2: Neoclassicism & the French Revolution

A Restructuring of Society: Industrial, Intellectual, and Political

Toward the middle of the 18th century, a shift in thinking occurred, known as the Enlightenment. The thinkers of the Enlightenment, including Rousseau, Diderot, and Voltaire, influenced by the scientific revolutions of the previous century, believed in shedding the light of science and reason on the world in order to question traditional ways of thinking. The scientific revolution (based on empirical observation and not on metaphysics or spirituality) gave the impression that the universe behaved according to universal and unchanging laws. This provided a model for looking rationally at human institutions as well as nature.

The Enlightenment was a period of profound optimism, a sense that with science and reason—and the consequent shedding of old superstitions—human beings and human society would improve.

The Enlightenment encouraged criticism of the corruption of Louis XVI and the aristocracy in France, leading to the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789. In 1792, Louis XVI and his wife, Marie Antoinette, were beheaded along with thousands of other aristocrats believed to be loyal to the monarchy.

During this period, Rococo art was condemned for being immoral and indecent, and a new kind of moral, instructive art was called for: Neoclassicism. In opposition to the frivolous sensuality of Rococo painters like Jean-Honoré Fragonard and François Boucher, the Neoclassicists looked to the artist Nicolas Poussin for their inspiration. Poussin’s work predominantly features clarity, logic, and order, plus it favors line over color. His work served as an alternative to the dominant Baroque style of the 17th century. Poussin was the major inspiration for such classically oriented artists as Jacques-Louis David, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, and Paul Cézanne.
Figure \(\PageIndex{1}\): Et in Arcadia Ergo, by Nicholas Poussin, c. 1630s Poussin came to define Neoclassical artwork.

Neoclassicism is characterized by clarity of form, sober colors, shallow space, and strong horizontals. Its verticals render the subject matter timeless, instead of temporal, as in the dynamic Baroque works, and depicts classical subject matter—or classicizes contemporary subject matter. Neoclassicists believed that strong drawing was rational, and therefore morally superior, and that art should be cerebral, not sensual.

The Neoclassicists wanted to express rationality and sobriety that was fitting for their times. Artists like David supported the rebels in the French Revolution 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.

Figure \(\PageIndex{1}\): "Oath of the Horatii" by Jacques-Louis David, 1784. David was an extremely influential figure in the Neoclassical movement.

Neoclassicism was strongest in architecture, sculpture, and the decorative arts, where classical models in the same medium were relatively numerous and accessible. Rococo architecture emphasizes grace, ornamentation, and asymmetry; Neoclassical architecture is based on the principles of simplicity and symmetry, which were seen as virtues in the arts of Rome and Ancient Greece, and were more immediately drawn from 16th century Renaissance Classicism.
The Grand Tour & Its Portraits

The Grand Tour was a customary trip to Europe undertaken by wealthy Europeans and some Americans that flourished as a tradition from about 1660 to 1840. The trip was viewed as an educational rite of passage typically for young men, but sometimes women as well. It was intended for culturally broadening purposes and associated with a fairly standard itinerary. The Grand Tour tradition was extended to include the middle class when railroad and ship travel became more widespread in the second half of the 18th century.

The travel itinerary typically began in Dover, England and crossed the English Channel to Ostend or to Calais in France. From here the tourist and “bear-leader,” or tutor, and possibly a troupe of servants, could rent a coach and travel to Paris. From Paris they would travel to Switzerland, then Spain, and Northern Italy. Once in Italy, the tourist would visit Turin, and might spend a few months in Florence and Venice, which was the epitome of the Grand Tour for most British tourists. From Venice they would go to Rome to study the ruins and masterpieces and possibly to the archaeological sites at Pompeii. Next was the German section of Europe, such as Vienna, Dresden, Berlin, and Potsdam, and finally to Holland and Flanders before making the trip home. The journey generally involved the study of art at museums and universities, private collections, and notable architectural sites.

The pilgrimage was popularized further by the advent of tour guides, such as Thomas Cook, which became synonymous with the Grand Tour. Grand Tourists were known to travel with an entourage that included valets, coachmen, scholarly guide and possibly a cook. Souvenirs and mementos became an important element as they could demonstrate the specifics of which location was visited and what was seen or acquired. Their popularity created an industry of sorts, and prices rose with the growth of the trend. Some Grand Tourists invited artists from home to accompany them throughout their travels, painting views specific to their personal itineraries.

A popular souvenir of the Grand Tour was a portrait of the tourist themselves, often painted amidst the architecture, or famous art works of a particular European location. The artist, Pompeo Batoni, made a career of painting portraits of English tourists posed among Roman antiquities. He became very popular in Rome and his portraits of the British traveling through the city were in very high demand. There are records of over 200 portraits of visiting British patrons standing amidst ruins and great works of art by Batoni. These paintings made it into numerous private collections in Britain, thus ensuring the genre’s popularity in the United Kingdom.
Figure 1: A portrait by Pompeo Batoni: A popular souvenir of the Grand Tour was a portrait of the tourist themselves, often painted amidst the architecture, or famous art works of a particular European location.

Jacques-Louis David

Oath of Horatii

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The Death of Marat

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William Hogarh – “A Rake’s Progress”

Sex, Booze and 18th-Century Britain

Essay by Sophie Harland[3]
If you ever needed proof that the sex, booze and a rock’n’roll lifestyle was not a twentieth century invention, you need look no further than the satirical prints of William Hogarth. He held up a moralising mirror to eighteenth-century Britain; the harlots, the womanizers—even the clergy could not escape. Hogarth’s prints play out the sins of eighteenth-century London in a kind of visual theatre that was entirely new and novel in their day.

![A Rake's Progress](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/Book%3A_Western_Art_from_18th_to_Mid-20th_Century_(Taylor)/02%3A_Neoclassicism_and_Romanticism/02.02%3A_British%2C_German%2C_and_North_American_Art/02.02.02%3A_Hogarth/Marriage_A-la-Mode_(including_Tete_a_Tete))

Figure \(\PageIndex{1}\): William Hogarth, A Rake’s Progress, plate 2, “Surrounded by Artists and Professors,” 1735, engraving on paper, 35.5 x 31 cm

But it is not just Hogarth’s ‘take no prisoners’ approach to social commentary that made him so popular. Printed satire was actually already very common place and central London was full of bookshops and print sellers that displayed this kind of work. What Hogarth did do that was so completely novel was to tell a story through pictures, A Rake’s Progress is like a story board for a play. In fact, Hogarth’s series were adapted into plays and pantomimes during his lifetime. His visual drama offered his audience a new way to enjoy satire. It is for this reason that to find comparisons and inspirations we should be looking at authors such as Hogarth’s friend and fellow moraliser, Henry Fielding or Jonathan Swift—author of Gulliver’s Travels, rather than contemporary artists. The title A Rake’s Progress was referencing John Bunyan’s The Pilgrims Progress. We can be quite sure that most people would have gotten this reference as it is thought that, at this time, this was the most read book in Britain after the Bible. Hogarth successfully borrows from popular culture in order to express complicated ideas through an enjoyable and totally accessible story. Of course Hogarth wasn’t the first to do this, but he did it so well, he is celebrated to this day.

**Marriage A-la-Mode**

[Smarthistory > Baroque, Rococo & Neoclassicism in Europe > British art in the 18th century > Hogarth, Marriage A-la-Mode (including Tete a Tete)]
A YouTube element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: pb.libretexts.org/art1/?p=27

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