The Baroque Period in France, that is the 17th century of artistic production, was very much marked by the influence of the artistic innovations that were taking place in Rome for the service of the Catholic Church and its Counter Reformation, and in service to religious and personal artistic patronage by elite individuals.

France at this time was marked by a series of religious wars that left the kingdom badly battered, with its economy and political institutions in a state of flux. Stability returned when Henry IV became king in 1594, and even after his assassination, France maintained its stability when his wife, queen Marie de’Medici was left as the regent to her son, and the next king of France, Louis XIII. Marie de’Medici was a connoisseur of the arts and she invited the great Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens to court, while also supporting a number of French native artists. Many of these French artists in the early 1600s migrated to Rome where they learned of the new styles of Caravaggio and the Carracci family. Among them were the artists Georges de La Tour, Nicolas Poussin, and Claude Lorrain. These artists were to build on their recognition of Italian examples of art, Northern European traditions, and their own natives styles.

Catholicism became the dominant religion in France, and when King Louis XIII came of age, he and the Cardinal Richelieu established unlimited and unchecked power of a single individual, that is, of the king. It was under the reign of King Louis XIII that Cardinal Richelieu founded the French Royal Academy. In 1648 the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture was founded and it was to become the supreme authority on the arts from this point on until the 19th century. Florence had lost its preeminence as the center of innovation in the arts and Rome became a font of classical learning and a storehouse of the power that was the ancient Roman Empire. It is this appreciation of the ancient...
heroic Roman past that informs the subject matter of French art in the 17th century.

The Artistic Highlights

French artists like Georges de La Tour (Slide 2) often traveled to Italy and the Netherlands to work. Louis XIII however, started to recall these artists to Paris, in other words he commanded them to come back to Paris in order to work for the king and to develop the curriculum at the Royal Academy. Not much is known about La Tour but he did come under the influence of Caravaggio as is seen in Slide 2.

Here, St. Joseph, the patron of carpenters, and the adoptive father of Jesus, is working on a beam as the young Jesus lights the space with his singular candle in assistance. The tenebristic technique developed by Caravaggio is so strongly present in La Tour’s painting. The painting is monochromatic, bathed in these deep brown tones that contrast the lightness that falls on Jesus’s face and the temple of Joseph as he leans down to work. Looking at the painting, and even reading the title what one comes to notice is that these figures could be anyone, not St. Joseph or Jesus alone, but any Joseph and any child with their parent/guardian working together or being part of such an intimate relationship. The hidden symbolism (northern European device) layered in the painting, such as the form of the wood that reflects the crucifix and the light that Jesus holds being the light of his resurrection, underscore the religious tone of this work but makes it accessible to a broad audience. Think of the time in which this work was produced, France had suffered from many years of war, much of it a religious war—and how many children became orphaned, how many mothers sacrificed or lost their children—and the painting becomes even more poignant. The drama is heightened by this asymmetrically balanced composition with the figures pushing against the boundaries of the canvas and making these individuals come closer to us; they take up the whole space and we are invited to contemplate.

Claude Lorrain was also influenced by Italian art, traveling to Rome and there spending the remainder of his life. He studied the
campagna, or the country side of Rome and made countless
drawings and observations. He is the first artist to have painted or
sketched oil studies outdoors for days at a time and returning to
his studio to compose paintings. He was very much fascinated with
light and his works are often studies of the effect of the rising sun
on colors and atmosphere and on the landscape. Landscape is
prominently featured in this painting and its expanse recedes deep
into the background and beyond, leading our eye across the bridge
that’s lit with this early sunrise and we see the citadel of the village
ahead. Two human figures are present but they don’t take on a
prominent role here, their presence highlighted by their brightly
colored shepherd’s cloaks, and their cattle blending into the
landscape in the foreground. Again, the asymmetry of the
composition is balanced by the tall trees that frame the open space
in the center of the painting. We see the intimacy Lorrain holds for
nature and highlights the beauty of the untouched environment
against the structured forms of the bridge and buildings. This
tradition of appreciating the pastoral environment will remind us
of Titian’s painting, The Pastoral Concert. Titian’s influence in this
genre is to inform later artists and we see that here.