
Neoclassical Revival of the Eighteenth Century

by

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Of



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Brief History

In architecture, neoclassicism was the dominant style in Europe during 1750s-1850s, marked by the imitation of Greco-Roman forms. It was used in a range of architectural forms, including churches, arches, temples, houses, terraces, garden monuments and interior designs. Neoclassical architecture became an international style; each country having distinct characteristics which reflected the architecture of ancient Greece and Rome. The prefix *neo* means new. Buildings discovered in the ancient Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum in the 1730s and 1740s influenced neoclassical architecture; the wall paintings and other artifacts inspired the slim, straight-lined elegant “Pompeian” style that after mid century, almost entirely displaced the curvilinear Rococo. Architectural publications played an important role in the neoclassical movement by bringing the splendor of distant ruins into architectural reach. Sir William Hamilton made extensive contributions to classical scholarship based on the excavations of Pompeii and a catalogue of the Hamilton collection inspired much of the work of the Brothers’ Adam and Josiah Wedgwood in England. The easier travel and “grand tours” taken by the elite broaden knowledge of ancient times.

In England there had been an absence of a strong Renaissance Classicism, which enabled England to embrace neoclassicism more quickly. The English were the most adventurous and painstaking exponents of early field archaeology. They were the first to scientifically survey the Acropolis (1751), Palmyra (1753), Baalbek (1757), Split (1757) and Ionia (1764-69). The most important neoclassical architects in England were Sir William Chambers and Robert Adam and they were the first to evolve a style that evoked the richness of antiquity. Chambers designed many public buildings, notably Somerset House (1780) in London. He was a close adherent to the Palladian tradition and designed most of his buildings in strictly Roman classical form, with fine proportions and exacting excellence of detail and finish. Adam became an influential interior designer and furniture designer as well as a leading architect. He made Roman designs fashionable in such houses as Osterley Park House (1763-1780) in London; no two houses by Adam are alike. Adam drew from sources such as Roman imperial palaces or baths, Greek temples of Athens and Asia Minor, villas from Herculaneum following no rigid rule system.



The Etruscan Room in Osterley Park House shows how complete symmetry and rectilinearly have returned. The decorative motifs are taken from Roman art.

Source: google images

Pietro Bianchi, an Italian architect, designed one of the major neoclassical buildings of the early 1800s, the Church of San Francesco di Paola in Naples. The design of the church is based on that of the Pantheon, an ancient Roman temple. Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778) – a Venetian engineer and architect impacted on Italian design through the visual force of his etchings and engravings.

In France, neoclassicism was known as the *Louis XVI* or *Louis Seize* style and developed differently. Architects were interested in the primary geometric solids of the cube, sphere and pyramid and the logical basis for architectural expression. They proposed entire buildings dominated by simple solid geometrics. One of the most famous buildings is the Pantheon (1757-1790) designed by Jacques Soufflot. It was originally a church named after Sainte Genevieve. Jacques Soufflot's (1713-80) Pantheon Paris; introduced the first revelation of Roman grandeur into France. The



The Roman ruins at Baalbek, especially a titanic colonnade, inspired the neoclassical portico of the Church of Ste Genevieve, now the Pantheon in Paris
Source: alta vista images

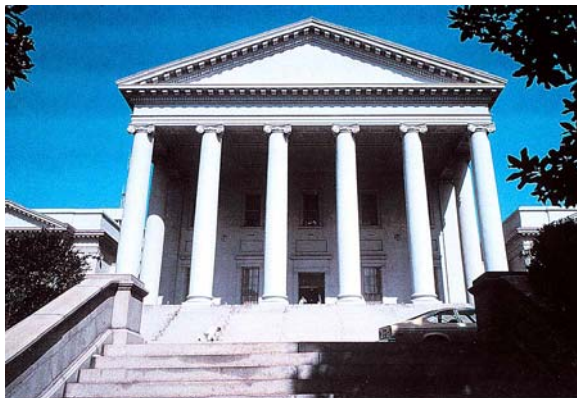
walls were severely blank, except for a repeated garland motif in the attic level. The colonnaded dome rises above a Greek-cross plan, and both vaults and dome rest upon an interior grid of freestanding Corinthian columns. The whole effects inside and out is Roman.

Other leading French Neoclassicists were Etienne-Louis Boullée (1728-1799) and Claude-Nicholas Ledoux (1736-1806), who attempted to reconcile the traditional elements of French classicism with the new spirit of the antique. Among these were the Chateau de Benouville, Calvados and the Hotel de Montmoreney, Paris both of which feature Ionic colonnades with straight entablatures. Boullée is best remembered for a design for a monument to Isaac Newton, an enormous sphere, set into a double ring base, which demonstrates the desire to exploit the use of massive geometric figures. It was in France that the greatest numbers of neoclassical monuments were constructed.



La Madeleine in Paris was intended to be a temple of honour for Napoleon's armies and as a monument to the newly won glory of France. It was converted to a church before its completion in 1842. Designed by Pierre Vignon as a temple it simulates the buildings of the time of the first Caesars and makes La Madeleine a symbolic link between the Napoleonic and Roman empires.
Source: alta vista images

In the United States, neoclassical architecture became known as the *Federal* style. The leading architects were Benjamin Latrobe, Charles Bulfinch and Thomas Jefferson. Latrobe for his designs in Washington, D.C., Bulfinch's most important projects included the statehouse of Maine and Massachusetts. Thomas Jefferson



Source: google images

believed that a classical manner was appropriate for public buildings. He used the complete Roman temple form as his model for the Virginia statehouse at Richmond. "Jefferson's choice was based on his admiration he felt for the original both as a embodiment of the pure beauty of antiquity and as a symbol of idealized Roman Republic government" (De La Croix H & Tansey R 1980; 707)

Philosophy

Neoclassicism combines the following tenets: a regard for tradition and reverence for the classics, a concern for social reality, and the communal commonplaces of thought which hold it together and a concern for “nature” – or the way things are, an inherent conservatism. According to De La Croix and Tansey (1980; 704) neoclassicism “embraced the idea of a changeless generality that supposedly transcends the accidents of time”.

The 18th Century was seen as the ‘Age of Reason’. Trachtenberg and Hyman (1986; 388) state that “reason was worshipped, and simultaneously the subjective – and – secular emotional experience was cultivated to an unprecedented degree – also been called the ‘Age of Sensibility’”. Neoclassicism was founded partly on a reaction to the excesses of Baroque, and partly on the new scholarships of history. It replaced “Baroque” decadence socially and culturally. Both Roman and Greek art was to be admired, “the glory that was Greece/and the grandeur that was Rome” De La Croix and Tansey (1980; 705). This summarized the conception of a noble classical world. According to De La Croix and Tansey (1980; 726) “neoclassicism could be romantically associated with revolutionary aspirations to primitive democratic purity, or with imperial ambitions for unshakeable authority” whilst Trachtenberg and Hyman (1986; 389) state that “neoclassicism exploited not for its rationalism but for poetic reverie and associations”.

Johann Winckelmann (1755), the first modern historian of art had a wide influence and his writings laid a theoretical and historical foundation for Neo-Classicism. He saw Greek art as the most perfect from the hands of man and the only model to be followed, the Greek sculpture as manifesting a “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur”. (Article; Neoclassical Architecture and the Influence of Antiquity) Neoclassicism had an aura of clarity and simplicity with a more sensuous manner. Trachtenberg and Hyman (1986; 392)

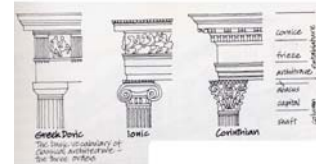
The English neoclassical movement had ideals of order, logic, restraint, and decorum, which enabled the practitioners to imitate or reproduce the structures and themes of Greek or Roman originals. Emphasis placed on accuracy of drawing, and hence on the notion of correct/incorrect.

To a certain extent neoclassicism represented a reaction against the optimistic, exuberant, and enthusiastic Renaissance view of man as being fundamentally good and possessed of an infinite potential for spiritual and intellectual growth. Neoclassical theorists, by contrast saw man as an imperfect being, inherently sinful, whose potential was limited. They emphasised order and reason, restraint, commonsense and on religious, political, economic and philosophical conservatism. They maintained that man himself was the most appropriate subject of art, and saw art itself as essentially pragmatic- intellectual rather than emotional. Hence their emphasis on proper subject matter and to employ in their work concepts like symmetry, proportion, units, harmony and grace which would facilitate the process of delighting, instructing, educating and correcting the social animal which they believe man to be.

Greenhalgh M (190; 10) summarizes the philosophy of classicism in the following quote “Classicism qua state of mind is an approach to the arts that emphasizes the ideal on form and in content over the everyday, the power of reason over the often misleading emotions – and hence restraint, moderation and self-control; clarity and simplicity and ... a respect for tradition.”

Design Methodology

Neoclassical design saw a return to a strictly logical use of classical architectural elements and was more or less taken from Greek and Roman Art. Neoclassicists valued the formal elements of line and form over colour. They designed colonnades and large structures, especially public buildings. Geometric forms such as the square and sphere were used. The most surprising form to be retrieved from the Greek past was the Doric –squat columns, absence of bases and austere entablature.



Source: Risebero (1985;27)

The Roman Triumphal arch was one of the main sources of neoclassical expression with its three-part division of four equal columns unequally spaced. The Arch of Constantine, Rome(AD.315) inspired the design and manifested itself in Luigi Cagnola’s Arco della Pace and the Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel (1806-08). The *thermae* window (twin –column trabeation surrounded by twin mullions) was also fundamental to neoclassical architecture especially in late 18th Century France



Source: google images

English architect Robert Adams studied the remains of antiquity with Charles-Louis Clerisseau; a French architecture noted for comprehensive planning, precise detail, polish and elegance- all qualities of Adam’s work. From imperial Roman architecture Adam derived a number of characteristic features – plans that set together a series of rooms of contrasting geometric shapes, freestanding interior columnar screens and made use of Roman interior ornamentation especially stucco mouldings and paneling. Adams use of such forms, along with Etruscan motifs, white figures, urns and garlands in low relief against a pastel background and numerous aspects of 16th century Italian Renaissance arch resulted in a personal antique style. Syon House and Kedleston Hall illustrate his palatial style. There is rich colour, fine coloured and white marbles, gilt decoration with stucco and layouts influenced by the great



Entrance hall of Syon House
Source: google images

Roman halls and baths. At Osterley and the library at Kenwood, the decoration is more delicate with the motifs nearer Greek origins; slender columns and pilasters and ceilings in pastel shades and white with arabesques in stucco.



Anteroom Syon House
Source: altavista images



Kenwood House – interior and exterior
Source: altavista images



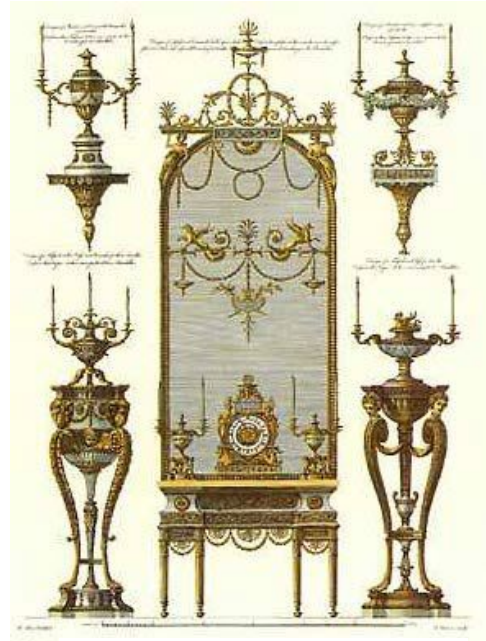
Kendleston Hall
Source: altavista images

Diversity, lightness and intricate movement are all aspects of Adam's art. He was known for wall moulding, mantle pieces, fanlights over doorways, ceilings in delicate relief often with a daisy shape in the centre and fan-like webs of garlands across each corner. His roman rooms show deeper colours – gilt and marble on pillars and flooring in black, dark green and terracotta's as well as trick of screening off and apse or a shallow alcove with massive pillars.

In general neoclassic designs had symmetry and rectilinearly. Motifs were recognizable and antique inspired and often taken from Roman art – medallions, urns, vine scrolls paterae, sphinxes and tripods – arranged sparsely with broad neutral spaces and slender margins. Materials such as marble, agate, malachite and ceramics were used.

In furniture design designers gradually eliminated the numerous curves of the rococo style in favour of the straight outlines of classical furniture. Neoclassical artisans used thin pieces of plain wood arranged in geometric designs. Formal Greek motifs such as key-fret, wavebands, egg and dart ornament appeared increasingly as decoration to furniture, bronze mounts etc. The design of furniture at first kept its curves, but lines gradually became more severe. Legs of furniture - straight and tapering, sometimes fluted, symmetrical. In France the furniture was influenced by Greuze and Madame Vigee-Lebrun, in England Chippendale and George Hepplewhite, though it was Robert Adam who introduce the neoclassical style into the United Kingdom in the 1760s. Adam borrowed some of his ideas from the French style but he also contributed many original elements. He used delicate floral motifs, ram and ox heads, and other features inspired by ornaments on Roman Buildings and tombs. Adam introduced the sideboard, or credenza into English furniture. He also became known

for skillfully blending furniture into the architectural plan of a room. A number of English furniture makers adopted Adam's style during the late 1700s. George Hepplewhite and Thomas Sheraton, prepared design books that popularized the style. The furniture made by Adam's was very expensive, Hepplewhite and Sheraton simplified the designs to reduce the cost of the furniture for middle class buyers. Hepplewhite popularized oval and shield shaped backs for chairs in neoclassical style in mahogany instead of painted and gilded wood of the Louis Seize version. Low relief carving of swags, urns, ribands, and trophies decorated a great deal of furniture of the period. Inlaying was revived by Brothers Adam. Dressing tables with many drawers, rising mirrors and other mechanical complications were inspired by German cabinetmakers especially Roentgen



Motifs used by Adams
Source: Savage (1966;188)

In contrast vase forms were more severe, often with angular handles; forms related to Renaissance metalwork rather than ancient pottery forms with Wedgwood the only one to successfully copy the Greeks. The pastoral scenes and landscapes of Boucher gave way to more strictly classical themes and portrait medallions with added modeled ornaments in the form of swags, acanthus leaves and laurel; all symmetrically disposed and usually in gilt-bronze.



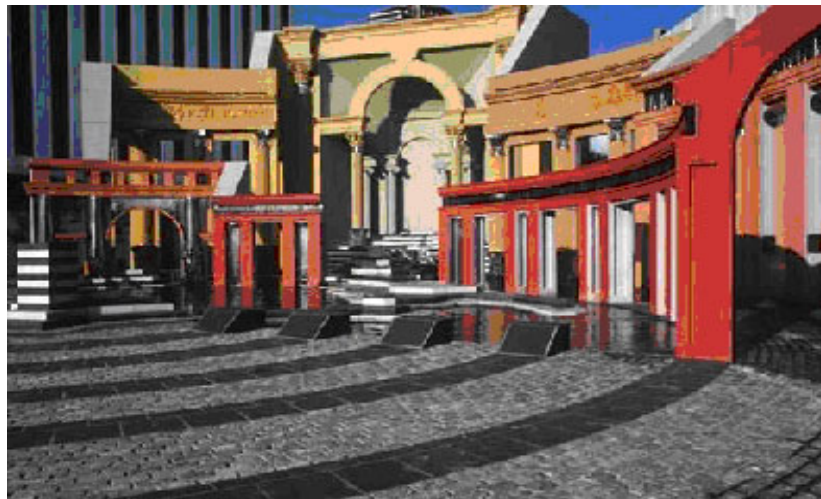
In tapestry the influence of Boucher was apparent until the 1770's because of the time necessary to weave large panels. The fashion was for allegorical and mythological subjects. A contributory factor to the decline of tapestry was the increase popularity of wallpaper. In 1785 Christophe Philippe Oberkampf invented the first machine for printing wallpaper and Louis Robert devised one for making endless rolls.

Personal Assessment

The effects of the Industrial Revolution on technology, economy and society continue to be felt today and it has been said that the changes in architecture during this period were significant in shaping the direction of modern design. A number of modern buildings in this century still have classical overtones. Greenhalgh M (1990:38) quotes Jameson “A building by Mies van der Rohe may look modern enough but underneath the flashy exterior is the same classical temple, sometimes standing up and sometimes lying down, but always keeping to the same classical symmetries, the same classical concern with simple rhythmic repetitions”. This raises the question must a building with neoclassical leanings look like ancient building with columns, pediments etc or are

the general classical ideals of balance and symmetry sufficient. I believe the latter is true.

The Charles Moore, Piazza D’Italia, New Orleans, Louisiana, 1975 –80 although not strictly neoclassical in design still portrays a classical message with the arches and colonnades.



Source: altavista images



AT&T building Source: altavista images

The AT&T building NY City 1978-1982 is less neoclassical in a theoretical sense but still portrays a sense of symmetry, balance and a lack of frivolous decoration. The top has a sloping, broken pediment reminiscent of a Chippendale bookcase. Both these buildings though very different in design have a definite historical influence from the 1800s

Today’s buildings are more minimalist with an elegant simplification, but many still display a “presence of the past”

Neoclassicism as a style is flexible enough to adapt to modern times – its regional diversity an important element. Buildings cannot be considered separate from the environment in

which it stands. New materials and methods of industrial production, new technical services and changes in

craftsmanship lends itself easily to the philosophy of the neoclassical movement; a concern for social reality, a concern for nature and the ideas of a changeless generality. The “Age of Sensibility” which I feel is true today as a reaction to the opulence and overstatement of the 1980s. Demand for new buildings is greater than ever; designed to satisfy the needs and demands of a changing society. More emphasis is placed on environmentally friendly solutions to buildings and homes. Components of buildings are now prefabricated and the rationality of today is to reduce costs and erect buildings as quickly as possible which lends its self readily to a classical feel and is apparent in the new suburban homes of Sydney with porticos and colonnades at the front of homes. Today there is a more neoclassical façade decoration than internal that still tends to be very minimalist. Today’s homes are not truly neoclassical because of the changing needs of society and technology for e.g. dual car ownership has meant a need for garages which can be accessed easily from the street resulting in house designs that are not symmetrical. The use of decoration in present times tends not to include marble and gilt due to cost, though decoration in the form of figurines, statues has a neoclassical feel. Current homes in Sydney attempt to portray neoclassical architecture through grandeur of scale. According to Greenhalgh (1990; 65) “there is a world –wide classical revival”

Some experts have referred to post modernism as the New Classicism. The Ricardo Bofill apartment complex 1980-84 at Marne-a Vallee in France and the Allan Greenberg, Offices for Brent Publications NY 1985 have a distinct neoclassical feel with colonnades, symmetry, balance and grandeur, arches and columns.



Bofill apartment complex
Source: altavista images



Brent Publications NY
Source: Greenhalgh (1990:60)

Ong Ards post-modernist high-rise apartment block in Bangkok is topped with a neoclassical temple and decorated with pediment windows and a Tower-of-the – Winds- like gazebo. Greenhalgh(1990;65) cites Taylor “ the rampant use of neoclassical fragments in reinforced concrete to decorate buildings, is the result of a combination of factors; the architects’ desire to be part of a “global” trend characterized by western classical decoration and a certain strata of Thai society that wishes to advertise their worldly success”.

Neoclassical architecture expresses authority – hence its use in public buildings. It radiates confidence. A perfect example of this is the buildings that are found in Macquarie St Sydney and St James Church, although these buildings would have been

highly influenced by English trends in the 1800s, they still impart the impression of authority, of being in control.

“Architecture is the reflection of the society that produces it; one must live with one’s time, using new technologies while retaining a sense of harmony; without innovation, the masterpieces of the past would not exist.” Greenhalgh (1990;65)
Though neoclassicism is not reproduced in a true theoretical sense today its influence is felt throughout society I feel we will always see a ‘classical’ influence in design because of its timeless qualities which can adapt to many societies and environments.

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