One of the defining characteristics of the late 18th century was a renewed admiration for classical antiquity, which the Grand Tour was instrumental in fueling. This interest gave rise to the artistic movement known as Neoclassicism, which incorporated the subjects and styles of ancient art. Painting, sculpture, and architecture, however, were only the most prominent manifestations of Neoclassicism. Fascination with Greek and Roman culture was widespread and extended to the public culture of fashion and home decor. The Enlightenment’s emphasis on rationality in part explains this classical focus, because the geometric harmony of classical art and architecture embodied Enlightenment ideals. In addition, classical cultures represented the pinnacle of civilized society, and Greece and Rome served as models of enlightened political organization. These cultures, with their traditions of liberty, civic virtue, morality, and sacrifice, were ideal models during a period of great political upheaval. Given these traditional associations, it is not coincidental that Neoclassicism was particularly appealing during the French and American Revolutions. Further whetting the public appetite for classicism were the excavations of two ancient Roman cities on the Bay of Naples—Herculaneum and Pompeii. The violent eruption of Mount Vesuvius in August 79 CE had buried both cities under volcanic ash and mud (see “An Eyewitness Account of the Eruption of Mount Vesuvius,” Chapter 10, page 245). Although each city was “rediscovered” at various times during the ensuing centuries, systematic exploration of both sites did not begin until the mid-1700s. Because Vesuvius buried these cities under volcanic ash and lava, the excavations produced unusually rich evidence for reconstructing Roman art and life. The 18th-century excavators uncovered paintings, sculptures, furniture, vases, and silverware in addition to buildings. As a result, European interest in ancient Rome expanded tremendously. European collectors acquired many of the newly discovered objects. For example, Sir William Hamilton, British consul in Naples from 1764 to 1800, purchased numerous vases and small objects, which he sold to the British Museum in 1772. The finds at Pompeii and Herculaneum, therefore, quickly became available to a wide public. “Pompeian” style soon became all the rage in England, as evident in the interior designs of Robert Adam, which were inspired by the slim, straight-lined, elegant frescoes of the Third and early Fourth Styles of Roman mural painting (FIGS. 10-21 and 10-22). The new Neoclassical style almost entirely displaced the curvilinear Rococo (FIGS. 29-2 and 29-3) after midcentury. In the Etruscan Room (FIG. 29-21) at Osterley Park House, Adam took decorative motifs (medallions, urns, vine scrolls, sphinxes, and tripods) from Roman art and arranged them sparsely within broad, neutral spaces and slender margins, as in his ancient models. Adam was an archaeologist as well, and he had explored and written accounts of the ruins of Diocletian’s palace (FIG. 10-74) at Split. Kedleston House in Derbyshire, Adelphi Terrace in London, and a great many other structures he designed show the influence of the Split palace on his work.
were the excavations of Herculaneum (begun in 1738) and Pompeii (1748), which the volcanic eruption of Mount Vesuvius had buried (see “The Excavations of Herculaneum and Pompeii,” page 766). Soon, murals based on artwork unearthed in the excavations began to appear on the walls of rooms in European town houses, such as the “Etruscan Room” (fig. 29–21) by Robert Adam (1728–1792) in Osterley Park House in Middlesex, begun in 1761.

WINCKELMANN The enthusiasm for classical antiquity also permeated much of the scholarship of the time. In the late 18th century, the ancient world increasingly became the focus of scholarly attention. A visit to Rome stimulated Edward Gibbon (1737–1794) to begin his monumental Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, which appeared between 1776 and 1788. Earlier, in 1755, Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768), the first modern art historian, published Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture, uncompromisingly designating Greek art as the most perfect to come from human hands—and far preferable to “natural” art.

Good taste, which is becoming more prevalent throughout the world, had its origins under the skies of Greece . . . The only way for us to become great . . . is to imitate the ancients. . . . In the masterpieces of Greek art, connoisseurs and imitators find not only nature at its most beautiful but also something beyond nature, namely certain ideal forms of its beauty. . . . A person enlightened enough to penetrate the innermost secrets of art will find beauties hitherto seldom revealed when he compares the total structure of Greek figures with most modern ones, especially those modelled more on nature than on Greek taste. 3

In his History of Ancient Art (1764), Winckelmann described each monument and positioned it within a huge inventory of works organized by subject matter, style, and period. Before Winckelmann, art historians had focused on biography, as did Giorgio Vasari and Giovanni Pietro Bellori in the 16th and 17th centuries. Winckelmann thus initiated one modern art historical method thoroughly in accord with Enlightenment ideas of ordering knowledge—a system of description and classification that provided a pioneering model for the understanding of stylistic evolution. His familiarity with classical art derived predominantly (as was the norm) from Roman works and Roman copies of Greek art in Italy. Yet he was instrumental in bringing to scholarly attention the distinctions between Greek and Roman art. Thus, he paved the way for more thorough study of the distinct characteristics of the art and architecture of these two cultures. Winckelmann’s writings also laid a theoretical and historical foundation for the enormously widespread taste for Neoclassicism that lasted well into the 19th century.

Painting

ANGELICA KAUFFMANN One of the pioneers of Neoclassical painting was Angelica Kauffmann (1741–1807). Born in Switzerland and trained in Italy, Kauffmann spent many of her productive years in England. A student of Reynolds, and an interior decorator of many houses built by Adam, she was a founding member of the British Royal Academy of Arts and enjoyed an enviable reputation. Her Cornelia Presenting Her Children as Her Treasures, or Mother of the Gracchi (fig. 29–22), is an exemplum virtutis (example or model of virtue) drawn from Greek and Roman history and literature. The moralizing pictures of Greuze (fig. 29–13) and Hogarth (fig. 29–15) already had marked a change in taste, but Kauffmann replaced the modern setting and character of their works. She clothed her actors in ancient Roman garb and posed them in statuesque attitudes within Roman interiors. The theme in this painting is the virtue of Cornelia, mother of the future political leaders Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, who, in the second century BCE, attempted to reform the Roman Republic. Cornelia reveals her character in this scene, which takes place after the seated visitor showed off her fine jewelry and then insisted haughtily that Cornelia show hers. Instead of rushing to get her own precious adornments, Cornelia brought her sons forward, presenting them as her jewels. The architectural setting is severely Roman, with no Rococo motif in evidence, and the composition and drawing have the simplicity and firmness of low-relief carving.


Kauffmann’s painting of a virtuous Roman mother who presented her children to a visitor as her jewels exemplifies the Enlightenment fascination with classical antiquity and with classical art.
JACQUES-LOUIS DAVID

Jacques-Louis David was the leading Neoclassical painter in France at the end of the 18th century. He championed a return to Greek style and the painting of inspiring heroic and patriotic subjects. In 1796 he made the following statement to his pupils:

I want to work in a pure Greek style. I feed my eyes on antique statues, I even have the intention of imitating some of them. The Greeks had no scruples about copying a composition, a gesture, a type that had already been accepted and used. They put all their attention and all their art on perfecting an idea that had been already conceived. They thought, and they were right, that in the arts the way in which an idea is rendered, and the manner in which it is expressed, is much more important than the idea itself. To give a body and a perfect form to one's thought, this—and only this—is to be an artist.¹

David also strongly believed that paintings depicting noble events in ancient history, such as Oath of the Horatii (Fig. 29-23), would instill patriotism and civic virtue in the public at large in postrevolutionary France. In November 1793 he wrote:

[The arts] should help to spread the progress of the human spirit, and to propagate and transmit to posterity the striking examples of the efforts of a tremendous people who, guided by reason and philosophy, are bringing back to earth the reign of liberty, equality, and law. The arts must therefore contribute forcefully to the education of the public. . . . The arts are the imitation of nature in her most beautiful and perfect form. . . . [T]hose marks of heroism and civic virtue offered the eyes of the people [will] electrify the soul, and plant the seeds of glory and devotion to the fatherland.†

† Ibid., 205.

29-23 JACQUES-LOUIS DAVID, Oath of the Horatii, 1784. Oil on canvas, 10’ 10” × 13’ 11”. Louvre, Paris. David was the Neoclassical painter-ideologist of the French Revolution. This huge canvas celebrating ancient Roman patriotism and sacrifice features statuesque figures and classical architecture.
Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825) became the Neoclassical painter-ideologist of the French Revolution. A distant relative of Boucher, he followed the Rococo painter’s style until a period of study in Rome won the younger man over to the classical art tradition. David favored the academic teachings about using the art of the ancients and of the great Renaissance masters as models. He rebelled against Rococo style as an “artificial taste” and exalted the “perfect form” of Greek art (see “David on Greek Style and Public Art,” page 768).

**Oath of the Horatii** David concurred with the Enlightenment belief that subject matter should have a moral and should be presented so that noble deeds in the past could inspire virtue in the present. A milestone painting in David’s career, *Oath of the Horatii* (Fig. 29-23), depicts a story from pre-Republican Rome, the heroic phase of Roman history. The topic was not too arcane for David’s audience. Pierre Corneille (1606–1684) had retold this story of conflict between love and patriotism, first recounted by the ancient Roman historian Livy, in a play performed in Paris several years earlier, making it familiar to David’s viewing public. According to the story, the leaders of the warring cities of Rome and Alba decided to resolve their conflicts in a series of encounters waged by three representatives from each side. The Romans chose as their champions the three Horatii brothers, who had to face the three sons of the Curatius family from Alba. A sister of the Horatii, Camilla, was the bride-to-be of one of the Curatius sons, and the wife of the youngest Horatius was the sister of the Curatii.

David’s painting shows the Horatii as they swear on their swords, held high by their father, to win or die for Rome, oblivious to the anguish and sorrow of their female relatives. In its form, *Oath of the Horatii* is a paragon of the Neoclassical style. Not only does the subject matter deal with a narrative of patriotism and sacrifice excerpted from Roman history, but the painter presented the image with force and clarity. David depicted the scene in a shallow space much like a stage setting, defined by a severely simple architectural framework. He deployed his statuesque and carefully modeled figures across the space, close to the foreground, in a manner reminiscent of ancient relief sculpture. The rigid, angular, and virile forms of the men on the left effectively contrast with the soft curvilinear shapes of the distraught women on the right. This pattern visually pits virtues the Enlightenment ascribed to men (such as courage, patriotism, and unwavering loyalty to a cause) against the emotions of love, sorrow, and despair that the women in the painting express. The French viewing audience perceived such emotionalism as characteristic of the female nature. The message was clear and of a type readily identifiable to the prerevolutionary French public. The picture created a sensation at its first exhibition in Paris in 1785, and although David had painted it under royal patronage and did not intend the painting as a revolutionary statement, the Neoclassical style of *Oath of the Horatii* soon became the semi-official voice of the French Revolution. David may have painted in the academic tradition, but he brought new impetus to it. He created a program for arousing his audience to patriotic zeal.

**Death of Marat** When the French Revolution broke out in 1789, David threw in his lot with the Jacobins, the radical and militant revolutionary faction. He accepted the role of de facto minister of propaganda, organizing political pageants and ceremonies that included floats, costumes, and sculptural props. David believed that art could play an important role in educating the public and that dramatic paintings emphasizing patriotism and civic virtue would prove effective as rallying calls. However, rather than continuing to create artworks focused on scenes from antiquity, David began to portray scenes from the French Revolution itself. He intended *Death of Marat* (Fig. 29-24) not only to serve as a record of an important event in the struggle to overthrow the monarchy but also to provide inspiration and encouragement to the revolutionary forces. Jean-Paul Marat (1743–1793), a writer and David’s friend, was tragically assassinated in 1793. David depicted the martyred revolutionary after Charlotte Corday (1768–1793), a member of a rival political faction, stabbed him to death in his medicinal bath. (Marat suffered from a painful skin disease.) David presented the scene with directness and clarity. The cold neutral space above Marat’s figure slumped in the tub produces a chilling oppressiveness. The painter vividly placed narrative details—the knife, the wound, the blood, the letter with which the young woman gained entrance—to sharpen the sense of pain and outrage and to confront viewers with the scene itself. *Death of Marat* is convincingly real, yet David masterfully composed the painting to present Marat as a tragic martyr who died in the service of the revolution. David based the figure of Marat on Christ in Michelangelo’s Pietà (Fig. 22-12) in Saint Peter’s in Rome. The reference to Christ’s martyrdom made the painting a kind of “altarpiece” for the new civic “religion,” inspiring the French people with the saintly dedication of their slain leader.
Architecture and Sculpture

Architecture in the Enlightenment era also exhibits a dependence on classical models. Early in the 18th century, architects began to turn away from the theatricality and ostentation of Baroque and Rococo design and embraced a more streamlined antique look.

PANTHÉON  The portico of the Parisian church of Sainte-Geneviève, now the Panthéon (Fig. 29-25), by Jacques-Germain Soufflot (1713–1780), stands as testament to the revived interest in Greek and Roman cultures. The Roman ruins at Baalbek in Lebanon, especially the titanic colonnade of the temple of Jupiter, provided much of the inspiration for Soufflot’s design. The columns, reproduced with studied archaeological precision, stand out from walls that are severely blank, except for a repeated garland motif near the top. The colonnaded dome, a Neoclassical version of the domes of Saint Peter’s (Figs. 24-3 and 24-4) in Rome, the Église du Dôme (Fig. 25-36) in Paris, and Saint Paul’s (Fig. 25-38) in London, rises above a Greek-cross plan. Both the dome and the vaults rest on an interior grid of splendid freestanding Corinthian columns, as if the portico’s colonnade continued within. Although the overall effect, inside and out, is Roman, the structural principles employed are essentially Gothic. Soufflot was one of the first 18th-century builders to suggest that the logical engineering of Gothic cathedrals (see “The Gothic Cathedral,” Chapter 18, page 469) could be applied to modern buildings. In his work, the curious, but not unreasonable, conjunction of Gothic and classical has a structural integration that laid the foundation for the 19th-century admiration of Gothic building principles.

CHISWICK HOUSE  The appeal of classical antiquity extended well beyond French borders. The popularity of Greek and Roman cultures was due not only to their association with morality, rationality, and integrity but also to their connection to political systems ranging from Athenian democracy to Roman imperial rule. Thus, parliamentary England joined revolutionary France in embracing Neoclassicism. In England, Neoclassicism’s appeal also was due to its clarity and simplicity. These characteristics provided a stark contrast to the complexity and opulence of Baroque art, then associated with the flamboyant rule of absolute monarchy. In English architecture, the preference for a simple style derived indirectly from the authority of the classical Roman architect Vitruvius, through Andrea Palladio’s work (Figs. 22-29 to 22-32), and on through that of Inigo Jones (Fig. 25-37).

Richard Boyle (1695–1753), earl of Burlington, strongly re-stated Jones’s Palladian doctrine in a new style in Chiswick House (Fig. 29-26), which he built on London’s outskirts with the help of William Kent (ca. 1686–1748). The way had been paved for this shift in style by, among other things, the publication of Colin Campbell’s Vitruvius Britannicus (1715), three volumes of engravings of ancient buildings, prefaced by a denunciation of Italian Baroque and high praise for Palladio and Jones. Chiswick House is a free variation on the theme of Palladio’s Villa Rotonda (Fig. 22-29). The exterior design provided a clear alternative to the colorful splendors of Versailles (Fig. 25-32). In its simple symmetry, unadorned planes, right
angles, and precise proportions, Chiswick looks very classical and “rational.” But the Palladian-style villa’s setting within informal gardens, where a charming irregularity of layout and freely growing uncropped foliage dominate the scene, mitigates the classical severity and rationality. Just as the owners of English villas cultivated irregularity in the landscaping surrounding their homes, they sometimes preferred interiors ornamented in a style more closely related to Rococo decoration. At Chiswick, the interior design creates a luxurious Baroque foil to the stern symmetry of the exterior and the plan. Palladian classicism prevailed in English architecture until about 1760, when it began to evolve into Neoclassicism.

**STUART AND REVETT** British painters and architects James Stuart (1713–1788) and Nicholas Revett (1720–1804) introduced to Europe the splendor and originality of Greek art in their enormously influential *Antiquities of Athens*, the first volume of which appeared in 1762. These volumes firmly distinguished Greek art from the “derivative” Roman style that had served as the model for classicism since the Renaissance. Stuart and Revett fostered a new preference for Greek art and architecture over Roman antiquities, despite the fact that in the 18th century, familiarity with Greek art continued to be based primarily on Roman copies of Greek originals. Notwithstanding the popularity of the Grand Tour (see “The Grand Tour,” page 765), travel to Greece was hazardous, making firsthand inspection of Greek monuments difficult. Stuart and Revett spent four years visiting Greece in the early 1750s, where they formed their preference for Greek art. When Stuart received the commission to design a portico (fig. 29-27) for Hagley Park in Worcestershire, he used as his model the fifth-century BCE Doric temple in Athens known as the Theseion. His Doric portico is consequently much more severe (and authentic) than any contemporaneous Neoclassical building in Europe based on Roman or Renaissance designs.
Jefferson led the movement to adopt Neoclassicism as the architectural style of the United States. Although built of local materials, his Palladian Virginia home recalls Chiswick House (FIG. 29-26).

Modeled on the Pantheon (FIG. 10-49), Jefferson’s Rotunda, like a temple in a Roman forum, sits on an elevated platform overlooking the colonnaded Lawn of the University of Virginia.
THOMAS JEFFERSON Part of the appeal of Neoclassicism was due to the values with which it was connected—morality, idealism, patriotism, and civic virtue. Thus, it is not surprising that in the new American republic (MAP 29-1), Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826)—scholar, economist, educational theorist, statesman, and gifted amateur architect—spearheaded a movement to adopt Neoclassicism as the national architectural style. Jefferson admired Palladio immensely and read carefully the Italian architect’s *Four Books of Architecture*. Later, while minister to France, he studied French 18th-century classical architecture and city planning and visited the Maison Carrée (FIG. 10-32), a Roman temple at Nîmes. After his European trip, Jefferson completely remodeled his own home, Monticello (FIG. 29-28), near Charlottesville, Virginia, which he first had designed in a different style. The final version of Monticello is somewhat reminiscent of Palladio’s Villa Rotonda (FIG. 22-29) and of Chiswick House (FIG. 29-26), but its materials are the local wood and brick used in Virginia.

UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA Jefferson’s Neoclassicism was an extension of the Enlightenment belief in the perfectibility of human beings and in the power of art to help achieve that perfection. When he became president, he selected Benjamin Latrobe (1764–1820) to build the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C., specifying that Latrobe use a Roman style. Jefferson’s choice in part reflected his admiration for the beauty of the Roman buildings he had seen in Europe and in part his association of those buildings with an idealized Roman republican government and, through that, with the democracy of ancient Greece.

In his own designs for public buildings, Jefferson also looked to Rome for models. He modeled the State Capitol in Richmond, Virginia, on the Maison Carrée (FIG. 10-32). For the University of Virginia, which he founded, Jefferson turned to the Pantheon (FIG. 10-49). The Rotunda (FIG. 29-29) is the centerpiece of Jefferson’s “academical village” in Charlottesville. It sits on an elevated platform at one end of a grassy quadrangle (“the Lawn”), framed by Neoclassical pavilions and colonnades—just as temples in Roman forums (FIGS. 10-12 and 10-43) stood at one short end of a colonnaded square. Each of the ten pavilions (five on each side) resembles a small classical temple. No two are exactly alike. Jefferson experimented with variations of all the different classical orders in their designs. Jefferson was no mere copyist. He had absorbed all the principles of classical architecture and clearly delighted in borrowing from major buildings in his own designs, which were nonetheless highly original—and, in turn, frequently emulated.

JEAN-ANTOINE HOUDON Neoclassicism also became the preferred style for public sculptural commissions in the new American republic. When the Virginia legislature wanted to erect a life-size marble statue of Virginia-born George Washington, the commission turned to the leading French Neoclassical sculptor of the late 18th century, Jean-Antoine Houdon (1741–1828). Houdon had already carved a bust portrait of Benjamin Franklin when he was U.S. ambassador to France. His portrait of Washington (FIG. 29-30) is the sculptural equivalent of a painted Grand Manner portrait (FIG. 29-18). But although both Washington and West’s General Wolfe (FIG. 29-18) wear contemporary garb, the Houdon statue makes overt reference to the Roman Republic. The “column” on which Washington leans is a bundle of rods with an ax attached—the ancient Roman *fasces*, an emblem of authority (used much later as the emblem of Mussolini’s Fascist—the term derives from “fasces”—government in 20th-century Italy). The 13 rods symbolize the 13 original states. The plow behind Washington and the fasces alludes to Cincinnatus, a patrician of the early Roman Republic who was elected dictator during a time of war and resigned his position as soon as victory had been achieved in order to return to his farm. Washington wears the badge of the Society of the Cincinnati (visible beneath the bottom of his waistcoat), an association founded in 1783 for officers in the revolutionary army who had resumed their peacetime roles. Tellingly, Washington no longer holds his sword in Houdon’s statue.


Houdon portrayed Washington in contemporary garb, but he incorporated the Roman *fasces* and Cincinnatus’s plow in the statue, because Washington had returned to his farm after his war service.
HORATIO GREENOUGH After his death, Washington gradually acquired almost godlike stature as the “father of his country.” In 1840 the United States Congress commissioned the American sculptor HORATIO GREENOUGH (1805–1852) to make a statue (FIG. 29-31) of the country’s first president for the Capitol. Greenough used Houdon’s portrait as his model for the head, but he portrayed Washington as seminude and enthroned, like the famous lost statue of Zeus that Phidias made for the god’s temple at Olympia in ancient Greece. The statue, which epitomizes the Neoclassical style, did not, however, win favor with either the Congress that commissioned it or the public. Although no one ever threw Greenough’s statue into the Potomac River, as one congressman suggested, the legislators never placed it in its intended site beneath the Capitol dome. In fact, by 1840 the Neoclassical style itself was no longer in vogue. The leading artists of Europe and America had embraced a new style, Romanticism, examined in the next chapter.