



## European Art: Neoclassicism

by James Smalls

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.  
Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.  
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Neoclassicism refers to the classical revival movement in European art, architecture, and interior design from the mid-eighteenth to the early nineteenth century. The movement was inspired by the discovery of artifacts excavated from the ancient Italian ruins of Herculaneum (first excavated in 1709) and Pompeii (first excavation in 1748).

Each country in Western Europe contributed a unique aspect to the interest in classical revival, but France and England were the most prolific in terms of producing art and architecture in the neoclassical style.

In England, neoclassicism was associated with the aristocratic and industrial ruling classes and became useful to their aims of building an empire.

In France, the new interest in classical revival was linked to political concerns and moral issues associated with the ideals of the French Revolution of 1789. In French art, Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825) created and led an entire school of painting based on neoclassical principles.

### Male-Female Roles

Neoclassical themes often centered around classical stories of heroic male deeds and virtues. The activities and expectations of men and women were strictly divided. Males are shown in public roles and depicted as heroic and stoic. Conversely, women and femininity were confined to the realm of the private and domestic spheres.

The sharp divisions between the sexes was also reflected in the neoclassical style itself. Neoclassical paintings are characterized by a severe linearity, rational compositions, direct lighting, and strong acidic colors. Male figures are usually given angular and sculptural qualities, while females are typically rendered in soft, curvilinear forms.

Because of the dominant position of males in both art and society, the neoclassical style is often referred to as masculine and is set in distinct opposition to the period and stylistic sensibility that preceded it, the rococo. In neoclassicism, the male body is burdened with a range of political, social, and sexual meaning.

### Male Homosexuality and Neoclassicism

Male homosexuality and its erotic undercurrents played a major role in the aesthetic formation and content of neoclassicism. The artist's studio became the primary site for understanding, developing, and disseminating neoclassicism as politics and as erotics.



**Top:** *Hercules Hurling Lichias into the Sea* (1795) by Antonio Canova.

**Above:** *Odalisque and the Slave* (1840) by J.A. D. Ingres.

The image of *Hercules Hurling Lichias into the Sea* appears under the GNU Free Documentation License. Image attributed to LuciusCommons.

The pedagogical and erotic intimations of man-boy coupling as had been practiced in ancient Greece were transplanted to and imitated in the artist's studio. The all-male environment of David's studio, for example, fostered a complex relationship among the young male students and elevated the master to the status of father figure.

The environment was competitive and the neophytes constantly vied for David's attention and favor. The homoerotic overtones of the patriarchal male figure surrounded by younger male disciples can best be seen in David's 1787 *Death of Socrates* (New York, Metropolitan Museum), a painting in which homoeroticism and pederasty are part of the story being told.

### **Winckelmann**

An important influence in developing the homoerotic aesthetic in neoclassicism was the noted scholar Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768), who, in his mid-eighteenth-century writings on ancient art, gave intellectual justification to the erotics of neoclassicism.

Winckelmann sublimated his homosexuality into intense sensual descriptions of male Greek sculptures. His description of the corporeal splendor of the *Apollo Bebevedere* (Vatican Museums, Rome, ca Fourth century B.C.) is perhaps the most notorious example of this practice:

". . . a mouth shaped like that whose touch stirred with delight the loved Branchus. The soft hair plays about the divine head as if agitated by a gentle breeze, like the slender waving tendrils of the noble vine; it seems to be anointed with the oil of the gods, and tied by Graces with pleasing display on the crown of the head."

### **Neoclassical Sculpture**

Neoclassical style and subject matter were not confined to painting. In sculpture, the most famous exponents of neoclassicism were the Italian sculptor Antonio Canova (1757-1822) and the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770-1844). Both artists created works of male beauty and sensuality based on classical sources.

Canova's *Theseus and the Centaur* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, 1804-1819) and Thorvaldsen's *Jason* (Thorvaldsen Museum, Copenhagen, 1802-1803) are just two examples of marble works portraying Greek gods and heroes that convey the sensuousness of the male form.

The suspension of heroic action and the frozen contemplation of male bodily beauty are underscored by the smooth and polished marble surfaces that heighten the sensual quality of the figures. Both works are based on the *beau idéal* (beautiful ideal)--a tenet of neoclassical sculpture that sought to combine the most beautiful parts of antique statuary and the most beautiful aspects of living models. The beautiful ideal attempted to satisfy a need, at once intellectual and erotic, to forge in art a representation of the beautiful male body.

### **Other Subjects**

Neoclassicism as a style and movement was also applied to artworks in which the beauty of the male form played very little or no part at all. The French painter J. A. D. Ingres (1780-1867), for example, applied the characteristics of neoclassical line, voluptuous form, and grace to women.

Landscape painter Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes (1750-1819) used neoclassical principles of line and rational form to depict the pure landscape, while Claude-Nicolas Ledoux (1736-1806) and Étienne-Louis Boullée (1728-1799) did the same for architecture.

In interior design and the decorative arts, François Honoré-Georges Jacob (1770-1841) triumphed by combining the formal elements of neoclassicism with the fad for things Egyptian in the early nineteenth century.

In the graphic arts, the drawings and illustrations of the Englishman John Flaxman (1755-1826) made use of a purified linear contour that, although derived from designs on Greek vases, was applied to representations of both women and men.

In its emphasis on rationality and recovery of tradition, neoclassicism may seem antithetical to the anarchic spirit sometimes associated with our modern understanding of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer culture. Nevertheless, homoeroticism is a prominent presence in neoclassicism. It could hardly be otherwise given the movement's development of a masculine style, its appreciation of male beauty, and its privileging of ancient Greece and Rome as civilizations to be emulated.

### **Bibliography**

Crow, Thomas. *Emulation: Making Artists for Revolutionary France*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995.

Honour, Hugh. *Neo-Classicism*. New York: Penguin, 1977.

### **About the Author**

**James Smalls** is Associate Professor of Art History and Theory at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. He teaches and publishes on the interrelatedness of race, gender, and queer sexualities in nineteenth-century and modern art and in twentieth-century black visual culture.