

# The Historical Context of Neoclassicism

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers Neoclassicism. By the end of this lesson, you'll be able to identify and define today's key terms, describe important historical events during this period, and identify examples of Neoclassical artwork. This will be accomplished through the discussion of:

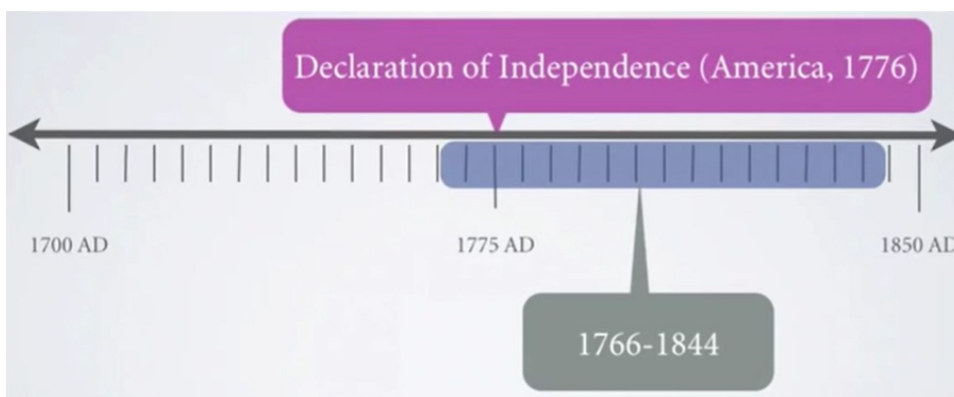


## BIG IDEA

Neoclassicism occurred during a time when the emphasis was on logic, reason, and observable information, in a period known as the Enlightenment and Age of Reason.

## 1. Period and Location: Neoclassicism

The artwork that you will be looking at today dates from between 1766 and 1844. However, the scientists and philosophers whose ideas influenced the Neoclassical movement date from as far back as the 16th century. This lesson will focus geographically on three locations, which mark the origins of the artists discussed in this lesson: England, France, and the United States.

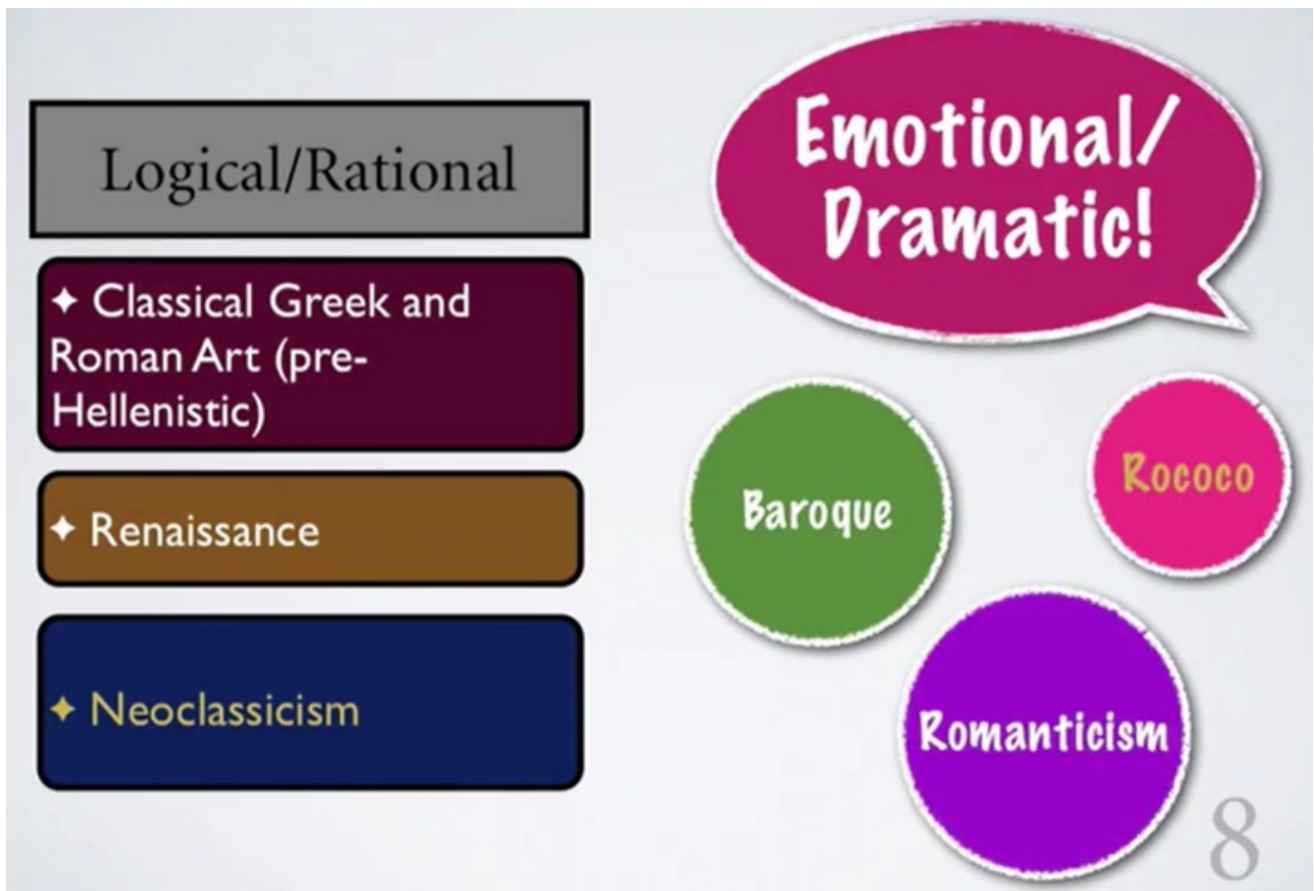


## 2. Categorization of Artistic Movements

You may have noticed that the artistic movements and periods discussed in these tutorials seem to emerge and pass on in a rhythmic sort of fashion. Generally speaking, the artistic styles of the time move from logical and rational at their foundation to emotional and dramatic.

It's not wholly accurate to say that these movements are completely defined as one or the other—it simply isn't that cut and dry, and there is definitely crossover and inter-categorical influence. However, if you had to

place each of these artistic movements in a particular group, for simplicity's sake, it might look something like this:



In the logical and rational category, you'd have classical Greek and Roman art, the Renaissance, and Neoclassicism. In the emotional and dramatic category, you'd have the Baroque, **Rococo**, and Romanticism, which will be explored in later lessons.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Rococo

Also called "late Baroque," an artistic movement and style seen across all the arts; characterized by playful witty themes and creamy-pastel colors, ornate asymmetrical designs, curves and gold, sensuality, and overindulgence.

## 3. Neoclassicism: Historical and Philosophical Context

Neoclassicism, or "new classicism," was a major movement in Western civilization in the 18th and 19th centuries, particularly in the arts and architecture. It drew inspiration and influence from the classical works of ancient Greece and Rome. Although it sounds like the Renaissance in this respect, **Neoclassicism** coincided with major intellectual movements in the sciences and philosophy that looked at scientific reason and logic as opposed to superstition to guide humanity.



#### HINT

This focus on scientific reason and logic is why this period is known as the **Enlightenment** and the **Age of Reason**.

The philosophical branch of thought called **Empiricism** centers around the belief that knowledge comes from sensed experience, rather than divine providence or an innate understanding. The discovery of empirical evidence, or evidence through experiment and observation, is the most fundamental idea of science. Now, the thinking at this period was highly influenced by the empiricists and **philosophes** of this time and before.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Neoclassical**

“Neo” meaning new, a movement or style occurring during the mid 18th century and characterized by a revival of classical style.

##### **Age of Enlightenment**

A European intellectual and cultural movement in the 17th and 18th centuries whose mission was to reform society by reason and knowledge using scientific methods.

##### **Age of Reason**

A publication written by Thomas Paine, a British/American revolutionary, that challenged institutionalized religion.

##### **Empiricism**

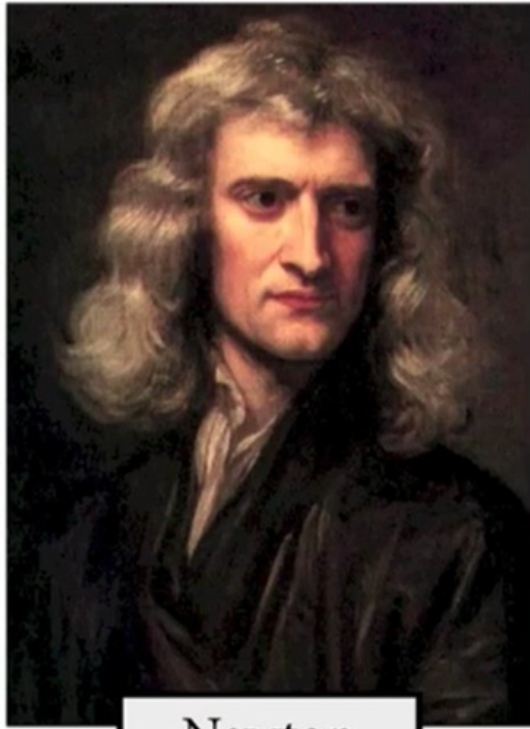
A belief that knowledge comes through sensed experience.

##### **Philosophes**

A group of 18th century French intellectuals (men and women) united by their belief in human reason and logic.

### **3a. The Great Thinkers**

Noted Empiricists include Isaac Newton and Rene Descartes, shown below. Both men were intellectuals who acquired knowledge through the process of observation and experimentation. Newton, through his simple observation of an apple falling, helped create an entire branch of physical science related to gravity and its properties.

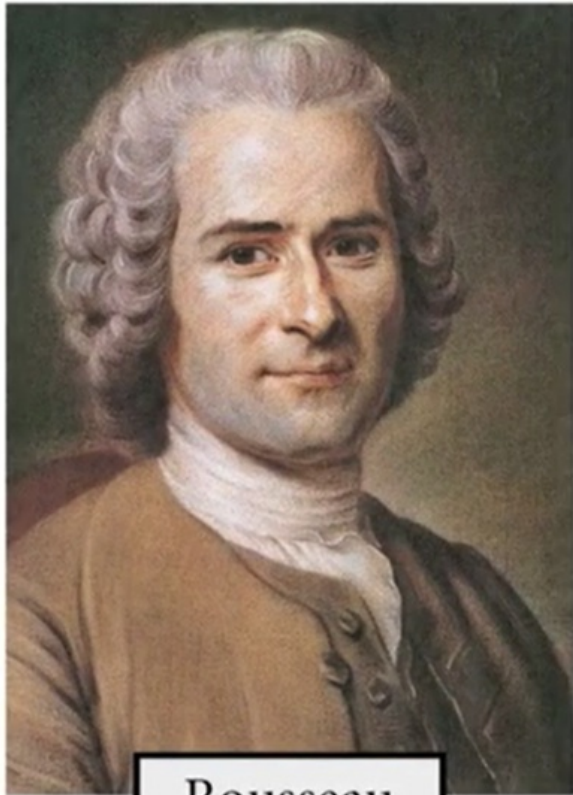


Newton



Descartes

The philosophes Jean Rousseau and Voltaire, shown below, may have had their disagreements, but they were both very important influences behind social reform and government change. Rousseau's book *The Social Contract* is often cited as an important catalyst that led to the French Revolution. Voltaire's beliefs in the separation of church and state, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion were important Enlightenment ideas that made their way directly or indirectly into the United States Constitution.



Rousseau



Voltaire

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## 4. Neoclassicism: Artistic Influences

Neoclassicism drew inspiration and influence from a number of sources during this period.

### 4a. Science as Religion

In a way, science became the religion of the time. It could be seen as the inspiration behind works of art in much the same way Christian religion had been in the themes of Baroque art. Looking at the painting below, at first glance this recalls the work of Caravaggisti artists such as Georges de La Tour, who used a single light source to illuminate his paintings and identify the focus of the artwork. The influence of Caravaggio and his use of strong contrast is apparent, but notice how the figures have virtually none of the emotion and drama that you see in Baroque works of art. Rather, their poses appear frozen, which is much more indicative of Classical or Renaissance works of art.





**A Philosopher Giving a Lecture at the Orrery by Joseph Wright of Derby**

**1766**

**Oil on canvas**

Now, what is drawing their attention? Well, it's a scientific instrument known as an "orrery," a physical model that is used to describe the relative orbits and positions of celestial objects such as the planets and moons of the solar system. Once again, it recalls religious imagery such as the nativity scene of Georges de La Tour, shown below, but science—not the infant Jesus—is now the object of reverence.



The Newborn Christ by Georges de La Tour

1645-1648

Oil on canvas

## 4b. Classical Greece and Rome

If the ideas of classical Greece and Rome influenced the thinking of the time, the stylistic characteristics of classical Greece and Rome influenced the aesthetic. Artistically, Neoclassicism was a response to the Rococo and the excesses of the aristocracy, yet the influence of Classicists and art historians such as Johann Winckelmann can't be overlooked. Winckelmann believed that the work of classical Greece and Rome served as the gold standard by which all other work was compared.

Like in Classical works of art, political and social virtues were often personified in the themes of the artwork of the time. The artist Jacques-Louis David's work is considered to be quintessentially Neoclassical in its execution. The tight and rational composition coupled with the classically modeled forms in this next example recall the work of Raphael. In this scene, the Greek philosopher Socrates is heroically portrayed and contrasted against his mourning and grieving entourage, including the elderly figure of Plato seated at the end of the bed.



The Death of Socrates by Jacques-Louis David

1787

Oil on canvas

Having been unjustly convicted and sentenced to die, Socrates sits erect and confidently reaches for his cup of poison while gesturing with his other hand. Notice how all the figures, including the elderly Socrates, are idealized versions of men. Most older men do not necessarily have the fit figure represented by Socrates in this painting!

#### 4c. The Natural Man

While the influence of Classical ideals is fundamental to Neoclassicism, there are also the interests of the natural, as influenced by the work of Rousseau and his idea of a natural man as uncorrupted by society. This was an idea that was not appreciated by his contemporary and, at times, rival, Voltaire. Nevertheless, it influenced the Neoclassical design aesthetic, which was essentially Classical. This idea can be seen in this portrait bust of George Washington, by the American sculptor Hiram Powers.





Portrait bust of George Washington by Hiram Powers

1844

Marble

The sculpture recalls the Roman veristic portraits that prized the realistic depiction of individuals as indicative of age and experience. His confident posture and realistic appearance suggest wisdom and leadership more than youth and athleticism—the kind of admirable qualities that come from a lifetime of dedication and service to the people.



#### THINK ABOUT IT

The artwork and architecture of America during this time was highly influenced by the political and social climate of the period, such as the ideas of democracy that developed during the Enlightenment. How do you think events such as the American and French Revolutions, and the Industrial Revolution to come, all had an effect on the artwork of this time? This was a time that saw the proliferation of ideas that spread on a global scale. The tie between Neoclassical ideas in architecture and democracy is so strong that it became the most widely accepted style of architecture used after the American and French Revolutions—and without question, the style of architecture most closely associated with government and politics in America today.



#### SUMMARY

Today you learned about the historical context of **Neoclassicism** and how to identify and define

today's key terms. You explored the **categorization of different art movements**, and learned how to describe the important **historical events and philosophies during this period**, most notably the emphasis on logic, reason, and observable information, which is why this period is known as the Enlightenment and Age of Reason. Lastly, you learned about the **artistic influences behind Neoclassicism** and how to identify examples of Neoclassical artwork.

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



## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Age of Enlightenment**

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### **Age of Reason**

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