WHAT IS NEOCLASSICISM?

Neoclassicism is the movement that shaped the thought, minds, and civic ideals of Americans for 150 years.

What is neoclassicism? How can teachers and students define this term quickly but correctly?

Neoclassicism was a revived interest in classical forms and ideas that saturated European and American intellectual thought, fine arts and politics during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Neoclassicism was a transatlantic phenomenon. American neoclassicism was at first a channel of English antiquarianism. Americans had extremely close cultural and literary ties to London. Economical mass printing, affordable books and engraved drawings helped to stimulate interest and spread neoclassical taste. Academies, publishers, libraries and museums moved neoclassical ideas forward with accelerating velocity and at all levels of culture.

By the late eighteenth century, both in the newly constituted United States and in Europe, classicism was authoritative in letters, design, and politics. Less than a century later, the classics were no longer a badge of the elite and cultivated. In high culture and popular lore they were established sources of authority and common reference points. Greco-Roman legends conveyed neoclassicism's aspirations, giving unusual insight into the intellect and emotions of early American leaders. During the next century, from Plutarch to Aesop, classical stories were widely cycled in popular stories and maxims. Historian Caroline Winterer observes in her 2002 book, The Culture of Classicism, American neoclassicism expressed itself in a "staggering variety" of ways. Classical allusions and authorities, Winterer notes, helped to define America's ethical, political, oratorical, artistic and educational ideals. “Given our devotion to more modern concerns today, it is difficult to grasp how dazzled Americans were by the ancient Greeks and Romans, how enthusiastically they quarried the classical past,” she concludes.
For more on the impact of classical imagery on early American thought

For European and American opinion makers, clergy, and writers, Greco-Roman literature and philosophy were central to formal education; classical works were the common currency of cultural exchange. Neoclassicism was increasingly at the core of humanistic learning, public symbolism, and revolutionary political thought. And it was a point of view and intellectual force in Boston and New England, New York and Philadelphia, Virginia and South Carolina, spreading across the continent in the nineteenth century, reified in colleges, courthouses and museums that look like Greek temples.

Neoclassicism admired order, simplicity, clarity, and reason set in a mood of quiet grandeur. It used classical exempla as guides. It left a plentiful record of observations, reflections, and designs in books, essays and folios. It asserted its intentions in clear, detailed, and often majestic prose. It conveyed in precise and elegant language its theory and practice, its means of thought and execution, and its progress as an idea and institutional force. With profound enthusiasm for what they were doing and the new aesthetic they were creating, eighteenth-century scholars examined newly discovered artifacts, not only manuscripts but also old pottery and coins, for example, looking for historical clues to what made a great civilization and culture. "There is but one way for the moderns to become great, and perhaps unequalled ... by imitating the ancients," the German historian Johann Winckelmann declared in his influential 1755 book, *Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture*. With his *History of the Art of Antiquity*, published in 1764, a systematic survey of Greek art by date and style, Winckelmann is often thought to be the originator of art history as a scholarly discipline. Winckelmann's immense influence throughout Europe shifted taste against baroque conventions and toward classical form.

*For more about Johann Winckelmann*

*The Invention of Antiquity: an exhibition with photographs*

Neoclassicism left an array of paintings, sculpture, buildings, and furniture freighted with inventive and sometimes radical forms. Neoclassicism could also be standardized and conventionalized -- and was, over and over -- which is the reason why people too often write neoclassicism off as nothing more than dreary white marble nymphs and busts of long forgotten men.

Johann Winckelmann, Thomas Jefferson, and other classicists did not use the term neoclassicism to describe the antique revival that they were living through. But the term is used today to describe a multivalent cultural phenomenon that revalued antiquity between 1750 and 1900. To define and categorize neoclassicism, the art historian George Heard Hamilton stated in 1970: "The use of Greek and Roman forms for symbolic as well as functional purposes, which was a continuous and often dominant tendency in Western art for a century after 1750, has been called the Classic Revival, or Neoclassicism,
and can be divided into two periods, with a Roman phase conspicuous until 1815 and a Greek one thereafter. The use of such forms was not always chronologically successive.”

Long before Hamilton’s definition, in 1922, the architectural historian Siegfried Giedion coined the term *romantic classicism* to describe the emotional side of neoclassical form and idea. Neoclassicism included the recreation of a distant, lost and idealized world. The Virgilian landscape with a Temple was a staple of classical pastoralism. Ancient statesmen became larger than life heroes. The ancient could even be connected to nature and the sublime, as with the eruption of Vesuvius. With the strict modeling of building and art works on ancient models, the classical world was imagined as a perfect and pure ideal. Through the nineteenth century, artists and others made a conscious attempt to humanize the cooler, more cerebral aspects of pure neoclassicism. Classical images could be expressly evocative and picturesque, as in the contemplation of ruins and the inexorable passage of time. Caroline Winterer expands the eighteenth and early nineteenth century American interest in antiquity beyond Greece and Rome, and in the following essay outlines and examines American interest in the broader history of the Ancient Mediterranean, including Etruria, Carthage, Egypt, and Persia.

**Early American views of the ancient Mediterranean**

Winterer observes that along with the Classic Revival, there was fascination with ancient Egyptian culture, kindled in part by Napoleon’s Egyptian Campaign (1798-1801). Archaeologists, scholars and visitors throughout the nineteenth century spurred American interest. Cleopatra, the Pyramids, the Sphinx, mummies, and obelisks all became part of popular American consciousness and culture.

*The obelisk was the Egyptian and Roman symbol of perpetuity and power.*

For more about the Washington Monument

Between the 1840s and 1880s, with many long interruptions, Americans built a colossal obelisk in the middle of the national capitol, a symbolic fixture of ancient Egypt and Rome, and called it the Washington Monument.
Neoclassicism’s political and constitutional dimension

Neoclassicism was in part a political phenomenon. In the late eighteenth century, spurred by classical ideas, Americans established a republican government modeled on Greek and Roman principles. This was a form of government that cherished liberty, using ancient models to try to reform polities, protect individuals, and constrain tyranny.

What is republicanism?

Classical models of government were influential in the creation of the American republic, a radical and novel form of self-government modeled on antiquity. In essence, Americans borrowed and reshaped Roman government and civics in their political self-interest, in the process creating a modern republic. The Founders of the United States looked to the Greco-Roman past for successful political models and emotional inspiration. The Greeks and Romans had debated and developed the principles of justice, the rule of law, liberty, and due process. For the Founders, ancient opponents of tyranny, monarchy, and aristocracy provided illustrations of heroism, as did classical advocates of the philosophical life. The eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American view of the classical world was to admire the workings of republican government, not imperialism or unrestrained democratic rule. Republicanism reasserted itself as a vital idea as part of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Political leaders were looking for keys to successful and longstanding government that protected citizens against tyranny. In particular, they admired Greco-Roman achievements in political order and legal authority (including “limited government” and "rule of law"). Roman models of law and jurisprudence were regarded as the foundations of the civilized world, a great achievement of enlightened liberalism, and as such, deserving of popular respect and ardor. In politics and statesmanship, neoclassicism often reflects the effort to connect contemporary greatness and accomplishments to the legendary achievements of larger-than-life Greek and Roman heroes. It is often a projection of its own ambitions on the classical past. Studying neoclassicism gives us clues to what was in the minds of Americans as they set out to create a new and better form of political rule, one rooted in reason, liberty and self-government.

Neoclassicism as a style

With plentiful links, this Metropolitan Museum of Art online survey and resource gives an overview of the neoclassical style and its impact across the visual arts.

A survey of the neoclassical style
The Art Institute of Chicago explains neoclassical art in America, saying:

Neoclassicism is a term used to describe works of art that are influenced stylistically or thematically by Classical Greek and Roman sources. The origins of the neoclassical style lie in the discovery of the ancient Roman cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii, which had been buried by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in A.D. 79. The preserved cultural artifacts of those cities educated and inspired European archaeologists, artists and collectors during the first half of the eighteenth century. The German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s extensive and enthusiastic writings about the achievements of Greek sculptors encouraged artists to pursue Classical forms and ideals as well.

European and American artists adopted Neoclassicism for aesthetic and political reasons, and the style flourished during the revolutionary periods in France and the United States. The appropriation of Classical forms suggested learning, democratic values, moral virtue, and a sophisticated appreciation of beauty, each considered essential components in the development of a nation. Painters, sculptors, architects, and decorative artists employed simple, flowing lines, restrained ornament, and idealized figures to impart their lofty aims to the public. American Neoclassical sculpture was produced primarily by artists such as Horatio Greenough, Hiram Powers, and Harriet Hosmer, who traveled to Rome and Florence during the first half of the nineteenth century to study with European masters.

**Introducing neoclassicism to students**

To explain neoclassicism, one Advanced Placement history instructor stresses four points of introduction.

- In ideals and aspirations, neoclassicism is a return to perceived *purity* of ancient Greece and republican Rome.
- In neoclassicism, works of all kinds – literary, artistic, political -- model the *ideals* of the ancient Greek and Roman arts and letters, and, to an extent, 16th century Renaissance classicism.
- Conviction runs through neoclassicism that there are *universals* that embody permanent truths about what things are and should be. These universals can be discovered in the collected wisdom of the classics.
- Classical *ethics* run deeply through the political and cultural aspirations of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Americans.

Each of the four words above in italics – *purity*, *ideal*, *universals*, and *ethics* – is defined, examined, and used to open class discussion and introduce the larger subject: the elements of neoclassicism and the influence of ancient Rome and Greece on American history, political systems, and culture. Historian William Ziobro has developed a well-known online syllabus called “Classical America.”
Study Questions

- Identify neoclassicism's core ideals and explain how they bridge the arts, letters, and politics.
- How does neoclassicism extend classicizing tendencies from the Renaissance and previous centuries? How is it different and new?
- How did Americans adapt the concepts of a republic, senate, rule of law, and capitol, borrowing them from ancient Rome?
- How is neoclassicism part of larger American interest in the ancient Mediterranean?
- What is the "romantic" element of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antiquarianism?
- In style and form how does neoclassicism compare with the rococo that precedes it?

Andalusia, home of Nicolas Biddle, near Philadelphia

Washington Square Arch, New York City

- How do Nicholas Biddle's Andalusia (built between 1835-36) and McKim, Mead and White’s Washington Square Arch (1890-92) embody neoclassical forms?
- What are the purposes of each building? What are their prototypes?
- What emotions are they trying to convey through their antique references?
- Where do other temples and triumphal arches exist in the United States?

For Further Study

Recommended surveys, anthologies, texts, and monographs that cover neoclassicism in the arts and other areas of culture:


