

Neoclassical Painting

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers Neoclassical painting. By the end of this lesson, you'll be able to identify and define today's key terms, describe the influence of the academies and academic art on the Neoclassical style, and identify examples of Neoclassical painting. This will be accomplished through the exploration of:

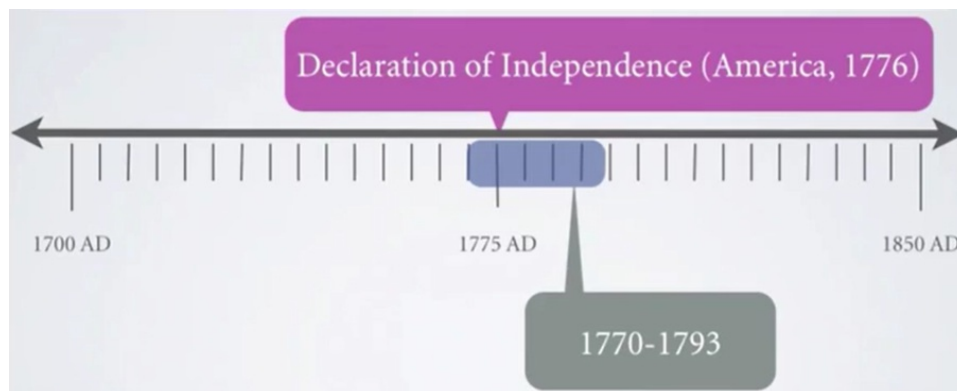


BIG IDEA

The Neoclassical style was highly influenced by the art academies of the time, which emphasized the virtues of patriotism and heroism as some of the most important themes a painting could depict.

1. Period and Location: Neoclassical Painting

The artwork that you will be looking at today dates from between 1770 and 1793, and focuses geographically on London, England, and Paris, France.



2. Artistic Style of Neoclassical Painting

So many influences are prevalent during this time that it may be hard to keep track of what Neoclassicism really is at its core. The artistic style of Neoclassical painting consists of:

- A subdued palette
- An emphasis on sculptural form
- Simplicity

- Clarity

Keep an eye out for these characteristics in the artwork you'll explore today.

3. The Academies and Academic Art

Do you ever wonder how these artists became so good? Innate talent is definitely part of it, but this talent was usually honed and refined in some sort of school in which a master instructed the student in a specific field.

During medieval times, this instruction took place within what is called “the guild system.” During the time period of Neoclassicism, Academies, like the one shown below, replaced the medieval guild system, and influenced the art, the tastes, and the subject matter that was considered acceptable for the time.



Institut de France

1795

Paris, France

Academies were a more formal method of education. They were state- or government-sponsored, so the range of artistic styles and subject matters would be limited to artistic training in what was considered essential. There was a hierarchy of artistic subjects in **Academic art**, outlined below. At the top—considered to be the most important area—was **history painting**, including mythology scenes, followed by portraiture in second place, genre scenes in third place, landscape in fourth, and still life bringing up the rear.

History Painting (including mythology scenes)

Portraiture

Genre Scenes

Landscape

Still Life

Training for artists in an Academy would begin with copying plaster casts or molds of real people, particularly their faces, and would eventually transition to the drawing of live nude models. The painting below, called the “Academicians of the Royal Academy,” provides you with an idea of what the training may have looked like—although keep in mind that this is an idealized picture.



Academicians of the Royal Academy by Johann Zoffany

1771-1772

Oil on canvas

The room is decorated with numerous examples of classical art. In the background, you can see it on the shelves.



DID YOU KNOW

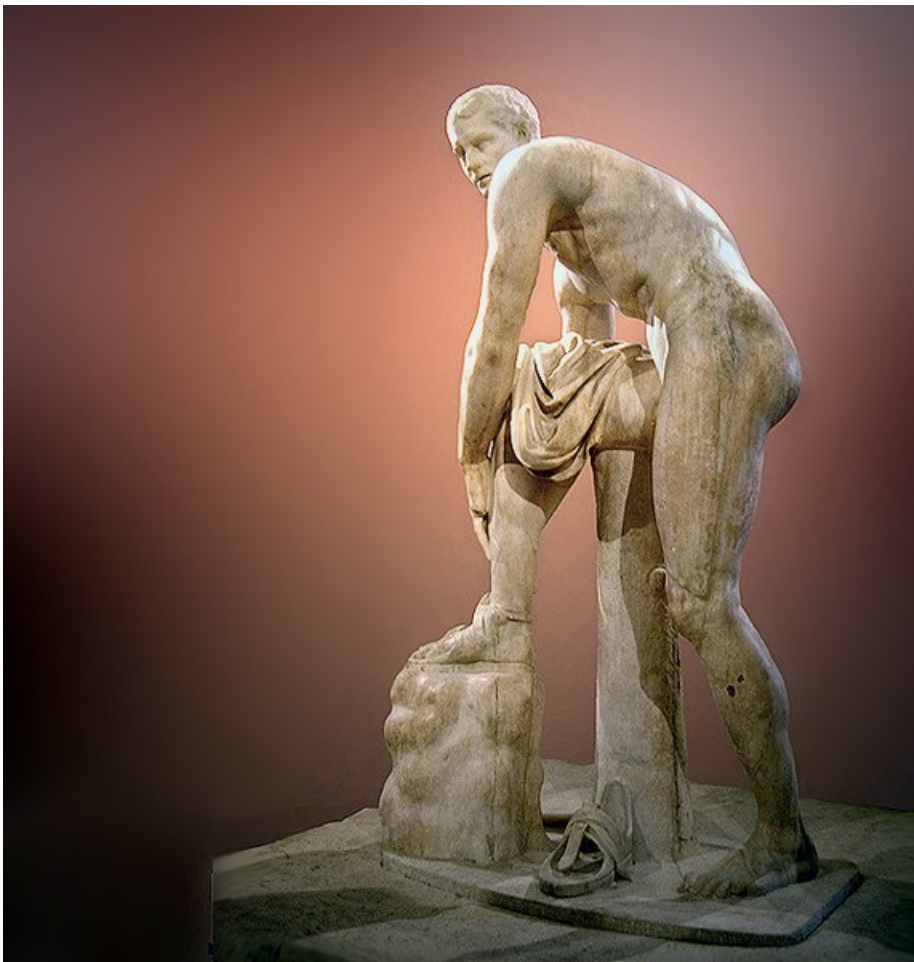
Did you notice how the room is filled only with men? This is because of the nude figure in the painting (see closeup below). In the interest of propriety, women—even women artists—wouldn't have been allowed to view a live nude figure.



There's a sense of chatter implied in the painting, as if the room is filled with sounds of conversation. Also of note, do you see the figure of the youth in the foreground holding his leg, shown in the detail below?



This recalls classical depictions of sandal removal from antiquity, as in the example below.



Hermes Fastening his Sandal

2nd century

Roman marble copy



TERMS TO KNOW

Academy

Or academie in French, the formal study of drawing or casting the human form.

Academic Art

A style of painting or sculpture created in European schools adhering to strict standards (especially under Neoclassicism and Romanticism).

History Painting

A type of large painting with scenes from classical history, Christian history, or mythology that displays a narrative, and is characterized by having many people rather than a single portrait as the subject.

3a. Benjamin West

The American-born artist Benjamin West was an important contributor to Neoclassicism. He took the ideas of classicism but depicted them within a modern context and, in a sense, immortalized the subjects of his paintings as figures of patriotism and heroism.

In the example below, West takes artistic liberties within the depiction of the death of General Wolfe during

the French and Indian War (or Seven Years' War, if you're European). It's an idealization, and creates a much more impressive depiction of the general's death, which serves to elevate the incident from a melancholic depiction of a war casualty to a noble depiction of a fallen hero.



The Death of General Wolfe by Benjamin West

1770

Oil on canvas

4. History Paintings

As mentioned before, history painting was considered to be the most important area of Neoclassical Academic art.

4a. Angelica Kauffman

The female artist Angelica Kauffman was highly regarded for her work with history paintings, and her work is a great example of early Neoclassicism. Of Swiss origin, she spent a great deal of time working out of London during the 18th century.



DID YOU KNOW

Kauffman was actually one of two female founding members of the Royal Academy in London. Her painting of “Cornelia Pointing to Her Children,” shown below, references a second-century BC anecdote in which a visitor shows Cornelia her precious jewels or treasures and then asks to see Cornelia’s, at which she gestures to her children. It’s a depiction of the virtue of motherhood, set within a classical composition

and enhanced by the use of a warmer palette that seems to evoke the warmth of the figure of Cornelia.



Cornelia Pointing to Her Children by Angelica Kauffmann

1785

Oil on canvas

4b. Jacques-Louis David

The painting and artwork of the artist Jacques-Louis David is considered to be some of the finest examples of Neoclassical painting. In a sense, his paintings almost function as a Neoclassical checklist. You can use this image of “The Oath of the Horatii” as an example.



The Oath of the Horatii by Jacques-Louis David

1784

Oil on canvas



Look at the painting and see how many Neoclassical characteristics it contains:

- Is it an example of history painting, including mythology scenes?

Yes. The subject matter in this scene is believed to be an invention of David's, which itself was based on ancient Roman texts. In the painting, three sons of Horace holding the swords swear to represent Rome and fight to the death against representatives from the neighboring city-state of Alba in order to settle a border dispute.

- Does it have a subdued palette of color?

Yes. Just like in a play, the figures are arranged as if on the shallow space of a stage. Notice how the background is dark, forcing your attention to the foreground.

- Does it contain idealized figures based on classical sculptural forms and figures?

Yes. Also notice how the background has architectural details in the use of columns and rounded arches, which are references to classical architecture.

- Does it contain clean lines and simplicity of form?

Yes. This composition isn't busy. The figures are arranged in such a way that the viewer doesn't have to search to find the story—it's clearly articulated visually.

The final example, “The Death of Marat,” is arguably David’s most famous work and often the image most closely associated with the artist. Jean-Paul Marat was a journalist and important figure during the French Revolution. He suffered from a very painful skin condition near the end of his life, which required him to take medicinal baths, where he did most of his writing. As you can see, there was a makeshift desk situated over the tub.



The Death of Marat by Jacques-Louis David

1793

Oil on canvas

Marat is credited as having incited radical action during the revolution by his writings. He was killed by Charlotte Corday, who feared that Marat’s writings were contributing to an increase in violence.



Speaking of violence, you can see the stab mark on his chest?



David succeeds in immortalizing the figure of Marat, just as West had done with General Wolfe. As opposed to Baroque depictions of death that were often quite graphic, the murder here is downplayed. You're seeing it after it happened—almost an afterthought. Once again, you see the noble death of a fallen hero, depending on whom you talk to. Even his writing desk next to his bathtub seems to commemorate the event. It's a marker for the man in the tub and the man who immortalized him in this painting.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about **Neoclassical painting**. You learned how to identify and define today's key terms and describe the **artistic style of Neoclassical painting**. You also learned how to describe the influence of **the Academies and Academic art** on the Neoclassical style by looking at the work of **Benjamin West**. Finally, you learned how to identify examples of Neoclassical painting by exploring examples of **history painting** by **Angelica Kauffman** and **Jacques-Louis David**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Ian McConnell.



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