which had important historical consequences even for those not directly connected with them. The sheer availability of the printed material and translations on a larger scale had revolutionary consequences, whose impact could be experienced in the world during and after the French revolution. Most major writers straddled more than one form of writing. And common features were found across Europe, with specific national context and distinctions. There were several variants of pastoral poetry and novels of chivalry, depictions of the conflict between town and country, a feeling of discomfort expressed through literature.

England produced an outburst of writing that reflected the changed spirit. Shakespeare continued to be performed and was looked at differently; his later plays were already reflecting the changed climate of the 17th century. John Milton, John Bunyan and John Dryden were the big names of the 17th century baroque literature of grandeur. John Bunyan's *The Pilgrims Progress*, a religious allegory, published in two parts in 1678 and 1684, is a "symbolic vision of the good man's pilgrimage through life". At one time it was second only to the Bible in popularity. Bunyan was imprisoned by the State for his views. In poetry, Milton's *On His Blindness* and *The Paradise Lost* were kind of modern epics that depicted the experience of those caught in the politics and religious wars of the 17th century. The ironies of the time are expressed in La Fontaine's (1621-95) *Fables* and in the devastating sketches of the public personalities in John Dryden's (1631-1700) work, followed by Alexander Pope whose poems *An Essay on Criticism* (1711), *The Rape of the Lock* (1712-14), *The Dunciad* (1728), and *An Essay on Man* (1733-34), made him a major voice in England.

As the 18th century progressed, there was much that thinking minds perceived as requiring questioning and critique, of both institutions and ways of thinking. This became reflected in an outburst of satire and in the novels written. Jonathan Swift's satirical novel *Gulliver's Travels* critiqued contemporary European prejudices in an emerging age of science and technology, as did Voltaire's *Candide*. Swift, of Anglo-Irish origin was satirist, essayist, political pamphleteer and poet.

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) was another towering presence of many talents: poet, playwright, essayist, moralist, literary critic, biographer, editor, and lexicographer. Diaries became another popular literary form. Evelyn Jones and Samuel Pepys' diaries became famous. Edward Gibbon's *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* in several volumes was a landmark. The Scottish Enlightenment led to a flowering of literature.

France produced two contradictory yet related trends, reflected in the Enlightenment and Romanticism, which gave rise to a lot of political and philosophical writings that could be characterized as literature of ideas, and involved a variety of genres. The *Encyclopedia* of Diderot was the most celebrated of these, as were the writings of Voltaire and Rousseau. For example, *The Spirit of the Laws* by Montesquieu in 1748, *An Essay on Tolerance* by Voltaire in 1763, *The Social Contract* by Rousseau 1762; *The Supplement to a voyage of Bougainville* by Diderot, or *The History of the Two Indias* by the Abbé Guillaume-Thomas Raynal were important essays. Montesquieu also wrote a satire on French life in the form of letters, presumably from another country. The important works of the *philosophes* belonged to a variety of different genres, such as the tale illustrating a particular philosophical point; *Zadig* (1747) or *Candide* (1759), both by Voltaire in 1759; or essays. The comedies of Marivaux and of Beaumarchais also played a part in this debate about and diffusion of great ideas. History writing and journalism became important forms of cultural expression, identity formation and quest for knowledge all across Europe. Many of the philosophies wrote art criticism and on the philosophy of aesthetics and beauty.

The novel was a more flexible form in terms of the variety of experiences it could express and the social settings it could be placed in. It underwent transformations in content to reflect the more immediate circumstances and milieu, particularly with the expansion also of many women readers. Many women writers too emerged. There was emphasis on characters and personal relationships, an example being Madame Lafayyete's *The Duchess of Cleves* (1678). She was hostess of one of the famous Parisian salons of the time. There were also novels of adventures and fantasy, the most well-known among them being Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. There were others that reflected the great moral dilemmas and conflicts of the time, for example the works of Henry Fielding, Samuel Richardson, Laurence Stern, Tobias Smolding. The 18th century marks the age of realism and the birth of the modern novel, and there was a "deheroising and humanizing of heroes" (Hauser; p. 25), and a middle class morality and some realism.

The French novelists showed great versatility, although the influence of the English novel was there: there were the philosophical tales by people like Voltaire, a romantic sentimental one by Rousseau, novels of social realism and love by Marivoux, psychological explorations and imagined scenarios by various authors, and autobiographies which became models for discovering and exploring the self.

German literature was influenced by English and French works, but later developed its own stream of romanticism, with emphasis on feelings and emotional grandeur, referred to in literature as "Storm and Stress". The greatest names of 18th century German literature were Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Herder and Friedrich Schiller. Their works encompassed folk songs, poetry, dramas and literary criticism. In fact growth of art criticism

and literary criticism emerged as significant during this period across Europe. Translation was widespread, and readership of important works were read throughout Europe.

Westernisation by Peter the Great brought the Russian intelligentsia into regular contact with Western Europe and many of the works read in the 18th century were mainly translations. The first modern writing in Russian is said to be a novel by Radishchev, *A Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow*, which is a vivid critique of Russian society and political system. A pioneering national poet and playwright was Lomonosov. In Hungary and Poland literature was tied to independence and self-expression as search for identity and nationality. In the Ottoman Empire literature, influenced by Persian forms, was much more varied, with Sufi poetry and ghazals and stories linked with folk memories. Sweden and Denmark produced many works of drama and history and literary criticism.

The life of literature, in its relationship with society, was most directly reflected in **theatre**, both in the plays written and their performance. Here, the educated who wrote the plays and the many not so literate who formed the audience, came together to add a new dimension to literary production. Theatre was popular across Europe, despite the past censorship or restrictions imposed during the religious wars by the churches. In England there emerged a trend in drama that is collectively known as “Restoration drama”, that emerged after the post Renaissance productions of Shakespeare and overcoming the setbacks and censure on theatre during the Cromwellian regime. As in the case of the arts and architecture, in France during the 17th century, the French Court used theatre as part of enhancing its glories. The great writers of drama, Jean Baptiste Moliere (1622-73) and Jean Racine (1639-99) enjoyed court patronage, but also broke free to write for varied audiences. Of the two, Moliere plays were bolder, and contained social and religious satire, while Racine continued to rely on traditional classical themes to depict modern psychological sensibility, was more poetic, and accepted a Court position towards the end of his life. In the 18th century, with the liveliness in French politics and the life of the salons, theatre began to express the ideas of the time, breaking away from its moorings in court culture. We have referred to the comedies of Marivaux and of Beaumarchais which became significant expressions of the debates and ferment of ideas of the period. In Germany, Lessing was the most important name, writing both comedies and plays with social themes a new original sensibility. In Bohemia, the Czech national theatre was opened in 1737, Poland in 1765.

5.7 SOCIAL LIFE AND LEISURE

Social life was very much shaped by material conditions of the late 17th and 18th century. In general people had more household items in their homes with, however, only the real elite getting introduced to what we can call a consumer culture, with big houses and large spaces at their disposal. It is from them that resources for culture and leisure came from. The entertainment, the fashions of the time and celebrations of festivals of the elite pertain to these sections of society across Europe, the landed classes and the bourgeoisie. Therefore, the distinctions in culture and entertainment were along class lines rather than between town and countryside. Yet, there were differences between how the aristocracy clad themselves and the middle classes during these occasions, with velvets and jewellery signifying power as much as wealth.

Improvement in communications and transport, as well as travel and literacy and education brought about some convergence of elite culture by the end of the 18th century. Salons were the centres of cultural life in the 18th century and this marked a real break with the courtly culture. The cities were no longer subsidiaries or adjuncts of the Courts and the impulse for cultural expression in these salons came from the bourgeoisie, even if the aristocracy participated in them. They facilitated both convergence and debate of ideas. Hauser calls these salons “the cultural heirs of the Court”, with the major gap now being between the common people and those who stood above.

Literacy and the expansion of the reading public had similar impact. In the French towns, by the middle of the 18th century, “up to 90 per cent of the lower middle class could read and write, and about 50 per cent of the better working class, with some 20 per cent of the poorest sections of society.” For women the rates were much lower, but literacy was spreading. Other countries of western Europe can be more or less comparable, with literacy being more restricted to the upper echelons in eastern and central Europe in the 18th century. In protestant countries, the houses of clergymen were important centres of literacy still. Attitudes to children’s education began to be positive. Given the variations in terms of class, gender, region and between town and country, in access to education, the generalization holds true regarding the impact of expanding literacy on culture and politics.

Newspapers and broadsheets began to proliferate throughout Europe. The English revolution had seen a mass upsurge in printed material, and “the first daily newspaper was published in London in 1702, and there were provincial ones too.” There were private circulating libraries. The two decades before the French revolution saw a similar upsurge in France and across Europe. And then there were chapbooks, or illustrated and abridged editions of classic and well known novels that were read by mass of the reading public. Women constituted a big portion of this readership. The old classes like the landed aristocracy and the peasantry were becoming transformed during this period, while new classes like the bourgeoisie and the urban working classes emerged to create modern society.

5.8 POPULAR CULTURE

The popular culture of the 17th and the 18th century was in one sense far removed from that of the privileged world of the elite and the educated. A large component of it was peasant culture, its songs, stories and folk lore centred around the world of the peasant and his/her agricultural cycle. As Rude points out, “some of this was traditional and by no means peculiar to the eighteenth century, like the folksongs and folklore, which had deep roots in the past and were carried by word of mouth and only appeared as literature when recorded by professionals” and the educated.

While the rootedness in peasant life and its continuity through centuries made peasant popular culture diverse and regional and to a degree autonomous, the very fact of its transmission in time added elements that were contemporary to the times it was continuously manifested in. Changes occurred simply because life changed and minds and knowledge changed. Further, connectedness of the modern world in the 16th and 17th centuries broke its autonomy, if not the diversity. Between 1500 and 1800 the popular traditions were subject to change

in all sorts of ways, as a result of social stratification and also participation of the elite in popular festivals, for example the carnivals, feasts of saints and May Day celebrations in their areas, and on the other hand the access of craftspeople and peasants to printed books, for example ballads committed to writing by the scholars or other educated elite. And, as Burke again points out, clowns were popular at courts as well as taverns, often the same clowns. (*Burke*, pp. 24-25) The arias of the Italian opera were sung by Neapolitan boatmen and venetian gondoliers, and Parisian people in the streets. (*Rude*, p.151)

The various contradictory elements in combination meant that “there were varieties of popular culture” and by 1800, “craftsmen and peasants usually had a regional rather than a national consciousness”, or a cosmopolitan one like the elite. This is because while “the elite participated in the little tradition, but the common people did not participate in the great tradition” (of the elite). They still retained a common world linked with their social situation. The city and the urban poor and working people added a new dimension to popular culture. There were harvest festivals of course, but also spinning songs, weavers’ songs, sailors’ songs, women’s songs and so on, and traditions that members of different guilds followed. Tastes, artefacts, ways of building houses, articles of consumption, household items etc., all underwent some change with urbanization, change in working patterns of production and the commercial revolution, including production for a market. Peasants were also influenced by the baroque and rococo forms which they adapted to their own styles and subject matters in their paintings.

Literacy and reading was an important factor in ways time was spent, and horse racing, discussions in taverns and the village square were new elements of time pass and entertainment. Hundreds of written materials were brought out especially for popular consumption. The content of the chapbooks above mentioned points to changing preferences for reading. Politics after the English revolution and on the Continent in the two decades before the French Revolution led to politicization of culture and political consciousness and participation in meetings.

While all this brought a convergence in culture, the scientific revolution and enlightenment thought, pervasive among the educated elite, all increased the gap in many ways between elite and popular culture and ways of thinking. The culture of the taverns of the common people was distinct from that of the salons of the 18th century, even when politics pervaded them.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Describe the main features of growth of literature in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries in Europe with examples.

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- 2) Write a brief note on Popular Culture during this period.

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5.9 LET US SUM UP

We have seen in this Unit that the late 17th and 18th century till the Industrial and the French revolutions was significant in its own right and the developments in culture and society cannot simply be passed through simply as a bridge between the great Renaissance and the modern world ushered in by the two revolutions. The cultural ambience and cultural production of this period, including lifestyles and everyday patterns of living, were shaped by the changes in material conditions, particularly production for market and the commercial revolution. The social classes were taking the shape of what we see in our modern societies. The scientific revolution and the spread of enlightenment thought was significant in the evolution of new ways of thinking and looking at their own societies.

There was diversity and distinction not only over this long chronological period, but also between the different regions of Europe during the same years. There were points of convergence and conflict between elite culture and popular culture. The cultural developments of this period laid the foundations for the two revolutions that shaped the world we live in and the way we experience modernity, the human advances and the increase in inequalities that are around us.

5.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Section 5.2
- 2) See Sub-section 5.4.1

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Section 5.6
- 2) See Section 5.8