



Neo-Classicism

"The only way to become great is by imitation of the ancients. Art should aim at noble simplicity and calm grandeur." - Johann Winckelmann

1750-1815 - FRANCE

BACKGROUND

The political and social structures in France were in a critical condition after 1750. The state was nearly bankrupt and the large middle class was tired of being oppressed by the aristocracy. They wanted the vote and to pay less taxes. During the extreme political and economic crisis in France in 1789, the French Revolution started. The original goals, to create a constitutional monarchy and reform the financial and political structure of the nation, soon developed into a move to overthrow the king and establish a republic. In the course of the Revolution, the immense landholdings of the Roman Catholic Church, as well as those of the feudal lords, were taken over by the government and sold to the bourgeoisie (middle class) and peasants. In 1792 a republic was declared. The revolutionary movement culminated in the Reign of Terror in which thousands of aristocrats lost their lives.

The middle class took power, but then unexpectedly the Revolution, which was supposed to bring freedom for all, became victim to its own most successful military leader. Under the dictatorship of Napoleon Bonaparte, a colossal military force was unleashed upon Europe. It ended in 1815 with his defeat at Waterloo. European monarchies had been exposed as vulnerable and revolutions were to erupt at intervals throughout the 19th century. Ideas of freedom and equality were spread throughout Europe.



THE EXECUTOR OF KING LOUIS XVI SHOWS HIS HEAD TO THE CROWD AFTER HE WAS GUILLOTINED.



JACQUES-LOUIS DAVID,
NAPOLEON AT SAINT BERNARD PASS, 1801.

Characteristics of Neo-Classicism

- Neo-Classicism was linked to political events. At first they sought to replace what they viewed as the playfulness of the Rococo style with a style that was **logical**, **serious** in tone and **moralising** in character. When the French Revolution resulted in a republic being established in France, the new government adopted Neo-Classicism as their official style. As Napoleon rose to power, the style was modified to serve his propaganda needs.
- Neo-Classicism was a renewed interest in the Classical civilisation. This was fired by the excavation in Italy of the ruins of the Roman cities of Herculaneum in 1738 and Pompeii in 1748. Extolling the 'noble simplicity and calm grandeur' of Greek-Roman art, the German art historian Johann Winckelmann urged artists to study and 'imitate' its timeless, ideal forms. Incorrectly, the classical past was viewed as a golden age with republican Rome as a model of order, justice and morality. Neo-Classicism was seen as an art to educate the people.
- **Subject matter:** Usually consisted of only a few figures in **calm**, **static** poses mainly derived from classical sculpture. Before the French Revolution, art was seen as a way to educate the people. It became the official style of the French Revolution and Napoleon.
- **Composition:** Balanced and ordered compositions were often based on geometrical shapes such as rectangles and triangles.
- **Shapes:** Line and drawing were the most important characteristics of this style. Hard and precise outlines with clearly defined shapes were used. Forms were seen to be 'carved'.
- **Application:** These was a smooth application of paint with no visible brushstrokes.
- **Colour:** They were strong contrasts between colours and between dark and light areas.
- **Neo-Classicism** is a serious, **objective** art, intellectual, rather than emotional.



THE CITIES OF POMPEII AND HERCULANEUM WERE DESTROYED AND COMPLETELY BURIED UNDER 4 TO 6 METERS OF ASH AND PUMICE AND WAS ACCIDENTALLY DISCOVERED IN 1749. THE EXCAVATION AND RECONSTRUCTION HAS PROVIDED A DETAILED INSIGHT INTO THE LIFE OF A ROMAN CITY. THE MURALS FROM THE VILLA OF MYSTERIES GIVING A SENSE OF ROMAN PAINTING AND LIFE.

GLOSSARY

OBJECTIVE is free of any bias or prejudice caused by personal feelings. It is based on facts rather than thoughts or opinions.

PROPAGANDA in art is when art propagates a political doctrine and follows a certain party/state/ political thought to promote an ideology, idea or cause. Often deceptive or distorted information is spread.

WHO WAS DAVID?

Jacques-Louis David (30 August 1748–29 December 1825) was considered to be the finest painter of his era. David later became an active supporter of the French Revolution and was effectively a dictator of the arts under the French Republic. Imprisoned after Robespierre's fall from power, he aligned himself with yet another political regime upon his release, that of Napoleon. David had a huge number of pupils, making him the strongest influence in French art of the early 19th century, especially academic salon painting.



JACQUES-LOUIS DAVID, *THE OATH OF THE HORATII*, 1784 - 85.
OIL ON CANVAS.

Jacques-Louis David, *The Oath of the Horatii*

The subject matter for this political painting comes from a historical story of ancient Rome. The moral of the story is that patriotism (or love for one's country) should be held in higher esteem than the love of one's family. The three Horatii brothers in profile are swearing on their father's sword that they will sacrifice their lives for their country. To settle a political dispute these three had volunteered to fight three brothers from their neighbouring state, the Curatii of Alba. The sisters and mother of the Horatii brothers weep for the impending battle, particularly tragic as one of the sisters was engaged to be married to one of the

Alba brothers. The Horatii brothers are praised for their patriotism and lack of emotion in the face of danger and pain. Masculine courage and resolve is contrasted with feminine weakness and emotion. According to David, art should be taught by a set of rules. The architecture in the background forms a series of geometric shapes, and the figures in the foreground form a series of triangles superimposed onto the architectural structure. The space is fairly shallow. The contours are clear and there are strong contrasts between light and dark so that the figures seem to be sculptures. Everything was carefully planned and clearly depicted.