

## Neo-Classicism

### **Introduction:**

In opposition to the frivolous sensuality of Rococo painters like Jean-Honoré Fragonard and François Boucher, the Neo-classicists looked to Nicolas Poussin for their inspiration. The decision to promote Poussinist painting became an ethical consideration. They believed that strong drawing was rational, therefore morally better. They believed that art should be cerebral, not sensual.

Neoclassicism is a revival of the styles and spirit of classic antiquity inspired directly from the classical period, which coincided and reflected the developments in philosophy and other areas of the Age of Enlightenment, and was initially a reaction against the excesses of the preceding Rococo style.

### **Historical Background:**

The term "Neoclassical" was not invented until the mid-19th century, and at the time the style was described by such terms as "the true style", "reformed" and "revival"; what was regarded as being revived varying considerably. Ancient models were certainly very much involved, but the style could also be regarded as a revival of the Renaissance, and especially in France as a return to the more austere and noble Baroque of the age of Louis XIV, for which a considerable nostalgia had developed as France's dominant military and political position started a serious decline.

### **The Classical Ideal, the Artists and their Art:**

Influential theoretical and historical writings of Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768), German archaeologist and philosopher, emphasized the supremacy of Greek art. His major work, *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks*, 1755, rejected the notion that art imitates life, Winckelmann taught that qualities superior to nature are found in Greek art, specifically, "ideal beauties, brain-born images." Such transcendent works, he explained, went beyond mere verisimilitude to capture ".

Anton Raphael Mengs (German, 1728–1779), a Winckelmann protégé and *premier peintre* to the Dresden court, freely employed classical themes. Mengs had dispensed with the illusion of space and reduced volumes to unshaded outlines, giving his figures an abstract sense of unreality and weightlessness that appealed to countless fellow artists.

After the interest that gained momentum as Winckelmann brought forth the concept of a buried world of great Classical tradition, Rococo frivolity and Baroque movement had been simply stripped away. Also in the absence of ancient examples for history painting, the achievements of Raphael, Poussin and Claude Lorrain served as a conduit for a renewed interest in harmony, simplicity, and proportion.

France was on the brink of its first revolution in 1789, and the Neo-classicists wanted to express rationality and sobriety that was fitting for their times. Artists like David supported the rebels through an art that asked for clear-headed thinking, self-sacrifice to the State (as in Oath of the Horatii) and an austerity reminiscent of Republican Rome. David preferred the well-delineated form—clear drawing and modeling. Drawing was considered more important than painting. The Neo-classical surface had to look perfectly smooth—no evidence of brush-strokes should be discernable to the naked eye. Predictably David became the leader of French art, and after the French Revolution became a politician with control of much government patronage in art.

David's many students included Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, who saw himself as a classicist throughout his long career, despite a mature style that has an equivocal relationship with the main current of Neoclassicism, and many later diversions into Orientalism that are hard to distinguish from those of his Romantic contemporaries, except by the primacy his works always give to drawing. He exhibited at the Salon for over 60 years, from 1802 into the beginnings of Impressionism, but his style, once formed, changed little.

If Neoclassical painting suffered from a lack of ancient models, Neoclassical sculpture tended to suffer from an excess of them, although examples of actual Greek sculpture of the "classical period" were very few and the most highly regarded works were mostly Roman copies. The leading Neoclassical sculptors enjoyed huge reputations in their own day, but are now less regarded, with the exception of Jean-Antoine Houdon, whose work was mainly portraits, very often as busts, which do not sacrifice a strong impression of the sitter's personality to idealism. (statue of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin). Another famous sculptor Antonio Canova was based in Rome who represented the strongly idealizing tendency in neoclassical sculpture. Canova has a lightness and grace, which is exemplified in his Three Graces.

Neo-classicism is characterized by: clarity of form; sober colors; shallow space; strong horizontal and verticals that render that subject matter timeless, instead of temporal as in the dynamic Baroque works; and, Classical subject matter—or classicizing contemporary subject matter.

### **Conclusion:**

Though Neo-classicism was a child of the Age of Reason (the Enlightenment), when philosophers believed that we would be able to control our destinies by learning from and following the Laws of Nature. But ironically enough Neo-classicism, because of its connection with the Classical tradition lately became favorite style to manipulate for all the dictators or such like people at the helm of the affairs.

### **Major Artists:**

Anton Raphael Mengs, Jacques-Louis David, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, Jean-Antoine Houdon and Antonio Canova

## Short notes on individual artists:

### David:

Jacques Louis David (August 30, 1748 - December 29, 1825) was a highly influential French painter in the Neoclassical style, considered to be the prominent painter of the era. In the 1780s his cerebral brand of history painting marked a change in taste away from Rococo frivolity toward a classical austerity and severity, chiming with the moral climate of the final years of the “ancien regime”.

The art of Jacques Louis David embodies the style known as Neoclassicism, which flourished in France during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. David championed a style of rigorous contours, sculpted forms, and polished surfaces. History paintings, such as his “Lictors Returning to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons” of 1789, were intended as moral exemplars. The painting depicts Lucius Junius Brutus, the Roman leader, grieving for his sons. Brutus's sons had attempted to overthrow the government and restore the monarchy, so the father ordered their death to maintain the republic. Thus, Brutus was the heroic defender of the republic, at the cost of his own family. On the right, the Mother holds her two daughters, and the grandmother is seen on the far right, in anguish. Brutus sits on the left, alone, brooding, but knowing what he did was best for his country. The whole painting was a Republican symbol, and obviously had immense meaning during these times in France.

David won wide acclaim with his huge canvases on classical themes (‘Oath of the Horatii’, 1784). When the French Revolution began in 1789, he served briefly as its artistic director and painted its leaders and martyrs in a style that is more realistic than classical. “The Death of Marat”, 1793, became the leading image of the “Terror” and immortalized both Marat, and David in the world of the revolution. A political martyr was instantly created as David portrayed Marat with all the marks of the real murder, in a fashion which greatly resembles that of Christ or his disciples. The subject although realistically depicted remains lifeless in a rather supernatural composition. With the surrogate tombstone placed in front of him and the almost holy light cast upon the whole scene; alluding to an out of this world existence.

Imprisoned after Robespierre's fall from power, he aligned himself with yet another political regime upon his release, that of Napoleon I. It was at this time that he developed his “Empire style”, notable for its use of warm Venetian colors. After Napoleon's successful coup d'etat in 1799, as First Consul he commissioned David to commemorate his daring crossing of the Alps. The crossing of the St. Bernard Pass had allowed the French to surprise the Austrian army and win victory at the Battle of Marengo on June 14, 1800. Although Napoleon had crossed the Alps on a mule, he requested that he be portrayed “calm upon a fiery steed”. David complied with “Napoleon Crossing the Saint-Bernard” (1800-01). After the proclamation of the Empire in 1804, David became the official court painter of the regime.

On the Bourbons returning to power, David figured in the list of proscribed former revolutionaries and Bonapartists - for having voted execution for the deposed King Louis XVI. The new Bourbon King, Louis XVIII, however, granted amnesty to David and even offered him the position of court painter. David refused, preferring self-exile in Brussels, where he later died in a carriage accident, on the 29th of December of 1825.

He painted in the service of royalty, radical revolutionaries, and an emperor. Although his political allegiance shifted, he remained faithful to the tenets of Neoclassicism.

## **Ingres:**

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780 – 1867) was a French Neoclassical painter. Although he considered himself to be a painter of history in the tradition of Nicolas Poussin and Jacques-Louis David, by the end of his life it was Ingres's portraits, both painted and drawn, that were recognized as his greatest legacy.

At the time, art history as a scholarly enquiry was brand-new. Artists and critics outdid each other in their attempts to identify, interpret, and exploit what they were just beginning to perceive as historical stylistic developments. The Louvre, newly filled with booty seized by Napoleon in his campaigns in Italy and the Low Countries, provided French artists of the early 19th century with an unprecedented opportunity to study, compare, and copy masterworks from antiquity and from the entire history of European painting. From the beginning of his career, Ingres freely borrowed from earlier art, adopting the historical style appropriate to his subject, leading critics to charge him with plundering the past.

Ingres's style was formed early in life and changed comparatively little. Even his earliest drawings show a suavity of outline and an extraordinary control of the parallel hatchings which model the forms. From the first, his paintings are characterized by a firmness of outline reflecting his often-quoted conviction that “drawing is the probity of art”. He believed color to be no more than an accessory to drawing. According to him, Drawing is not just reproducing contour, drawing is also the expression, the inner form, the composition, the modeling. He abhorred the visible brushstroke and made no recourse to the shifting effects of color and light on which the Romantic school depended; he preferred local colors only faintly modeled in light by half tones.

A man profoundly respectful of the past, he assumed the role of a guardian of academic orthodoxy against the ascendant Romantic style represented by his nemesis Eugène Delacroix. Nevertheless, modern opinion has tended to regard Ingres and the other Neoclassicists of his era as embodying the Romantic spirit of his time, while his expressive distortions of form and space make him an important precursor of modern art. His most significant heir was Degas. And in the 20th century, Picasso and Matisse were among those who acknowledged a debt to the great classicist.