

## INTRODUCTION

# CLASSICAL, CLASSIC, THE CLASSICS, AND CLASSICISM

“Classical” is a divisive word. For some, it conjures up stirring images of *The Glory That Was Greece* (Fig. 1) and *The Grandeur That Was Rome*. For others, it invokes the tyranny of Dead White Males, of extinct languages force-fed one as a child, and of tweedy pedants poring over dusty remains (Fig. 2).

Both sides have a point. For centuries “the classics” and a classical education *were* used to intimidate, and the legacy of Greece and Rome did cast a long shadow over Western culture. Yet the almost complete disappearance of Greek and Latin from schools and from many universities by the late twentieth century produced an unexpected payoff. It lifted the spell, for good or ill, and made these two cultures seem strange again. Now we can approach them more on their own terms, bearing less inherited baggage than before.

For the Greeks and Romans not only lived in a particularly vibrant period of human history, but also created a unique body of art and literature in response to its challenges. The most thoughtful of them explicitly sought to add to the sum of human understanding – to create a “possession for ever,” to quote the historian Thucydides (who will reappear often in the chapters to come). They aimed to leave a legacy that would be both “classic” and socially useful. So if *any* products of the past are worth studying, theirs should be.

The words “classic” and “classical” are not Greek but Roman, however. They derive from the Latin *classicus*, meaning “of a certain class,” and thence “in a class of its own.” For in addition to conquering the Greeks, the Romans eagerly appropriated their legacy in literature and the arts. They taught their children the Greek literary classics, mostly those of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. (the period covered by this book); translated them into Latin; and based their own literature upon them. And last but not least, they collected

*Classical Greece and the Birth of Western Art*



1. *Glimpse of the Golden Age of Greece*. Nineteenth-century copy by August Wilhelm Julius Ahlborn after an original by Karl Friedrich Schinkel painted in 1836, but destroyed in 1945. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Nationalgalerie. In an idyllic landscape with the Akropolis at center, Athenian craftsmen erect a colonnade including the Parthenon frieze.

Greek masterpieces of sculpture and painting, particularly fifth- and fourth-century ones; copied them; and wrote about them. They considered them to be authoritative, to set a standard that none, probably, could ever surpass. Since so much Greek literature and art has fallen victim to the ravages of time, much of what we know about them is due to this Roman reverence for things Greek.

Today, however, “classical” is often used as shorthand to describe all of Greek and Roman antiquity. This is because from the Renaissance into the nineteenth century, many people thought that *everything* Greek and Roman was exemplary – a towering cultural achievement that could only be imitated, never surpassed. The rise of Romanticism after 1800 even reinforced this belief, because its critics promptly used the Romantics’ scandalous lack of restraint, balance, order, and decorum to boost the case for the classics, which were universally held to exhibit such virtues. In academe, at least, the establishment prevailed, and today departments of Classics (i.e., of Greek and Roman studies) are to be found in many universities across the Western world. The

*Introduction*



1 (*continued*).

one at Harvard is even called the Department of The Classics, as if no other classics (English, French, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, . . . ) existed at all.

Those classicists who study ancient material culture, from the Parthenon to potsherds, are called classical archaeologists (or classical art historians: the distinction is a false one, rooted in the nineteenth century). Yet they tend to employ the adjectives “classic” and “classical” in a more restrictive way – like the ancient Romans. Often spelling them with a capital C, they use them to refer to the Greek buildings, sculptures, paintings, and luxury crafts of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.: the period seen as the summit of human cultural achievement by the Romans and by later Greeks too, and the period covered by this book. This practice is also a nineteenth-century one, when scholars divided Greek history and culture into three main phases based on a biological model of birth, maturity, and decline: the “primitive” Archaic (ca. 700–480 B.C.), the “mature” Classic (ca. 480–330 B.C.), and the supposedly “degenerate” Hellenistic (ca. 330–30 B.C.).

Confusingly, though, the surviving products (literary and artistic) of what is consequently called Classical Greece include not only those done in true “classical” style – exhibiting the supposedly “classic” stylistic traits of consistency, economy, clarity, balance, restraint, and the supremacy of formal

*Classical Greece and the Birth of Western Art*



2. *A Cognocenti contemplating ye Beauties of ye Antique* by James Gillray, ca. 1801. London, National Maritime Museum. An aged pedant seeks inspiration from the detritus of antiquity.

design – but also others that do not exhibit these traits, or exhibit them only weakly or partially, if they happen to have been made during the same period. All the products of this period, regardless of their style, quality, and real or presumed status as “classics,” fall within the scope of the present book.

The term “classicism” is equally treacherous, for it covers more than the style(s) of the classical period proper. “Periklean classicism,” for example, traditionally describes the sculptural, pictorial, and architectural style(s) dominant in Athens under the leadership of Perikles, from the 450s B.C. to his death in 429 (see Chapter 3), but similar principles prevailed in other, later periods as well.

Thus, classicists regularly speak of “Augustan classicism” (under the emperor Augustus, who ruled from 31 B.C. to A.D. 14) and “Hadrianic classicism” (under Hadrian, A.D. 117–38) and even of “Constantinian classicism” (under Constantine, A.D. 312–37). Moreover, in 1899 the German scholar

---

*Introduction*

---



3. Head of the dying Laokoon from a group of Laokoon and his sons, from Rome, by Hagesandros, Athanodoros, and Polydoros of Rhodes, ca. 30. Marble; ht. of group 1.84 m (6'). Vatican Museums.

Heinrich Wölfflin published a path-breaking book entitled *Die klassische Kunst*, soon translated into English as *Classic Art* and still in print in both languages. But far from being a work on Greece or Rome, it discusses five “classic” painters of the Italian High Renaissance: Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, Fra Bartolommeo, and Andrea del Sarto.

Yet whereas the Augustans and these Renaissance painters decisively broke new ground, others thus described are often better termed “neoclassic” (the German alternative, “classicistic,” both is a tongue-twister and has an unpleasant tinkle to it). These individuals include the Roman-period sculptors who created marble copies of Greek classical statues, and Renaissance sculptors such as Baccio Bandinelli and the spectacularly named Pier Jacopo di Antonio Alari-Bonacolsi, helpfully called “Antico” for short, who did the same. Instead of creatively reinterpreting the classics, they sought merely to reproduce them as skillfully as they could.

---

*Classical Greece and the Birth of Western Art*

---

Finally, one recent discussion cheekily turns all this on its head, defining classicism in a purely functional way as “the emulation of any earlier set of visual styles, forms, or iconographies, which in the very fact of their being borrowed are established as in some sense canonical (or classic).” In other words, “a classic is something that sets a standard. It does not matter, for the most part, in what field the standard is set. We are now used to sports commentators talking of a classic horse race, and the notion of ‘rock classics’ no longer seems as incongruous as it once did.”

To this view, not only the Parthenon (Fig. 1; cf. Figs. 60–70), but also the Laokoon (Fig. 3), the early Greek bronzes (Fig. 4) beloved of many modern artists, Picasso’s *Demaiselles d’Avignon*, Dali’s *Soft Watches*, Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings, Craven Walker’s original lava lamp, and many Beatles songs are all classics, simply because they have set a standard that people have copied, quoted, adapted, and even parodied over and over again. (In California, where I live, there is even a company called “Classic Party Rentals,” though I have yet to discover whether it truly sets a standard!) But it is time to get back to the Greeks.

---

## THE CLASSICAL REVOLUTION

---

The Greek classical revolution changed the course of Western culture forever. Enshrined by the Greeks themselves, embraced by the Romans, and rediscovered in the Renaissance, it set a standard that altered our planet’s intellectual and visual landscape beyond all recognition. (Though by no means all at once. Classical architecture had no impact upon India, China, and Japan, for example, until the late nineteenth century.) Whether we like it or not, its legacy is everywhere, and in art at least we all “know” a classical or neoclassical work when we see one. As a standard textbook remarks, “Greek architecture, sculpture, and painting . . . are immediately recognizable as the direct ancestors of our own . . . A Greek temple reminds us of the bank around the corner, a Greek statue brings to mind countless other statues that we have seen somewhere, and a Greek coin seems as close as the change in our pockets.” Yet what did the classical revolution achieve, and what did the classical ideal really consist of?

First and most famously, the classical revolution set the seal on the Greek discovery of the mind, pioneered by Homer and in our period exemplified for all time in those two towering intellectual achievements of fifth-century Athens, namely, tragedy and moral philosophy. In *tragedy*, Aischylos, Sophokles (see Fig. 164), and Euripides explored the complexities of the human condition and Greek society through the refracting lens of heroic myth, whereas in *philosophy*, Sokrates (see Fig. 132) inaugurated the study of ethics, and his fourth-century followers Plato (see Fig. 133) and Aristotle systematized it. Meanwhile, the *comedies* of Aristophanes and others questioned and parodied both, relentlessly probing for weaknesses and mercilessly exposing charlatans and phonies.

But this was not all, and Athens was by no means the only city involved (Aristotle came from the tiny northern Greek town of Stageira, for example).

### Introduction



4. Horse from a ring handle of a large tripod caldron at Olympia, ca. 750–700. Bronze; ht. 11.2 cm (4.4"). Olympia Museum.

The fifth-century quest for knowledge led to the foundation of the exact, biological, social, and human sciences (though these were seldom distinct, at least early on), especially *mathematics* and *geometry*; *physics*, *astronomy*, and *cosmology*; *biology*; *medicine*, *psychology*, and *psychiatry*; *political science*; and *geography*, *ethnography*, *chronology*, and *historiography*. Many individuals from many different cities were involved in this unique enterprise. We shall encounter some of them in the chapters that follow, including the philosopher–mathematician Pythagoras of Samos, the doctors Alkmaion of Kroton and Hippokrates of Kos, the natural philosophers and cosmologists Parmenides of Elea and Anaxagoras of Abdera, the political theorist and town planner Hippodamos of Miletos, and the historians Hekataios of Miletos, Herodotos of Halikarnassos, and Thucydides of Athens (see Fig. 165).

Finally, to disseminate all this knowledge, much of it disputed among competing pundits and theorists, came *education* and the art of persuasion or *rhetoric*, dominated in the fifth century by the so-called Sophists. Two of them, Protagoras of Abdera and Gorgias of Leontinoi, will appear in Chapters 3 and 5. Simultaneously, and not coincidentally, the period witnessed the great efflorescence of Athenian political and courtroom *oratory* under such men as Perikles (see Fig. 56) and (in the fourth century) Lysias, Demosthenes (see Fig. 173), and Aischines.

In art, to amass a glittering array of lasting classical discoveries (both fifth- and fourth-century) and their discoverers (real or supposed) is easy.

*Classical Greece and the Birth of Western Art*

In *architecture*: integrated city planning (Hippodamos of Miletos: Fig. 31); the first theaters (Figs. 18, 163, 167), gymnasia, porticoes, and libraries; the Corinthian architectural style or *Order*<sup>1</sup> (Kallimachos: Compare Figs. 115, 137); classic statements of the Doric and Ionic Orders (by Libon of Elis; and Iktinos and Mnesikles of Athens [?]: Figs. 42, 60, 102; and by Pytheos of Priene); and the invention of the interior as a distinct architectural form (Iktinos and Skopas of Paros: Figs. 115, 137).

In *sculpture*: the civic monument (Kritios and Nesiotes of Athens: Fig. 5); the individualized portrait (Kresilas of Kydonia, Demetrios of Alopeke, Silanion of Athens, Lysippos and Lysistratos of Sikyon: Figs. 37, 56, 132, 133, 156); lifelike representations of the gods (Pheidias and Praxiteles of Athens: Figs. 69, 140) and of the human body (Kritios and Nesiotes, Polykleitos of Argos, Praxiteles, Lysippos: Figs. 71, 140, 141, 154); the invention of *contrapposto* and *sfumato* (Kritios, Polykleitos, Praxiteles: Figs. 5, 34, 71, 140, 141) (see Glossary); and an enhanced polychromy using brilliant metal inlays (Pheidias: Fig. 69) or seductive pastels (Nikias of Athens for Praxiteles: Compare Figs. 145, 146).

And in *painting* and *mosaic*: the framed picture to hang on a wall (Zeuxis of Herakleia, Parrhasios of Ephesos); the still life (Pausias of Sikyon); “encaustic” painting in hot wax (Polygnotos of Thasos, Aristeides of Thebes); the illusionistic devices of perspective and theatrical scene-painting (Polygnotos, Agatharchos of Samos: Figs. 51, 52, 108, 109, 142) and of shading, *chiaroscuro* (see glossary), and luster (Apollodoros of Athens, Zeuxis of Herakleia, Apelles of Kos: Figs. 110, 144–6, 158–60); the exploration of character and emotion, of the interior self (Polygnotos: compare Fig. 52); figured polychrome mosaics; and many of the innovations already listed under sculpture.

As for the classical ideal itself, in 1755 the German scholar Johann Joachim Winckelmann was the first to venture a definition of it: “a noble simplicity and quiet grandeur.” As mentioned earlier, others soon proposed a more concrete list of traits, such as consistency, economy, clarity, balance, restraint, and the supremacy of formal design. Yet such definitions are ultimately rather unsatisfying. Somewhat dry and abstract, they are decontextualized (severed from the social realities, concerns, and needs of the Greek city); they fail to tell us why the horse in Fig. 4, for example, should not be called classic despite its manufacture almost three centuries before the “true” classical period begins; they fail to explain the sheer novelty and force of the works discussed in this book; and they overlook four key components of Greek and Roman writing about art.

Good art, the Greeks and Romans believed, should have *vitality*, *beauty*, *sensuality*, and *soul*. These traits, already budding in archaic Greek art of the late sixth century B.C., burst suddenly into bloom in the fifth and fourth centuries, creating works that not only *looked* revolutionary (which is why the names of their creators were remembered) but also exuded artistic excellence or *aretē*

1 Note, however, that “Order” is not an ancient term but a Renaissance one, and implies a far greater rigidity than ever existed in practice. In reality, these ancient architectural styles were quite flexible.





5. The Tyrannicides Aristogeiton (left) and Harmodios (right) by Kritios and Nesiotes of Athens (Roman copy); bronze original, 477/76. Marble; ht. 1.85 m (6'). Naples, Museo Archeologico. The original group stood in the Athenian Agora near the *orchēstra* and was erected to replace a predecessor seized by the Persians in 480; it commemorated the assassination of the tyrant Hipparchos in 514. The assassins' swords are missing; the tree stumps were added by the Roman copyist.

*Classical Greece and the Birth of Western Art*

(pl. *aretai*). *Aretē* is a powerful term that Homer uses to denote the prowess of the hero; thereafter, it betokens excellence in general, and, eventually, moral virtue. In art, it signals technical and expressive distinction: the ability to create a visual wonder. The artist's task was to capture his subject accurately, powerfully, and authoritatively, whether it be god, hero, man, woman, monster, myth, animal, or plant.

### Vitality

*Vitality* was paramount. Wherever possible, materials must sparkle and shine, and buildings, sculptures, and paintings must seem to live and breathe, to engage us and to excite our empathy. Marble, in Greek *marmaros*, comes from the verb for “to sparkle”; bronze, enamel, silver, gold, and ivory are all radiant materials; and a judicious application of wax, paint, and even silver or gold leaf could signally intensify the effect.

Working directly from life, classical sculptors and painters abandoned the old formulaic poses and discovered new, evocatively mobile ones: new *rhythmoi*, as they called them – a word that is as suggestive in Greek as it is in English. Swinging hips, rippling muscles, pulsing veins, parted lips, focused gazes, windblown hair, revealing clothing – all these, rendered with the most precision that the artist could muster, signal a new understanding of the human body not merely as a mechanism, a “robot made by Daidalos,” but as a living, breathing organism, active in the here-and-now. These men sought to craft figures so lifelike that viewers would feel that they were about to step off their bases or out of their frames. Architects, too, enlivened their buildings by blending subtle curves into the design to give them bounce and spring, and invented a new, nature-based architectural style: the Corinthian Order.

### Beauty

By itself, however, mere liveliness was insufficient. If Sokrates ever had asked any of his long-suffering fellow Athenians what defined good art, his victim would probably have answered, “Beauty.” But beauty is culture-specific (in Greece it equaled, quite literally, the gendered civic ideals – masculine and feminine – of the Greek city) and all but impossible to define. How does one characterize, except in metaphor or simile, a beautiful face or torso, let alone a beautiful mouth or eyebrow? The Greeks, famously loquacious about everything, never even tried.

Instead, they chose another route. Beauty, they believed, is appearance informed by geometry. Hence the Greek belief that geometrical forms underlay all natural phenomena, from bodies to drapery folds; hence the horse (Fig. 4) and the korē (Fig. 6); and hence Plato's famous remark that “measure and commensurability are everywhere identified with beauty and excellence.” Commensurability of parts or *symmetria* (“measuring together”: for convenience, often paraphrased in this book as “proportion”) became geometry's ally, the key to creating an ideal *structure*. It linked every part of one's work – building, statue, or painted figure – proportionally (i.e., mathematically) to