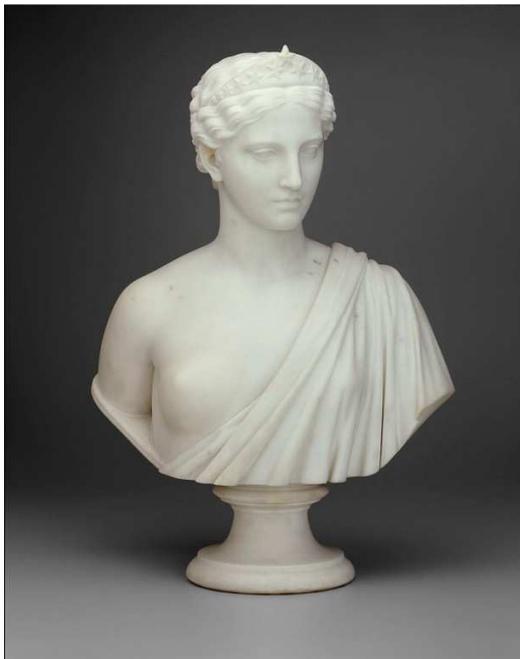


Neoclassicism and America

1750-1900



Hiram Powers, *America*, 1850-54
© Art Institute of Chicago

Neoclassicism is the movement that shaped the thought, minds, and civic ideals of Americans for 150 years. These lessons and resources for college-level courses provide a fresh survey of American neoclassicism for students and a general audience.

About These Lessons

WHAT IS NEOCLASSICISM?

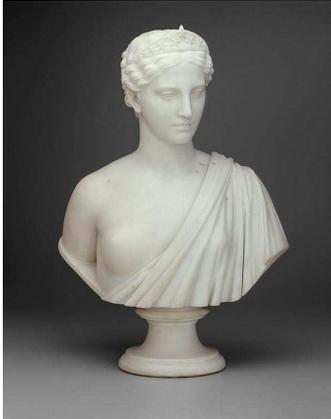
DISCOVERING THE CLASSICAL PAST
TRAVELERS IN EUROPE
THE RISE OF LIBRARIES
THE FOUNDERS AND THE CLASSICS
CLASSICAL STORIES
THE USES OF ANTIQUITY

Acknowledgments

A National Endowment for the Humanities and We the People Project

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WHAT IS NEOCLASSICISM?



Hiram Powers, America, 1850-1854
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Neoclassicism is the movement that shaped the thought, minds, and civic ideals of Americans for 150 years.

What is neoclassicism? How can teachers and students define this term quickly but correctly?

Neoclassicism was a revived interest in classical forms and ideas that saturated European and American intellectual thought, fine arts and politics during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Neoclassicism was a transatlantic phenomenon. American neoclassicism was at first a channel of English antiquarianism. Americans had extremely close cultural and literary ties to London. Economical mass printing, affordable books and engraved drawings helped to stimulate interest and spread neoclassical taste. Academies, publishers, libraries and museums moved neoclassical ideas forward with accelerating velocity and at all levels of culture.

By the late eighteenth century, both in the newly constituted United States and in Europe, classicism was authoritative in letters, design, and politics. Less than a century later, the classics were no longer a badge of the elite and cultivated. In high culture and popular lore they were established sources of authority and common reference points. Greco-Roman legends conveyed neoclassicism's aspirations, giving unusual insight into the intellect and emotions of early American leaders. During the next century, from Plutarch to Aesop, classical stories were widely cycled in popular stories and maxims. Historian Caroline Winterer observes in her 2002 book, *The Culture of Classicism*, American neoclassicism expressed itself in a "staggering variety" of ways. Classical allusions and authorities, Winterer notes, helped to define America's ethical, political, oratorical, artistic and educational ideals. "Given our devotion to more modern concerns today, it is difficult to grasp how dazzled Americans were by the ancient Greeks and Romans, how enthusiastically they quarried the classical past," she concludes.

[For more on the impact of classical imagery on early American thought](#)

For European and American opinion makers, clergy, and writers, Greco-Roman literature and philosophy were central to formal education; classical works were the common currency of cultural exchange. Neoclassicism was increasingly at the core of humanistic learning, public symbolism, and revolutionary political thought. And it was a point of view and intellectual force in Boston and New England, New York and Philadelphia, Virginia and South Carolina, spreading across the continent in the nineteenth century, reified in colleges, courthouses and museums that look like Greek temples.

Neoclassicism admired order, simplicity, clarity, and reason set in a mood of quiet grandeur. It used classical *exempla* as guides. It left a plentiful record of observations, reflections, and designs in books, essays and folios. It asserted its intentions in clear, detailed, and often majestic prose. It conveyed in precise and elegant language its theory and practice, its means of thought and execution, and its progress as an idea and institutional force. With profound enthusiasm for what they were doing and the new aesthetic they were creating, eighteenth-century scholars examined newly discovered artifacts, not only manuscripts but also old pottery and coins, for example, looking for historical clues to what made a great civilization and culture. “There is but one way for the moderns to become great, and perhaps unequalled ... by imitating the ancients,” the German historian Johann Winckelmann declared in his influential 1755 book, *Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture*. With his *History of the Art of Antiquity*, published in 1764, a systematic survey of Greek art by date and style, Winckelmann is often thought to be the originator of art history as a scholarly discipline. Winckelmann’s immense influence throughout Europe shifted taste against baroque conventions and toward classical form.

[For more about Johann Winckelmann](#)

[*The Invention of Antiquity: an exhibition with photographs*](#)

Neoclassicism left an array of paintings, sculpture, buildings, and furniture freighted with inventive and sometimes radical forms. Neoclassicism could also be standardized and conventionalized -- and was, over and over -- which is the reason why people too often write neoclassicism off as nothing more than dreary white marble nymphs and busts of long forgotten men.

Johann Winckelmann, Thomas Jefferson, and other classicists did not use the term *neoclassicism* to describe the antique revival that they were living through. But the term is used today to describe a multivalent cultural phenomenon that revalued antiquity between 1750 and 1900. To define and categorize neoclassicism, the art historian George Heard Hamilton stated in 1970: “The use of Greek and Roman forms for symbolic as well as functional purposes, which was a continuous and often dominant tendency in Western art for a century after 1750, has been called the Classic Revival, or Neoclassicism,

and can be divided into two periods, with a Roman phase conspicuous until 1815 and a Greek one thereafter. The use of such forms was not always chronologically successive.”

Long before Hamilton’s definition, in 1922, the architectural historian Siegfried Giedion coined the term *romantic classicism* to describe the emotional side of neoclassical form and idea. Neoclassicism included the recreation of a distant, lost and idealized world. The Virgilian landscape with a Temple was a staple of classical pastoralism. Ancient statesmen became larger than life heroes. The ancient could even be connected to nature and the sublime, as with the eruption of Vesuvius. With the strict modeling of building and art works on ancient models, the classical world was imagined as a perfect and pure ideal. Through the nineteenth century, artists and others made a conscious attempt to humanize the cooler, more cerebral aspects of pure neoclassicism. Classical images could be expressly evocative and picturesque, as in the contemplation of ruins and the inexorable passage of time. Caroline Winterer expands the eighteenth and early nineteenth century American interest in antiquity beyond Greece and Rome, and in the following essay outlines and examines American interest in the broader history of the Ancient Mediterranean, including Etruria, Carthage, Egypt, and Persia.

[Early American views of the ancient Mediterranean](#)

Winterer observes that along with the Classic Revival, there was fascination with ancient Egyptian culture, kindled in part by Napoleon’s Egyptian Campaign (1798-1801). Archaeologists, scholars and visitors throughout the nineteenth century spurred American interest. Cleopatra, the Pyramids, the Sphinx, mummies, and obelisks all became part of popular American consciousness and culture.



Washington Monument, 1848-1884

The obelisk was the Egyptian and Roman symbol of perpetuity and power.

[For more about the Washington Monument](#)

Between the 1840s and 1880s, with many long interruptions, Americans built a colossal obelisk in the middle of the national capitol, a symbolic fixture of ancient Egypt and Rome, and called it the Washington Monument.

Neoclassicism's political and constitutional dimension

Neoclassicism was in part a political phenomenon. In the late eighteenth century, spurred by classical ideas, Americans established a republican government modeled on Greek and Roman principles. This was a form of government that cherished liberty, using ancient models to try to reform polities, protect individuals, and constrain tyranny.

[What is republicanism?](#)

Classical models of government were influential in the creation of the American republic, a radical and novel form of self-government modeled on antiquity. In essence, Americans borrowed and reshaped Roman government and civics in their political self-interest, in the process creating a modern republic. The Founders of the United States looked to the Greco-Roman past for successful political models and emotional inspiration. The Greeks and Romans had debated and developed the principles of justice, the rule of law, liberty, and due process. For the Founders, ancient opponents of tyranny, monarchy, and aristocracy provided illustrations of heroism, as did classical advocates of the philosophical life. The eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American view of the classical world was to admire the workings of republican government, not imperialism or unrestrained democratic rule. Republicanism reasserted itself as a vital idea as part of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Political leaders were looking for keys to successful and longstanding government that protected citizens against tyranny. In particular, they admired Greco-Roman achievements in political order and legal authority (including "limited government" and "rule of law"). Roman models of law and jurisprudence were regarded as the foundations of the civilized world, a great achievement of enlightened liberalism, and as such, deserving of popular respect and ardor. In politics and statesmanship, neoclassicism often reflects the effort to connect contemporary greatness and accomplishments to the legendary achievements of larger-than-life Greek and Roman heroes. It is often a projection of its own ambitions on the classical past. Studying neoclassicism gives us clues to what was in the minds of Americans as they set out to create a new and better form of political rule, one rooted in reason, liberty and self-government.

Neoclassicism as a style

With plentiful links, this Metropolitan Museum of Art online survey and resource gives an overview of the neoclassical style and its impact across the visual arts.

[A survey of the neoclassical style](#)

The Art Institute of Chicago explains neoclassical art in America, saying:

Neoclassicism is a term used to describe works of art that are influenced stylistically or thematically by Classical Greek and Roman sources. The origins of the neoclassical style lie in the discovery of the ancient Roman cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii, which had been buried by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in A.D. 79. The preserved cultural artifacts of those cities educated and inspired European archaeologists, artists and collectors during the first half of the eighteenth century. The German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann's extensive and enthusiastic writings about the achievements of Greek sculptors encouraged artists to pursue Classical forms and ideals as well.

European and American artists adopted Neoclassicism for aesthetic and political reasons, and the style flourished during the revolutionary periods in France and the United States. The appropriation of Classical forms suggested learning, democratic values, moral virtue, and a sophisticated appreciation of beauty, each considered essential components in the development of a nation. Painters, sculptors, architects, and decorative artists employed simple, flowing lines, restrained ornament, and idealized figures to impart their lofty aims to the public. American Neoclassical sculpture was produced primarily by artists such as Horatio Greenough, Hiram Powers, and Harriet Hosmer, who traveled to Rome and Florence during the first half of the nineteenth century to study with European masters.

Introducing neoclassicism to students

To explain neoclassicism, one Advanced Placement history instructor stresses four points of introduction.

- In ideals and aspirations, neoclassicism is a return to perceived *purity* of ancient Greece and republican Rome.
- In neoclassicism, works of all kinds – literary, artistic, political -- model the *ideals* of the ancient Greek and Roman arts and letters, and, to an extent, 16th century Renaissance classicism.
- Conviction runs through neoclassicism that there are *universals* that embody permanent truths about what things are and should be. These universals can be discovered in the collected wisdom of the classics.
- Classical *ethics* run deeply through the political and cultural aspirations of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Americans.

Each of the four words above in italics – *purity*, *ideal*, *universals*, and *ethics* – is defined, examined, and used to open class discussion and introduce the larger subject: the elements of neoclassicism and the influence of ancient Rome and Greece on American history, political systems, and culture. Historian William Ziobro has developed a well-known online syllabus called “Classical America.”

[Classical America: a course syllabus](#)

Study Questions

- Identify neoclassicism's core ideals and explain how they bridge the arts, letters, and politics.
- How does neoclassicism extend classicizing tendencies from the Renaissance and previous centuries? How is it different and new?
- How did Americans adapt the concepts of a *republic*, *senate*, *rule of law*, and *capitol*, borrowing them from ancient Rome?
- How is neoclassicism part of larger American interest in the ancient Mediterranean?
- What is the "romantic" element of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antiquarianism?
- In style and form how does *neoclassicism* compare with the *rococo* that precedes it?



Andalusia, home of Nicolas Biddle,
near Philadelphia



Washington Square Arch,
New York City

- How do Nicholas Biddle's Andalusia (built between 1835-36) and McKim, Mead and White's Washington Square Arch (1890-92) embody neoclassical forms?
 - What are the purposes of each building? What are their prototypes?
 - What emotions are they trying to convey through their antique references?
 - Where do other temples and triumphal arches exist in the United States?
-

For Further Study

Recommended surveys, anthologies, texts, and monographs that cover neoclassicism in the arts and other areas of culture:

Albert Boime, *Art in an Age of Revolution, 1750-1800*, Chicago, 1987.

Lorenz Eitner, ed. *Neoclassicism and Romanticism, 1750-1850: Sources and Documents, vols. 1 and 2*, Prentice Hall, 1970.

George Heard Hamilton, "Romantic Classicism," *Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Art*, Abrams, 1970.

Hugh Honour, *Neo-classicism*, Penguin, 1977.

David Irwin, *Neoclassicism*, Phaidon, 1997.

Robert Rosenblum, *Transformations in Late Eighteenth-Century Art*, Princeton, 1970.

William L. Vance, *America's Rome*, vol. 1: Classical Rome, Yale, 1989.

Caroline Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life 1780-1910*, Johns Hopkins, 2002.



LESSON ONE

DISCOVERING THE CLASSICAL PAST



Vesuvius from the ruins of Pompeii

Archaeology was a new field of learning that revolutionized the way Americans and Europeans thought about antiquity.

Guiding Ideas and Themes

- During the eighteenth century the excavation of ancient ruins in the city of Rome and in Pompeii and Herculaneum near Naples revealed outlines of antiquity that had been previously lost and could only have been imagined.
- During the next hundred years illustrated books, engravings and translations became all-important means of popularizing newly discovered forms and artifacts from Rome and Greece.
- Neoclassicists admired and copied the Parthenon sculptures, also known as the Elgin Marbles. These reliefs from the Acropolis in Athens were moved to London after 1806, where they became nineteenth-century standards of classical perfection.
- American neoclassicism has its roots in British and continental scholarship, as archaeology evolved as a new field of study.

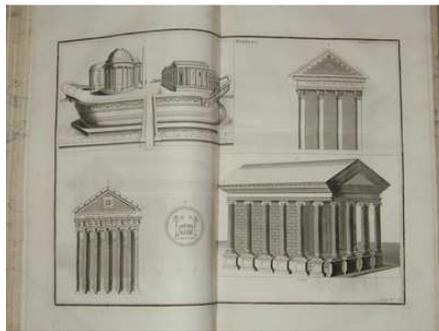
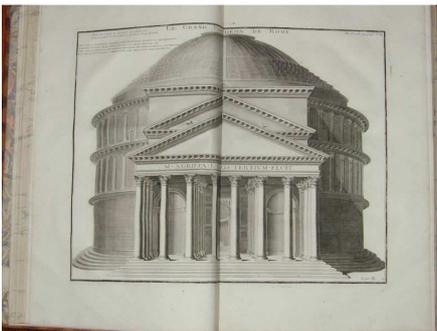
Rediscovering Roman Antiquity

Consider the impact of printed and illustrated books on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars and the expanding reading public. Archaeologists studied ruins, inscriptions, and artifacts (such items as pottery and coins). Ancient buildings and objects came in for serious study at excavations and then were reproduced in compilations such as Bernard de Montfaucon's *L'Antiquité expliquée* (Antiquity Explained) and *Le Antichità di Ercolano* (The Antiquities of Herculaneum).

- Why were books like these important vehicles in popularizing classical discoveries? Explain how and why they stimulated interest in antiquity.

Bernard de Montfaucon's L'Antiquité expliquée

Bernard de Montfaucon (1655-1741), a French monk, is considered to be one of the founders of modern archaeology. From 1698 to 1701 he lived in Rome. He established his reputation with his 15-volume work, *L'Antiquité expliquée et représentée en figures*, published between 1719 and 1724, a vast, pictorial encyclopedia with copious engravings of the gods, heroes, religious customs, architecture, military practices, domestic habits, and funerary rites of the ancient world. It is a truly staggering and fascinating production that remained an unrivalled source book for the art of the ancient world for scholars and artists through the nineteenth century. It was immediately translated into English by David Humphreys as *Antiquity Explained*.



Folio pages from Montfaucon

Le Antichità di Ercolano

No better example of eighteenth-century archaeological discovery exists than Pompeii. The excavation and archaeological discoveries of Pompeii and Herculaneum resulted in a folio collection, *Le Antichità di Ercolano*, an illustrated compendium of archeological finds from the excavations at the Roman city of Herculaneum. The books were profusely illustrated. They helped popularize the classics and fire the imagination both of Europeans and Americans, who used them as prototypes and models for modern designs. The volumes were published between 1744 and 1792, as the excavations continued. Many different artists and archeologists of the day worked on these books. This huge archaeological enterprise resulted in exquisite drawings of the ancient world that were widely circulated among tastemakers and connoisseurs. They had centuries-long influence on artists and architects. Explore this digital scan.

[A digital scan of *Le Antichità di Ercolano*](#)

Anyone interested in the archaeology of Pompeii and Herculaneum will find this website an inexhaustibly rich resource.

[Pompeii and its excavations](#)

An outstanding lesson for advanced high school students covers the destruction of Pompeii.

[A lesson on Pompeii for high school students](#)

For further lesson-related information on Pompeii, consult the website of the Field Museum in Chicago, *Pompeii: Stories from an Eruption* (2005).

[*Pompeii: an exhibition at the Field Museum*](#)

- The Archaeological Institute of America website has abundant links, not only to Pompeii and the birth of archaeology but to many related websites and projects. It covers a vast field of research and investigation:

[Links and topics from the Archaeological Institute of America](#)

The Parthenon Sculptures, or Elgin Marbles

Explore the 1816 London inquiry conducted on the Elgin Marbles in Parliament, the artists involved, and the definition of early nineteenth-century neoclassical ideals by means of this inquiry. Read the debate over the Elgin Marbles in Parliament and answer the study questions that follow.



The Parthenon sculptures became a standard of classical perfection from the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Parthenon, Athens, 5th century B.C.

The Parthenon sculptures have elicited attention ever since a career diplomat, Lord Elgin, was appointed British ambassador to Constantinople in 1799. Between 1801 and 1810, he arranged for the removal of the relief sculptures from the Parthenon on the Acropolis in Athens, which was still under Ottoman rule. What came to be known as the Elgin Marbles were shipped from Greece to England. In 1816, Elgin was able to persuade the English government to consider the purchase of the Parthenon sculptures for the British nation. A Select Committee of the House of Commons was appointed, and on February 15, 1816, took expert testimony concerning the value of the sculptures. The Elgin marbles served as a focal point around which the most significant aesthetic and critical issues of the day in London were fought out. There is continuing debate over the propriety of the removal and their presence in the British Museum. Was Elgin a rescuer or thief? The debate continues today. The Elgin Marbles were eventually purchased by the British Government and housed at The British Museum. The marbles were purchased for 35,000 pounds, or about half of what they had cost Lord Elgin. Before 1900, all across the United States, in the form of plaster casts on walls and engravings displayed in classrooms, libraries and museums, the Elgin Marbles became identifiable and known to American schoolchildren and artists, educated men and women. Their prominence in Anglo-American culture and influence in stimulating nineteenth-century enthusiasm about Greece and classical forms is unmatched.

From Lorenz Eitner, ed., Neoclassicism and Romanticism, 1750-1850: Sources and Documents, vol. 1: Enlightenment/Revolution, Prentice Hall, 1970. Testimony in the House of Commons, 1816, given by four eminent artists, the sculptors Joseph Nollekens (1737-1823) and John Flaxman (1755-1826), and the painters Sir Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830) and Benjamin West (1738-1820):

CHAIRMAN OF THE COMMITTEE. –

“Mr. Nollekens, are you well acquainted with the collection of Marbles brought to England by Lord Elgin?” -- “I am.”

“What is your opinion of those Marbles, as to the excellency of the work?” -- “They are very fine – the finest things that ever came to this country.”

“In what class do you place them, as compared with the finest Marbles which you have seen formerly in Italy?” -- “I compared them to the finest in Italy.”

“Which of those of my Lord Elgin’s do you hold in the highest estimation?” -- “I hold the Theseus and the Neptune to be two of the finest things; -- finer than any thing in this country.”

“In what class do you place the bas-reliefs?” -- “They are very fine – among the first class of bas-relief work.”

“Do you think that the bas-reliefs of the Centaurs are in the finest class of Art?” -- “I do think so.”

“Do you think that the bas-relief of the frieze, representing the Procession, also in the first class of art?” -- “In the first class of art.”...

“To which of the works you have seen in Italy do you think the Theseus bears the greatest resemblance?” -- “I compare that to the Apollo Belvedere and Laocoon.”

“Do you think the Theseus of as fine sculpture as the Apollo?” -- “I do.”

“Do you think it has more or less of ideal beauty than the Apollo?” -- “I cannot say it has more than the Apollo.”

Has it as much?" – "I think it has as much."

"Do you think that the Theseus is a closer copy of fine nature than the Apollo?" – "No; I do not say it is a finer copy of nature than the Apollo."

"Is there not a distinction among artists, between a close imitation of nature, and ideal beauty?" -- "I look upon them as ideal beauty, and closeness of study from nature."

"Have the Elgin Collection gained in general estimation and utility since they have been more known and studied?" -- "Yes."

JOHN FLAXMAN, ESQ, R.A., called in and examined.

"Are you well acquainted with the Elgin Collection of Marbles?" -- "Yes, I have seen them frequently, and I have drawn from them; and I have made such inquiries as I thought necessary concerning them respecting my art."

"In what class do you hold them, as compared to the first works of Art, which you have seen before?" -- "The Elgin Marbles are mostly basso-relievos, and the finest works of Art I have seen... and I have every reason to believe that they were executed by Phidias, and those employed under him, they are superior to almost any works of antiquity, excepting the Laocoon and the Torso Farnese; because they are known to have been executed by the artists whose names are recorded by the ancient authors. With respect to the beauty of the basso-relievos, they are as perfect nature as it is possible to put into the compass of the marble in which they are executed, and that of the most elegant kind. There is one statue also, which is called a Hercules, or Theseus, of the first order of merit. The fragments are finely executed; but I do not, in my own estimation, think their merit is as great."

"What fragments do you speak of?" -- "Several fragments of women; the groups without their heads."

"You do not mean the Metopes?" -- "No; those statues which were in the east and west pediments originally."

“In what estimation do you hold the Theseus, as compared with the Apollo Belvedere and the Laocoon?” -- “If you would permit me to compare it with a fragment I will mention, I should estimate it before the Torso Belvedere.”

“As compared with the Apollo Belvedere, in what rank do you hold the Theseus?” -- “For two reasons I cannot at this moment very correctly compare them in my own mind. In the first place, the Apollo Belvedere is a divinity of a higher order than Hercules.... In the next place, the Theseus is not only on the surface corroded by the weather; but the head is in that impaired state, that I can scarcely give an opinion upon it; and the limbs are mutilated. To answer the question, I should prefer the Apollo Belvedere certainly, though I believe it is only a copy.”

“Does the Apollo Belvedere partake more of ideal beauty than the Theseus?” -- “In my mind, it does decidedly; I have not the least question of it.”

“Do you think that increases its value?” -- “Yes, very highly. The highest efforts of art in that class have always been the most difficult to succeed in, both among ancients and moderns, if they have succeeded in it.”

“Supposing the state of the Theseus to be perfect, would you value it more as a work of art than the Apollo?” -- “No; I should value the Apollo for the ideal beauty, before any male statue I know.”

“Although you think it a copy?” -- “I am sure it is a copy; the other is an original, and by a first-rate artist.”

“Do you think it of great consequence to the progress of Art in Britain, that this collection should become the property of the public?” -- “Of the greatest importance, I think; and I always have thought so as an individual.”

“Do you conceive practically, that any improvement has taken place in the state of the Arts in this country since the collection has been opened to the public?” -- “Within these last twenty years, I think, Sculpture has improved in a very great degree, and I believe my opinion is not singular; I think works of such prime importance could not remain in the country, without improving the public taste and the taste of the artists.” ...

SIR THOMAS LAWRENCE, KENT, R.A., called in and examined.

“Are you well acquainted with the Elgin Marbles?” -- “Yes, I am.”

“In what class of art do you consider them?” -- “In the very highest.”

“In your own particular line of art, do you consider them of high importance as forming a national school?” -- “In a line of art which I have very seldom practiced, but which is still my wish to do so, I consider that they would; namely, Historical-painting.”

“Do you conceive any of them to be of a higher class than the Apollo Belvedere?” -- “I do; because I consider that there is in them an union of fine composition, and very grand form, with a more true and natural expression of the effect of action upon the human frame, than there is in the Apollo, or in any of the other most celebrated statues.”

“You had stated, that you thought these Marbles had great truth and imitation of nature; do you consider that that adds to their value?” -- “It considerably adds to it, because I consider them as united with grand form. There is in them that variety that is produced in the human form by the alternate action and repose of the muscles, that strikes one particularly. I have myself a very good collection of the best casts from the antique statues, and was struck with that difference in them, in returning from the Elgin Marbles to my own house.”

BENJAMIN WEST, ESQ., R.A.

Questions sent to the president of the Royal Academy, his health not permitting him to attend the Committee; with his Answers thereto.

“Are you well acquainted with the Elgin Collection?” “I am; having drawn the most distinguished of them, the size of the original marbles.”

“In what class of art do you rank the best of these Marbles?” -- “In the first of dignified art, brought out of nature upon uncertain truths, and not on mechanical principles, to form systematic characters and systematic art.”

“Do they appear to you the work of the same artists?” -- “One mind pervades the whole, but not one hand has executed them.”

“As compared with the Apollo Belvedere, the torso of the Belvedere, and the Laocoon, how do you estimate the Theseus or Hercules, and the River God or Ilissus?” -- “The Apollo of the Belvedere, the Torso, and the Laocoon, are systematic art; the Theseus and the Ilissus stand supreme in art.”

- In this parliamentary debate, four eminent authorities gave testimony and cited several classical works. Who and what are they? What position of authority did they hold in English arts of the time?
- List the works singled out by these artists for admiration and emulation. What does Benjamin West mean by “systematic” in his testimony?
- On what grounds did they hold these works up as an ideal or perfection?
- Through what means did the Elgin Marbles become universally known to American teachers and students?
- What historical events contributed to the “opening” of Greece and arguably the Greek Revival?

For more detail about Benjamin West, see Lesson 2. For further study of the Elgin Marbles and their significance, these articles are highly recommended.

Marc Fehlmann’s article, “Casts & connoisseurs: the early reception of the Elgin Marbles,” from *Apollo*, June 2007, is an excellent place to begin.

[The early reception of the Elgin Marbles](#)

Rochelle Gurstein’s Fall 2002 essay, “The Elgin Marbles and the Waning of ‘Ideal Beauty,’” from *Daedalus* (JSTOR only).

[The impact of the Elgin Marbles on neoclassical taste](#)

For Further Study

- Did Lord Elgin save or steal the Acropolis sculptures? Using the case of the Elgin Marbles, explore the issue of “looting” cultural property and related issues of museology and archaeological preservation. This website examines both sides of the argument, albeit with an

anti-Elgin bias. It contains excellent photographs of the sculptures and bas-reliefs:

[Photographs of the Elgin Marbles and resources on the archaeological controversy](#)

- In *Who Owns Antiquity?: Museums and the battle over our ancient heritage*, art historian and museum director James Cuno examines a number of contemporary issues in matters of cultural property:

[Who Owns Antiquity?](#)



LESSON TWO

TRAVELERS IN EUROPE



Hubert Robert, *Maison Carrée*, 1786
© Musée du Louvre

Americans and other travelers sought first-hand experience with Roman and Greek antiquities, with profound effects on ideas and style.

Guiding Ideas and Themes

- Travelers from Great Britain and America gained first-hand acquaintance with classical antiquity through the Grand Tour. Italy -- and Rome in particular -- were primary destinations.
- For the few Americans who traveled to Europe in the eighteenth century, London, France and Italy were part of the Grand Tour.
- As a minister of the American government to France, Thomas Jefferson traveled in France from 1784 to 1789 with profound effects on subsequent American government, ideas and design.
- Nineteenth-century statesmen, literary giants, and artists absorbed the classical world in their travels. Americans who did not travel became familiar with the classical past through books, engravings and paintings.

Addison and the Grand Tour

Published in 1705, Joseph Addison's *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy* became a landmark guide for generations of British and American travelers seeking inspiration and information about Italy. Addison's journal helped inspire a vast field of scholarship and classical antiquarianism. Of Rome, Addison wrote:

There are in *Rome* two sets [sic] of Antiquities, the Christian and the Heathen. ... Among the remains of Old *Rome*, the grandeur of the Commonwealth show it self chiefly in works that were either necessary or convenient, such as Temples, Highways, Aqueducts, Walls and Bridges of the City. On the contrary the magnificence of *Rome*, under the Emperors, is seen principally in such works as were rather for ostentation or luxury, than any real usefulness or necessity as in Baths, Amphitheatres, Circus's, Obelisks, Triumphal Pillars, Arches and Mausoleums; for what they added to the Aqueducts was rather to supply their Baths and Naumachias, and to embellish the city with fountains, than out of any real necessity there was for them. These several remains have been so copiously described by abundance of travelers ... that it is very difficult to make any new discoveries on so beaten a subject. There is however so much to be observed in so spacious a field of Antiquities, that it is almost impossible to survey them without taking new hints, and raising different reflections, according as a man's natural turn of thoughts, or the course of his studies, direct him.

- What was Joseph Addison's later contribution to English letters? Why was he so influential in the development of neoclassical taste?
- Addison observes that Roman antiquities are "so beaten a subject" and at the same time that "it is almost impossible to survey them without taking new hints, and raising different reflections." How does this paradox still apply to the study of classics and antiquities?
- Addison's 1713 drama, *Cato*, was extremely popular and well known to American revolutionary leaders. George Washington famously had it performed for his soldiers at Valley Forge. Why was the play so popular and influential for revolutionary Americans?

[Addison's *Cato* and its significance](#)

The Role of Benjamin West

The American Benjamin West (1738-1820) was the first internationally known American artist. Born in Philadelphia, he traveled to Italy in 1760. He was twenty-one years old at the time. West lived there for three years. He then settled in London, where his history paintings were greatly admired with lasting impact on English art. West helped found the Royal Academy of Art and the future National Gallery of London. He became President of the Royal Academy and royal painter to King George III. If he was a Londoner by adoption and if he became an English painter in effect, he was an important influence on American painting because two generations of American students including Washington Allston, John Vanderlyn, and Gilbert Stuart passed through his London studio.

Explore the life of the American expatriate Benjamin West and his influence on his many American students, using this web resource from the Metropolitan Museum of Art:

[The students of Benjamin West](#)

- Why is West a pivotal figure in American culture and the development of neoclassicism? How does West's life illustrate the close cultural links between North America and London during his long lifetime?

Thomas Jefferson and Antiquity



The Virginia Capitol, completed 1788



University of Virginia, 1826

Thomas Jefferson's travels were of importance not only for the antiquities he encountered. Jefferson was also conducting a modern sociological study of French and Italian manners and of continental economic innovations. He never traveled to Florence or Rome; his Italian travels were limited to Genoa and Turin. Jefferson first became familiar with classical architecture and the Pantheon through Andrea Palladio, a sixteenth-century Venetian architect and classicist influenced by Vitruvius and Roman classical building, the styles of the first century B.C to the second century A.D. The Pantheon was the prototype for Jefferson's Rotunda at the University of Virginia. He was equally influenced by the French architect and painter Charles-Louis Clérisseau, who published *Antiquités de la France, Première partie: Monuments de Nîmes* in 1778. The Pantheon and Maison Carrée (first from Clérisseau) had profound impact on Jefferson's architecture. The art historian George Heard Hamilton wrote of the Virginia State Capitol:

The first building to be so called in modern times, and the first since antiquity specifically intended for republican legislative functions, was the State Capitol in Richmond, Virginia, designed by Thomas Jefferson (1743 – 1826) in 1785. Jefferson, who was then in Paris as our first minister to France, chose as the model for his building a small Roman temple in Nîmes known as the Maison Carrée. Although he knew it only from engravings he thought it, sight unseen, "very simple, noble beyond expression," and later described it as "the most perfect model existing of what might be called cubic architecture." Two years later he was in Nîmes and found himself "gazing whole hours at the Maison quarrée [sic], like a lover at his mistress," as he

wrote to a friend who shared his love for “whatever is Roman and noble.” Jefferson’s enthusiasm is typical of early neoclassical taste; it is a mixture of sentimental rhapsodizing, a belief that certain artistic forms can express ethical values, and a new anti-Rococo taste for unadorned surfaces and geometrical shapes.

On his travels in southern France in 1787, several years after the classical temple at Nîmes had become known to him through Clérissseau’s book, Jefferson was able to see Maison Carrée with his own eyes. He wrote to his friend Madame de Tesse, from Nîmes on March 20:

Here I am, Madam, gazing whole hours at the Maison quarree, like a lover at his mistress. ... From Lyons to Nismes I have been nourished with the remains of Roman grandeur. They have always brought you to my mind, because I know your affection for whatever is Roman and noble. At Vienne I thought of you. But I am glad you were not there; for you would have seen me more angry than, I hope, you will ever see me. The Praetorian palace, as it is called, comparable, for its fine proportions, to the Maison quarree, defaced by the barbarians who have converted it to its present purpose, its beautiful fluted Corinthian columns cut out, in part, to make space for Gothic windows, and hewed down, in the residue, to the plane of the building, was enough, you must admit, to disturb my composure. At Orange too, I thought of you. I was sure you had seen with pleasure, the sublime triumphal arch of Marius at the entrance of the city. I went then to the Arenae. Would you believe, Madam, that in this eighteenth century, in France, under the reign of Louis XVI. they are at this moment pulling down the circular wall of this superb remain, to pave a road?

Architect Thomas Jefferson later said at the dedication of his Virginia state capitol at Richmond:

We took for our model what is called the Maison Quarree of Nismes, one of the most beautiful, if not the most beautiful and precious morsel of architecture left us by antiquity. It was built by Caius and Lucius Caesar, and repaired by Louis XV, and has the suffrage of all the judges of architecture who have seen it as yielding to no one of the beautiful monuments of Greece, Rome, Palmyra and Balbec, which late travelers have communicated to us. It is very noble beyond expression, and would have done honor to any country, as presenting to travelers a specimen of taste in our infancy, promising much for our maturer age.

[Jefferson's Virginia Capitol: from an exhibition at the University of Virginia](#)

- What was the Maison Carrée? Explain how its forms are typical of a Roman temple.
- What was Jefferson’s symbolic purpose in using the Maison Carrée as a prototype? What expressions in Jefferson’s letter indicate his enthusiasm for classical architecture?
- What aspects of the Maison Carrée most interested Thomas Jefferson, according to his letter to Mme. De Tesse?

For greater detail about and further study of the neoclassical temple, both in its design and influence, this online resource from the Metropolitan Museum of Art provides plentiful links.

[For more about the neoclassical temple](#)

Nicholas Biddle and the Greek Revival

Explain the contributions of Nicholas Biddle and his influence on the Classic Revival in the early nineteenth century.

In the first third of the nineteenth century Nicholas Biddle (1786-1844) was the most powerful banker in the U.S. with immense influence among the new nation's political and cultural elites. Biddle began to build his private home in Philadelphia in the Greek style in 1794. Then Biddle traveled in Greece in 1806, when it was still under Ottoman rule, and returned to the U.S. as an enthusiast of the classical age and design.

- Biddle was one of the few people of his generation who actually saw real ancient Greek buildings, or the remains of them, on their home ground. He was a patron of Greek Revival architecture.
- After Greece became independent of the Ottoman Empire, 1821-1832, a general wave of philhellenism swept Europe and America.
- Biddle promoted a Greek architectural revival in the U.S. He added a Greek façade to his house in 1835-1836. All the branch offices of the Bank of the United States were built in the style he approved, and only in the twentieth century did banks cease to look like Greek temples.

Biddle's contributions as a banker and neoclassicist are examined in an original article by Jeffrey Sklansky, "A Bank on Parnassus: Nicholas Biddle and the beauty of banking":

[Nicholas Biddle's dreams and achievements: an assessment](#)

The records of Biddle's 1806 Greek travels can be found in Richard A. McNeal, ed., *Biddle in Greece: The Journals and Letters of 1806*, Pennsylvania State, 1993.

[The contents of Nicholas Biddle's journal in Greece](#)

American Neoclassical Artists

What began with Benjamin West did not end with West. During the nineteenth century a growing number of American scholars, literary figures, and artists lived in England and Europe. As this excellent resource with plentiful links from the Metropolitan Museum of Art indicates, a large number of American neoclassical sculptors lived and worked in Italy.

[American neoclassical sculptors in Europe](#)

- *Hiram Powers' The Greek Slave was a famous symbol of the American anti-slavery abolitionists. What was its significance in ante-bellum cultural politics?*

In 1843, Hiram Powers, living in Florence, produced his celebrated statue, *The Greek Slave*, which at once gave him a place among the leading sculptors of his time. It was exhibited at the center of the Crystal Palace Exhibition in 1850 and Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote a sonnet on it. Modeled after the iconic Medici Venus in the Uffizi, *The Greek Slave* was widely reproduced and imitated, achieving great visibility and renown before the Civil War as a symbol of abolitionism. Copies of *The Greek Slave* appeared in many Union-supporting state houses. In fact Powers meant it to be a celebration of Christianity's victory over Ottoman slavery and of the liberation of Greece from Turkish rule. But the virtuous and chaste nude in chains was too powerful an image for anti-slavery Americans not to venerate.

[For more about *The Greek Slave*](#)

- *Explore Harriet Hosmer's life as an expatriate and the development of her feminist themes in allegorical marble works.*

In 1852, at the age of 22, Harriet Hosmer moved to Rome where she worked in the neoclassical style for most of her life. Hosmer's most famous work was of Zenobia, the third-century Syrian Queen known for her courage, intelligence and beauty. Zenobia conquered much of Asia Minor and Egypt, claiming the Roman Empire. When in 272 the Romans under Aurelian sacked Palmyra, Zenobia was captured. Nathaniel Hawthorne, visiting Hosmer's studio in 1858, called it "very noble and remarkable." In Hosmer's work, the fallen queen stands defeated but with great dignity; head slightly bowed, and eyes downcast. Her crown, jewels and impeccably gathered dress appear unaffected despite the heavy chain, which hangs from her wrists, the only symbol of her imprisonment. Hosmer's work, according to the Art Institute of Chicago, "addresses the theme of strong women whose power was thwarted by the injustices of society."

- Why was Zenobia a compelling historical figure for Hosmer?

In *America's Rome* (Yale, 1989) William L. Vance explores the lives of Horatio Greenough (1805-1852), Hiram Powers (1805-1873), and Harriet Hosmer (1830-1908) in detail. These three neoclassical sculptors of different generations worked in Italy for long periods of time. The Art Institute of Chicago designates them the leading neoclassical sculptors of the nineteenth century. In an excellent and original book, Vance also considers in depth the influence and significance of the Apollo Belvedere, Medici Venus, and other classical works as influential prototypes of American neoclassical sculpture.

For Further Study

- Read an extract of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* (1860) in which Hawthorne describes classical statuary. This novel of intrigue contains many wonderful descriptions of ancient Rome set against the drama of the characters in nineteenth-century Rome. Identify an antique work -- the Faun of Praxiteles is one choice -- that Hawthorne singles out in the book. Why does Hawthorne find the work outstanding or worthy of notice? Hawthorne mentions many works of ancient art when he describes a trip to the Capitoline Museum. What are some of them?

[Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*](#)

- Explore the life, works and significance of Augustus Saint-Gaudens, who began his career in the 1870s in Rome. Saint-Gaudens was an academic classicist who became the most influential sculptor in the United States during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

[Augustus Saint-Gaudens](#)

LESSON THREE

THE RISE OF LIBRARIES



Fénelon's *Telemachus*, 1728 English edition

Book collections acted as channels of knowledge and learning, dispensing the classics in Greek and Latin and English translation to an expanding American audience.

Guiding Ideas and Themes

- Libraries were a primary force in the spread of classical ideas and images.
- The Bible and other religious works contributed significantly to the expansion of a reading public and demand for libraries.
- Ancient texts – originally written in Greek and Latin and increasingly available as English translations – stirred the imagination of Europeans and Americans, including those interested in politics and government.
- Library companies and societies organized as book collections were antecedents of American public libraries.

Read this essay on the origins of American libraries and answer the study questions that follow.

Libraries are hardly an American invention, though the particular form of the “subscription library” enjoyed its greatest success in the New World, and today only survives here in any number of variations. Still, the library movement in Colonial America, while having its roots in European Enlightenment ideals, took root here because of a combination of practicality rooted in economic reality and a democratic interest in competing ideas.

First, transport yourself back to Colonial America and think about what life was like in “a world lit only by fire,” before libraries and a great deal else. Imagine that you are a somewhat prosperous tradesman living in Boston in 1730. You are white and of English heritage because that’s where the odds are. You are almost certainly Protestant and Christian. You live on a small spit of land in a large, well-protected harbor, the economic life-blood of the city. Transportation by road is expensive and slow, so access to water is critical for maintaining contact with Europe, your source for critical tools and raw materials for your trade. Boston is a prosperous and growing city, the capital of the Massachusetts Bay colony. It is Britain’s third largest port, has the largest population of any town in North America, and is the most sophisticated spot in the British colonial empire in the New World.



Boston in 1730

Living in town, you are in a distinct minority—only three percent of the population is urbanized. Boston is about the same size as a regional center in England such as Manchester or Birmingham on the eve of the industrial revolution. The best guess is that Boston has about 16,000 people, of which perhaps as many as 2,000 are black. In contrast, Williamsburg, the capital of Virginia, the most prosperous of the mainland British colonies, has only 2,000 permanent residents. Philadelphia, which is growing rapidly and will eclipse Boston later in the century, has 10,000 people. All of what would eventually become the United States contains about 650,000 people.

Boston was across the Atlantic Ocean from Great Britain but thought of itself as English. London, with as many people as all of North America, was the largest city in Europe and Paris, with over half a million residents, was nearly as big. The largest city in the world at the time was Tokyo, or Edo, as it was known then, with a million people. Still, in the colonial context, Boston was large and thriving, though it was barely big enough to support the dense network of shops and services that make city life so fascinating. As the capital of one of many semi-autonomous colonial territories that stretched from modern-day Canada to the West Indies, it contained most of the civic and governmental functions of the area. It had a governor, a rudimentary assembly and a local currency. Each colony was more or less successful depending upon its particular agricultural and geographical endowments.

You consider yourself British. Most of the people you know were born in England, and often the phrase “the American” is appended to a man’s name to distinguish the son born in the colony from the father. Your intellectual focus is on things English and you may well dream of making your fortune before returning “home” to settle permanently. Some winter days as you struggle up Tremont Street against the wind, you wonder why your family lives in this colony as opposed to Jamaica or Barbados. You probably drink a tot of rum every day made from sugar cane grown in those colonies. Sugar has been the source of fabulous wealth for the settlers in the West Indies—the richest men in the Empire all come from there.

Boston has a lively intellectual atmosphere by virtue of its population density. It has a college nearby and a number of bookshops. We know that booksellers hardly existed anywhere else in the colonies because Benjamin Franklin complained in his *Autobiography* that there were none to be found outside of Boston in the mid-eighteenth century:

There was not a good Bookseller’s Shop in any of the Colonies to the Southward of Boston. In New York and Philadelphia the Printers were indeed Stationers, they sold only Paper, etc., Almanacks, Ballads, and a few common School Books. Those who lov’d Reading were oblig’d to send for their Books from England.

Religion and books

To consider the issue of books and their availability, first imagine what people were thinking and discussing, and therefore what they were reading, or what they *wanted* to read if they could get their hands on it. At first glance it is not obvious why there would be any need at all for booksellers, or at any rate those who sold any books other than the Bible. The Bible was central to early American thinking. Any household that owned any books at all owned a Bible, and very often it was the only book in the house. It was read and re-read and discussed continually. Children were often taught to read their letters first with it and only later with primers. But they soon graduated back to the Good Book.

In this way, the early modern period was very different from the Middle Ages. To be sure books were still expensive but they were no longer luxury goods that were out of the bounds of possibility for most. Printing had made this possible, though a book was still, to a great extent, a handcrafted item and the Crown and the Church of England rigorously controlled the publication of the Bible in English. Most of us are familiar with the notion of the “family Bible” and this is a legacy of this period. The Bible was an important “furnishing” for a house, and it would have been an item for which money would be saved over time and, once acquired, would have been carefully preserved. At the risk of sounding blasphemous, you could think of the family Bible as an item similar to a color television in America, circa 1968—highly-desired and expensive, but not out of reach.

The need to read the Bible encouraged by the various brands of Calvinist Protestants drove universal elementary education in the North American colonies, at least those under the sway of religious theocracies. (This was obviously much less true in places such as the West Indies that had been colonized by men more in pursuit of commercial wealth than spiritual enlightenment.) A highly literate population with little to read sets up an uncomfortable dynamic: it allows people to read the Holy Scripture. The Church leadership risked losing its ability to control what people thought. The primary responsibility of the clergy was the interpretation of Scripture, interpretations that differed widely throughout the Colonies. And some groups, notably the Quakers and the other “plain sects” in Pennsylvania, believed that the sanctity and primacy of Scripture outweighed all considerations. They did away with creeds, liturgy and clergy entirely, allowing each individual direct spiritual communication with the Almighty through words.

In New England, the Puritan clergy were keen to maintain their intermediary role: they delivered sermons that demonstrated broad knowledge of the classics, an appetite for current thinking and a profound ability to synthesize information both ancient and modern about the world. Puritan sermons were richly textured, nuanced and firm in establishing the primacy of Biblical authority amid the potential onslaught of new ideas. Not only were they preached from the pulpit but also they were printed and distributed throughout Massachusetts. Such ephemera kept printers busy and, with longer religious tracts, constituted much of the stock of the Boston booksellers.

You had no need for many books if the only book you ever bothered to read was the Bible. This was very often the state of affairs for educated people in early America. But it was by no means the only situation. The clergy very often owned a few books—typically theological commentaries or selections from classical authors. Those who had attended college, which for a long time was essentially equivalent to a seminary, may have had a few volumes in their house. But, in general, most families neither owned nor had the desire for many books. But as Enlightenment ideas spread, there came a growing hunger for printed materials. People wanted to read new ideas or re-read old ones. They wanted to absorb ideas themselves, not through the intermediary office of the church.

Benjamin Franklin and the Library Company

Benjamin Franklin had settled in Philadelphia after leaving Boston. Franklin had formed a small club, the Junto, that met on Friday nights to debate topics of current interest. Here we see the effects of Enlightenment thinking, for rarely did the Junto discuss matters of theology. Instead they worked on questions of science or government or current affairs. Often the members found need to consult books to answer questions and settle arguments and in 1729, Franklin proposed that they pool their books together so that they might be able to consult them more easily. Further, Franklin felt that by making common cause, each could have the resources of a larger library than any one individual possessed. The members approved the idea and they “fill’d one End of the [meeting] Room with such Books as we could best spare.”

The experiment was a failure. Members did not lend their best or even valuable books, so the collection was never as numerous as hoped. Books were lost and damaged by careless members. After a year, the collection was disbanded. Franklin was disappointed but not despondent. In 1731, he drew up a plan for a subscription-based lending library that would eliminate the problems he had encountered while allowing a much larger collection to be accumulated. And so, in July the Library Company of Philadelphia was born.

Franklin's idea was simple, and became the basis for all the other subscription or "social" libraries that sprouted throughout the colonies and the states over the next century. Each member paid a fixed initial price to join and then an annual subscription fee. The library was run by directors, who purchased books and made them available in a permanent location. Subscribers were entitled to free use of the collection on site and could borrow one or more books to take home, sometimes for a small fee. Fines were levied for overdue books. If one substitutes "property tax" for "subscription fee", this is essentially the model we have in place for public libraries today. The initial order was for 56 titles in 141 volumes (as was common at the time) and included two titles that the bookseller donated gratis. The books arrived unbound and the Company paid Franklin's bookbinder to finish them. Altogether, the bill came to just under fifty pounds sterling or about one pound per title, or about six to seven shillings per volume.

This is an enormous sum in today's terms, perhaps as much as three hundred fifty dollars per title. But it makes sense when we compare the price of other goods at the time. We know that books were expensive, and that standard reference books were scarce and difficult to obtain. Direct price comparisons usually do not make a lot of sense because of changes in productivity and availability of goods and services over time. Still, it is interesting to note that it required between ten and sixteen days of wages for an unskilled laborer to purchase one book. Or, looked at another way, one book cost the same amount as twenty-four bottles of wine. And books were not *just* expensive: They were difficult to obtain *even* if one had money. Ordering books from London required the services of several agents and middlemen and was time-consuming—it was not simply a matter of going to the local book shop.

Books in early America, and for that matter, in England were expensive. Very expensive. We know this is true because we have direct evidence in the form of records of the prices of books and also through inference: Large collections of books were considered unusual and the province only of the very wealthiest members of society. Of those collections begun in America before 1700 only the remnants of a handful survive. The cost of Benjamin Franklin's continuing ventures into librarianship proved to be a stumbling block and tells us several things about the cost of living and the cost of books at the time, so Franklin complained, "few were the Readers at that time in Philadelphia, and the Majority of us so poor, that I was not able with great Industry to find more than Fifty Persons, mostly young Tradesmen, willing to pay down for this purpose Forty shillings each, and Ten Shillings per Annum." Forty shillings was equal to two pounds, a great deal of money. Franklin found that collecting subscriptions was not always easy. By January of the following year, only twenty-five members had paid up; but by March 1730 over forty persons were full subscribers and the Library Company was able to place its first order for books with an agent in London.

The Library Company proved a great success. People saw the mutual advantage it created and clamored to join. A decade after its founding, the collection numbered 375 titles and by Franklin's estimates was worth upwards of five hundred pounds. In sharp contrast to the college libraries and the libraries in New England, Franklin's library contained very little religious material. Instead, it more typically mirrored the interests of the Enlightenment: history was the largest portion with about a third of the titles; literature, mostly poetry and plays, about twenty percent, as was science; philosophy was about ten percent, with religion and "other" making up the balance. It was at the Library Company's rooms that Franklin carried out his first experiments with electricity. Perhaps the key point is that the Library Company built its collection by responding to the wants and needs of its members and readers, rather than by the superimposition of a plan from a higher authority such as a group of professors. Clearly the day was over when people only wanted to read the Bible and theology.

Franklin's library format was soon imitated throughout the colonies, from Salem to Charleston. The libraries quickly became the place in town where educated people met, and they were most likely to be the people interested in scientific questions, history, politics and the arts. The members viewed the library as vital, living organizations. The Boston Library Society, founded in 1794, acted as a cultural center for leading Bostonians and amassed an impressive collection, as did the Boston Athenæum, organized in 1807, "a Reading Room, a Library, a Museum and a Laboratory" for some of the best minds in high-minded Boston.

Libraries and neoclassicism

The term "athenæum" is a deliberate reference to Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom. Any discussion of libraries would be amiss if we did not mention the role of the classics in early American studies. Although there were periodic calls for more emphasis on English literature in colleges, it is clear that classical studies continued to dominate the curriculum through the eighteenth century. Men who had studied classics in college often continued to read them for pleasure after graduation. More importantly, they were a common currency to which people referred and made allusion constantly. Both sides in the Revolution would appeal to ancient authors to make their case before the public, claiming that Aristotle proved the superiority of the laws of God to the laws of men, while *Antigone* was presented as evidence for the trouble awaiting those who violated the laws of nature. The Roman republic was held up as an ideal state with supporters quoting Cicero and Tacitus liberally.

In the eighteenth century classical literary style was much praised and emulated and therefore these texts were needed for consultation on a regular basis. Latin rhetoric was studied and imitated and one can hear the cadences of the classics in iconic early American texts such as *The Federalist Papers*. Such "Golden Latin" has a majesty of style that when properly delivered has a hypnotic effect on an audience. Is it any surprise then that we should learn that when in 1761 James Otis

stood up in the Old State House in Boston, and delivered the speech against the Writs of Assistance—the speech that John Adams called the spark of the Revolution—he was best known for a textbook on Latin prose form that he had published the year before?

What then is the legacy of these early American libraries, other than a place where a few people gathered to read books? Franklin ended Part One of his *Autobiography* with the following statement about the libraries that had sprouted from the original seed of his Library Company:

These Libraries have improv'd the general Conversation of the Americans, made the common Tradesmen & Farmers as intelligent as most Gentlemen from other Countries, and perhaps have contributed in some degree to the Stand so generally made throughout the colonies in Defence of their Privileges.

Here we see encapsulated a view of humanity that would come to be closely associated with the American republic: it is at once optimistic and forward leaning, it is anti-aristocratic, and it is egalitarian. Franklin discredits the hierarchical structure of society by saying that Tradesmen and Farmers are as intelligent as “Gentlemen.” That is, the supposed distinctions based on birth had no basis in reality, for the commoner simply needed access to the same material as the noble to demonstrate his equality. This is important in the context of the Revolution, for although wealth and family origin had already been attacked and discredited by others, there remained the traditional mindset of the English and North Americans, that the upper and lower classes were divided by a fundamental and vast difference in intellectual ability.

Study Questions

- How did religion influence the spread of American libraries and the revival of classical interest?
- Why were libraries a democratizing force in expanding available knowledge?
- What particular religious denominations were interested in libraries and books? In what ways did those denominations encourage book collection?
- Who was instrumental in the establishment and expansion of early American libraries?
- Explain the significance of the Library Company of Philadelphia.
- How did libraries help spread classical ideas to a widening audience in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America?
- Why did Boston call itself the “Athens of America” during the nineteenth century?

For Further Study

- Read Forrest McDonald’s insightful overview of what the American Founders read:

[The libraries and reading collections of the American Founders](#)

- Consider Benjamin Franklin's library:

[The contents of Benjamin Franklin's library](#)

- Explore the contents of Thomas Jefferson's library. By what means did he compile and pay for it? Investigate its contents and its range. Find out what happened to it after Jefferson's death. Consult E. Millicent Sowerby, ed., *Catalogue of the Library of Thomas Jefferson*, 5 vols., Library of Congress, 1953, which reveals the range of Jefferson's bibliographic interest. Try to obtain a copy of one of Sowerby's volumes and browse.
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LESSON FOUR

THE FOUNDERS AND THE CLASSICS



Jean-Antoine Houdon,
George Washington, 1786

© Musée du Louvre

The Founders of the United States were influenced by ancient political systems and learning. The extent remains a matter of debate among historians.

Guiding Ideas and Themes

- Historians disagree over the extent and influence of the classics on American political philosophy.
- Historians see in the American Founding elements of “modern” influences or “classical” influences – or a combination of the two.

A Historians’ Debate

Compare and contrast four historians’ views of the impact of the classics on the Founders’ constitutional outlook and the political thinking of early American leaders. Read each extract, keeping in mind how each historian poses the relationship between the antique and modern. Distinguish differing points of view and points of convergence.

From Meyer Reinhold:

Early Americans lived in the afterglow of the Renaissance. Despite the distance from the great centers of humanistic learning, the absence of visible relics of the Greek and Roman presence to memorialize the continuity with Classical antiquity and excite feelings of pride in the cultural heritage, sporadic opposition on religious and utilitarian grounds, Classical learning was swiftly naturalized on American soil, and in consequence a fair number of colonial and revolutionary Americans was nurtured and moulded by the humanistic tradition. Though, as on the other side of the Atlantic, the immediate beneficiaries of this learning constituted a small intellectual elite, the markedly higher level of literacy in America provided a wider audience for the Classics.

Nevertheless, the overriding needs imposed on Americans by the winning and developing of a new country on the edge of the wilderness, the priorities obtruding in the practical and political domains affected Americans differently than was the experience of their Classically educated counterparts in Europe. Americans did not, for instance, produce a single great Classical scholar in two hundred years; they did not make a single significant contribution to Classical scholarship. But while adding nothing to the fund of Classical learning, they plundered the Classics liberally for the advantage of their own lives and the national good. For many Americans, there is no doubt, Classical learning was a superficial veneer, the indispensable hallmark of “gentlemen’s culture;” yet many of them drew inspiration throughout their lives from the study and reading of the Classics. They knew far less about the ancient world than we do today, but the learning they acquired, circumscribed though it was, affected their thought and action far more. Their reading in and meditation upon the Classics was eminently practical and purposeful; and it contributed substantially to the development and motivation of an unparalleled concentration of political giants in world history.

Evidence abounds for an American cult of antiquity during the eighteenth century, particularly during the second half: the ubiquitous classical quotations and tags; the common use of Classical pseudonyms; the revival of Classical place names; the constant adducing of Classical parallels; even the frequent use of Classical names for slaves in the southern states. Overshadowing all these was the tireless and purposeful reading by early Americans of the Classics as a repository of timeless models for guidance in republicanism and private and civic virtue.

“The Cult of Antiquity,” *Classica Americana*, Wayne State, 1984, pp. 23-49.

From Bernard Bailyn:

But this elaborate display of classical authors is deceptive. Often the learning behind it was superficial; often the citations appear to have been dragged in as “window dressing with which to ornament a page or a speech and to increase the weight of argument,” for classical quotation, as Dr. Johnson said, was “the parole of literary men all over the world.” ... What is basically important in the Americans’ reading of the ancients is the high selectivity of their real interests and the limitation of the range of their effective knowledge. For though the colonists drew their citations from all portions of the literature of the ancient world, their detailed knowledge and engaged interest covered only one era and one small group of writers. What gripped their minds, what they knew in detail, and what formed their view of the whole of the ancient world was the political history of Rome from the conquests in the east and the civil wars in the early first century B.C. to the establishment of the empire on the ruins of the republic at the end of the second century A.D. For their knowledge of this period they had at hand, and needed only, Plutarch, Livy, and above all Cicero, Sallust, and Tacitus – writers who had lived either when the republic was being fundamentally challenged or when its greatest days were already past and its moral and political virtues decayed. They had hated and feared the trends of their own time, and in their writing had contrasted the present with a better past, which they endowed with qualities absent from their own, corrupt era. The earlier age had been full of virtue: simplicity, patriotism, integrity, a love of justice and of liberty; the present was venal, cynical, and oppressive.

For the colonists, arguing the American cause in the controversies of the 1760’s and 1770’s, the analogies to their own times were compelling. They saw their own provincial virtues – rustic and old-fashioned, sturdy and effective – challenged by the corruption at the center of power, by the threat of tyranny, and by a constitution gone wrong. They found their ideal selves, and to some extent their voices, in Brutus, in Cassius, and in Cicero, whose Catilinarian orations the enraptured John Adams, aged 23, declaimed aloud, alone at night in his room. They were simple, stoical Catos, desperate, self-sacrificing Brutuses, silver-tongued Ciceros, and terse, sardonic Tacituses, eulogizing Teutonic freedom and denouncing the decadence of Rome. England, the young John Dickinson wrote from London in 1754, is like Sallust’s Rome: “Easy to be brought, if there was but a purchaser.” Britain, it would soon become clear, was to America “what Caesar was to Rome.”

The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution, Harvard, 1967, pp. 24-26.

From Gordon S. Wood:

For Americans the mid-eighteenth century was truly a neoclassical age—the high point of their classical period. At one time or another almost every Whig patriot took or was given the name of an ancient republican hero, and classical references and allusions run through much of the colonists’ writings, both public and private. It was a rare newspaper essayist who did not use a Greek or Latin phrase to enhance an argument or embellish a point and who did not employ a classical signature. John Dickinson lived up to his reputation for “Attic eloquence and Roman spirit” by ending each of his *Farmer’s Letters* with an appropriate classical quotation. Such classicism was not only a scholarly

ornament of educated Americans; it helped to shape their values and their ideals of behavior. “The Choice of Hercules, as engraved by Gribeline in some Editions of Lord Shaftsbury’s Works,” which John Adams proposed to the Continental Congress as a seal commemorating the British evacuation of Boston, was a commonplace of the age. Man was pictured in classical terms struggling between the forces of virtue and vice, reason and passion. Rural life was celebrated not for its wild or natural beauty but for its simplicity and repose to which in Horatian fashion virtuous men could retire after a lifetime of devotion to duty and country. The traits of character most praised were the classical ones—restraint, temperance, fortitude, dignity, and independence. Washington seemed to his contemporaries to fit the ideal perfectly.

Creation of the American Republic, North Carolina, 1969, pp. 49-50.

From Carl J. Richard:

While the founders used classical symbols to create implicit analogies, identifying themselves and their causes with the ancients, they also formulated explicit analogies and contrasts between ancient and contemporary individuals, societies, and governments. Decades after some of the founders lost their facility with the classical languages, they retained a thorough knowledge of ancient history. Ancient history provided the founders with important, if imprecise, models of personal behavior, social practice, and government form. Such models gave the founders a sense of identity and purpose during the struggles of the Revolutionary and Constitutional periods.

The founders’ models of personal behavior included mythological figures, Athenians, and Romans. The founders met their mythological heroes in the works of Homer, Hesiod, Virgil, and Ovid. They found their Athenian heroes in Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, and especially Plutarch.

Thomas Jefferson particularly admired Tacitus, whose moralistic *Annals* heaped scorn on the emperors and glorified the republic. In 1808 Jefferson wrote: “Tacitus I consider the first writer in the world without a single exception. His book is a compound of history and morality of which we have no other example.” In 1823 Jefferson reiterated his claim that Tacitus was “the strongest writer in the world.” By that time he had quoted Tacitus on the role of the historian: “This I hold to be the chief duty and office of the historian, to judge the actions of men, to the end that the good and the worthy may meet with the rewards due to eminent virtue, and that pernicious citizens may be deterred by the condemnation that waits on evil deeds at the tribunal of posterity.” “History” was the ultimate judge, dispensing fame to the virtuous, infamy to the vicious. Reading Tacitus as a young man in 1756, John Adams was filled with horror at the violence of the Roman emperors. John Dickinson praised Tacitus as “that excellent historian and statesman...whose political reflections are so justly and universally admired.”

For Further Study

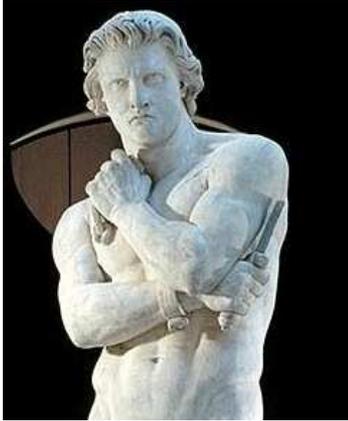
- For extensive source material on the Constitution and the political philosophy that lies under it, *The Founders' Constitution*, a magisterial compilation of documents and commentary edited by Philip Kurland and Ralph Lerner, is highly recommended.

[The Founders' themes and writings on government and the Constitution](#)

- Although he admired Plutarch, Alexander Hamilton thought classical antiquity, especially Rome, offered the new United States few *exempla*. He said: “Neither the manners nor the genius of Rome are suited to the republic or to the age we live in. All her maxims and habits were military; her government was constituted for war. Ours is unfit for it; and our situation still less than our Constitution, invites us to emulate the conduct of Home, or to attempt a display of unprofitable heroism.” What did Hamilton mean by this, and what realities of the United States (especially in regard to Great Britain and France) in the 1790s led Hamilton to draw this conclusion? What elements in Hamilton’s early life would reinforce this point of view?
- In Chapter 4 of *The Founders and the Classics*, Carl J. Richard raises the concept of classical anti-models: “those ancient individuals, societies, and government forms whose vices they wished to avoid.” What political qualities were the Founders eager to avoid? Why were Sulla, Cataline, Nero, Caligula, and Julius Caesar “anti-models” for early American leaders and the Founders. Why did Andrew Jackson’s enemies call him an American Caesar?
- In *The Learning of Liberty: The Educational Ideas of the American Founders*, Kansas, 1993, Lorraine Smith Pangle and Thomas L. Pangle admirably survey the role of the classics and the civic curriculum in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American education.
- The word Athenaeum is derived from Athena, the goddess of Knowledge and Wisdom. In *The Mirror of Antiquity: American Women and the Classical Tradition, 1750-1900*, Cornell, 2007, Caroline Winterer observes that the iconic American figures of Liberty and Columbia are classical in origin. In what ways?
- Explore the allegorical figure of Athena (known to Romans as Minerva) and her symbol of the Owl, and investigate how Americans used each as signifier of Knowledge and Wisdom in literature, public monuments, and rhetoric.

LESSON FIVE

CLASSICAL STORIES



Denis Foyatier, *Spartacus*, 1824

© Musée du Louvre

Classical heroes inspired Americans through their achievements and examples, providing ideal models of behavior.

Guiding Ideas and Themes

- Americans turned to Plutarch's *Lives* for biographical character models (*exempla virtutis*), moral inspiration, and dramatic stories taken from history.
- Ancient figures as Solon, Pericles, Alexander, Cornelia, Cato the Elder, Cicero, Julius Caesar, Cleopatra, and Spartacus became broadly known in national discourse and lore.
- Hercules' Choice is an ancient Greek myth admired by the Founders and later American generations. This allegory epitomizes neoclassical ideals and their existential bearings.
- Homer's *Odysseus* story of Telemachus and Mentor originates the widely employed concept of "mentor" and "mentoring." Why and how?

The Influence of Plutarch's *Lives*

[Teaching Plutarch in the age of Hollywood](#)

[Excerpts from Plutarch's *Lives*](#)

Where did George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison turn for character models, civic ideas, and inspiration?

Not only to Plutarch but to a range of classical authors, often read in translation, including Cicero, Livy, Tacitus and Virgil. But Plutarch had unique influence. Because he was so widely read, the luminaries he wrote about became familiar, iconic, and referential figures to men and women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Plutarch's reflections often included moral and psychological judgments. In an age before psychology, His biographies provided commonly admired moral examples and clues to human nature for public leaders and private citizens. They included stories of probity and vice, virtue and cowardice, liberty and tyranny. The Founders and others studied the lives of ancient lawmakers and statesmen in order to discover civic wisdom and the workings of just government.

Cornelia

In the early nineteenth century Cornelia became the model of the virtuous republican woman. In John Dryden's broadly published 1683 translation of Plutarch from Greek to English, Plutarch's description of Cornelia read:

Cornelia, taking upon herself all the care of the household and the education of her children, approved herself so discreet a matron, so affectionate a mother, and so constant and noble-spirited a widow, that Tiberius seemed to all men to have done nothing unreasonable in choosing to die for such a woman; who, when King Ptolemy himself proffered her his crown, and would have married her, refused it, and chose rather to live a widow. In this state she continued, and lost all her children, except one daughter, who was married to Scipio the younger, and two sons, Tiberius and Caius, whose lives we are now writing. These she brought up with such care, that though they were without dispute in natural endowments and dispositions the first among the Romans of their time, yet they seemed to owe their virtues even more to their education than to their birth.

For Americans, Cornelia's personal and civic virtue became legendary. When women friends questioned Cornelia about her simple dress and lack of personal adornment, simplicity unusual for a wealthy Roman woman of her rank, wise Cornelia pointed to and said of her sons, "These are my jewels."

In front of the Ohio Statehouse in Columbus, an 1893 figure of Cornelia, personifying the state of Ohio, with arms wide spread, overlooks the state's native sons and "jewels," military and political leaders of the Union during and after the American Civil War: Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield, Philip Henry Sheridan, Edwin McMasters Stanton, and Salmon P. Chase.



Cornelia and Her Jewels, Ohio State House, 1893

- Explore how Cornelia became an embodiment of the “Roman matron” and a model of republican womanhood. Explain why several generations of Americans found Cornelia’s actions and mindset virtuous and worthy of imitation. How does this Civil War monument celebrate Cornelia, and through what allegorical means?

Caroline Winterer elaborates the story of Cornelia and Cornelia’s model role among leading women of the early American republic in *The Mirror of Antiquity: American Women and the Classical Tradition, 1750-1900*, Cornell, 2007.

Spartacus

In the first century B.C., Spartacus was the leader of the great Roman slave revolt. Spartacus managed to break through Roman forces, but after many battles was killed. Approximately 6,000 of Spartacus’s followers were crucified on the Appian Way. The Roman general Crassus never gave orders for the bodies to be taken down, thus travelers were forced to see the bodies for years after the final battle. In the nineteenth century, Spartacus became a symbol of freedom and a hero for the anti-slavery movement and republicans. Plutarch’s Spartacus story was well known to nineteenth-century Americans. Those who opposed slavery often considered Spartacus a symbol, hero and martyr. It was an enduring story. *Spartacus* was an acclaimed 1960 Stanley Kubrick movie.

[Plutarch on Spartacus](#)

The Spartacus story is told in depth in Barry Strauss, *The Spartacus War*, Simon & Schuster, 2009, and in Brent D. Shaw's *Spartacus and the slave wars: a brief history with documents*, Bedford, 2001:

[A history of Spartacus and the slave revolt](#)

- Why did Spartacus become a symbol of freedom and a hero for abolitionists and anti-royalists?

Plutarch's Maxims

Sayings such as these plucked from Plutarch's biographies provided moral direction and working advice for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Americans:

- A shortcut to riches is to subtract from our desires.
 - Though boys throw stones at frogs in sport, the frogs do not die in sport but in earnest.
 - Socrates thought: if all our misfortunes were laid in one common heap, whence every one must take an equal portion, most persons would be contented to take their own and depart.
 - In human life there is a constant change of fortune; and it is unreasonable to expect an exemption from the common fate. Life itself decays, and all things are daily changing.
 - The talkative listen to no one, for they are ever speaking. And the first evil that attends those who know not to be silent is that they hear nothing.
 - He is a fool who leaves things close at hand to follow what is out of reach.
 - The whole life of man is but a point of time; let us enjoy it, therefore, while it lasts, and not spend it to no purpose.
 - An imbalance between rich and poor is the oldest and most fatal ailment of all republics.
 - The real destroyer of the liberties of the people is he who spreads among them bounties, donations and benefits.
-
- What is a maxim? How is a maxim different from an instructive story, such the lessons in Aesop's *Fables*? What lesson is to be learned from each of these maxims above?
 - From these maxims, how would you describe Plutarch's estimation of a good life? What worries does Plutarch sound on republican government? By implication, what warnings does Plutarch have for Americans today?

Hercules' Choice

The allegory of Hercules' Choice captures the opposing pulls of virtue and temptation. The moral tale had enduring interest for philosophers, political leaders, literary intellectuals, and artists through the Enlightenment, and it was a theme admired by the Founders.



***Hercules chose Virtue over Vice,
making him a symbol of personal
and civic good.***

Gribeline, *Hercules at the Crossroads*, 1725

The moral allegory of Hercules' Choice provides a straight thought-line from Renaissance humanism to the creation of the United States and its political symbols. Among classicists, it was one of the most beloved and inspiring tales of the eighteenth century. John Adams sought to make Hercules' Choice the national emblem in 1776:

I proposed the Choice of Hercules, as engraved by Gribeline [above] in some Editions of Lord Shaftsbury's Works. The Hero resting on his Clubb. Virtue pointing to her rugged Mountain, on one Hand, and perswading him to ascend. Sloth, glancing at her flowery Paths of Pleasure, wantonly reclining on the Ground, displaying the Charms both of her Eloquence and Person, to seduce him into Vice.

- John Adams invokes Hercules as a model for his own self-development. The note may be found in a diary entry, Jan. 1759, in L. H. Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, vol. 1: Diaries 1755-1770, Belknap, 1962, 72.

The theme of a hero at a crossroads originates in Hesiod's *Works and Days*, an epic poem of the seventh century B.C. Three centuries later, a friend of Socrates and Plato named Prodicus reinvented it as a moral fable starring Hercules. Socrates' student, Xenophon, developed the tale in his *Memorabilia*. Thinkers, poets and artists embellished the original story in individual and imaginative ways. They gave often Hercules at the Crossroads details and twists that are absent from the original. Sometimes, Minerva, goddess of Wisdom, and Venus, goddess of Love, are at odds. The traditional story goes as such:

Hercules, the son of Zeus, was marvelous to behold. Fire flashed from his eyes. So fearsome was the youth, he was sent to tend the cattle of his earth father, Amphitryon, on Mt. Cithaeron. But Hercules soon wandered off by himself. He left the herd and went into the wilderness. He came to a solitary crossroads where he sought to make sense of his future. Just at this moment, two women approached. One of them, Arete, is elegant and modest in her appearance and demeanor. She is dressed in white. The other, Kakia, is sensually dressed in a rainbow of colors. Kakia is more beautiful than Arete. "The whiteness of her skin is powdered and tinted. She carries herself so arrogantly that she seems taller than she is. She complacently regards herself with bright, vacant eyes, and then a moment later, she looks around to see if others are watching her, and often she gazes admiringly at her own shadow," says one old telling of the tale.

Kakia crowded Arete to one side and ran toward Hercules: "Choose me," she said, "for I will guide you along an easy path. There is no pleasure you will not taste. No discomfort that you will avoid. The pleasures of the senses, they are yours without labor or effort." Kakia promises a life that is easy-going and entertaining. She promises Hercules enrichment. "What is your name?" Hercules asked. "My friends call me Happiness and Bliss (eudaemonia) but my foes, Idle Pleasure and Wicked (kakia)," said the seductress. Then Arete said to Hercules: "I too come to you. I know your parents, your gifts, and I am led to hope that you will choose a different road. I will not bribe you with sloth. The gods give nothing to those on earth without effort and toil. You must honor the gods, render the city services, you must become a benefactor."

Arete promised Hercules a rough road of obstacles and ascents, but with the joys of life that had been gained as a result of hard work, contribution and service to others, and living in a strong, healthy body that serves the spirit. Arete turned on Kakia: "Miserable creature!" she exclaimed. "You do not know true pleasure. To prick your desire for food, you seek out resourceful cooks. To sharpen your urge to drink, you purchase costly wines. In summer your whim is for snow. No bed is soft enough for you. You spend the night in debauchery and the day in sleep. A sordid old age awaits your votaries, as does shame and regret, fear and faltering under the load of uncertainty and undone tasks. And you, an outcast among gods, an object of derision! You have never seen what gladdens the eye: good works!" Arete declares to Hercules that the gods never give good without suffering. Then Arete and Kakia vanish.

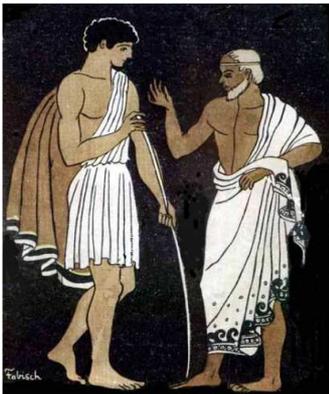
So what does Hercules do? Hercules chooses Arete over Kakia. His preference is for challenge and "hard living." Hercules returns to Mount Cithaeron, where a wild animal was laying waste to his father's flocks and to the shepherds in the countryside. The young hero -- Arete's words still ringing in his ears -- arms himself, scales the wild, wooded mountain, overcomes the Nemean lion, flinging the skin over his shoulder and setting the gaping jaw on his head as a helmet. Hereupon, in legend and lore, Hercules becomes the champion of the oppressed. Hercules at the Crossroads is the source for phrases like high road and rocky road. When we speak of the primrose path, we are talking about Kakia's flower-strewn road, the road to "pleasure," fleeting in its delights and gladness, a road that, according to the moral lesson, leads to ruin and

remorse. At the end of Hercules' climb may stand a Temple symbolizing Wisdom, or a winged horse, Pegasus, symbolizing Fame and Glory.

- Explain why Hercules' Choice is an allegory of free will (*libertas*). What does the story suggest about or prescribe as public virtues (*virtus*)? To what degree and in what ways does the story reflect what neoclassicism admired (*gloria, fides, dignitas*)?
 - Hercules' Choice acknowledges passion, desire, and appetite. How?
 - What pictorial symbols are used to represent virtue and vice? Explore the many representations of Hercules' Choice in painting and drawings. Identify symbols of Virtue (e.g., laurel, book, sword, owl) and Vice (e.g., masks, cards, mirror)?
 - Why did this particular moral allegory impress Americans like John Adams?
- For more detail on the theme of Hercules' Choice, see Karl Galinsky, *Hercules Themes*, Rowman and Littlefield, 1972. To read Ayers Bagley, "Hercules and Moral Education in the Enlightenment," go to:

[Hercules and moral education in the Enlightenment](#)

From *The Odyssey* Telemachus and Mentor



Telemachus and Mentor

Mentor was the trusted friend and wise teacher in The Odyssey made legendary by François Fénelon.

The concept of "mentor" has wide currency in all American institutional life, and from the study of this story, students and teachers may obtain a firmer understanding of how it evolved and its enduring vitality in education. Explain how the word mentor is used today (both as a noun and verb). How does it compare and extend the classical story from Homer and François Fénelon's tale of adventure and coming of age story?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines *mentor* as "allusively, one who fulfils the office which the supposed Mentor fulfilled towards Telemachus. Hence, as common noun: An experienced and trusted adviser." *The Odyssey* – the story of Ulysses' travels on his return from the Trojan Wars – was best known to Americans from Pope's magisterial and best-selling 1715 translation of Homer.

[Homer's *Odyssey* translated by Alexander Pope](#)

In Homer, the goddess of wisdom, Pallas Athena, assumed the form of Mentor to educate and support Ulysses' son Telemachus during his travels and wanderings. Thus the first "mentor" described in literature was Athena, a goddess and not an old man. In fact, the *Odyssey* provides only hints of the sage and supportive Mentor. The qualities of Homer's Mentor are elaborated in the following notes by Andy Roberts in the *History of Education Journal*:

[Reflections on Mentor and his role as a teacher](#)

The story of Mentor was embellished in *Les aventures de Télémaque*, by François Fénelon (1651-1715), written in 1699. Fénelon created the story of Telemachus and Mentor as it was known to the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Today nearly forgotten, Fénelon's *Telemachus* was one of the most widely read adventure stories of the age, well known and popular into the nineteenth century. In Fénelon's version, Telemachus with his tutor Mentor visits every corner of the Mediterranean world. From Mentor, who is the goddess Minerva in disguise, Telemachus learns patience, courage, modesty and simplicity, the qualities he will need as the son of Hercules and the future King of Ithaca. It is the story of the transformation of a young adventurer into a model ruler.

[Educating Telemachus: Lessons in Fénelon's Underworld](#)

- For more detail on the content of Fénelon's Telemachus and Mentor epic, with rich illustrations, see Emmanuel Schwartz, *The Legacy of Homer*, Dahesh Museum and École des Beaux-Arts, 2004.

LESSON SIX

THE USES OF ANTIQUITY



Hubert Robert, *Ruins of the Louvre*, 1796

© Musée du Louvre

Classical history acted as a guide to public life and morality for Americans seeking lessons of history.

Guiding Ideas and Themes

- History-conscious Americans – scholars, political dreamers, artists, and statesmen – used classical antiquity and “the lessons of the past” to moralize about the present and future.
- Neoclassical aesthetics included contemplating the “passage of time and the corruptions of decay that await all of us.” Travelers and readers of illustrated books in libraries wandered through old ruins, reflecting on the fate of human and all man-made things – including empires – to perish.
- Greece and Rome had direct and powerful impact on nineteenth-century American statesmen. Public speeches and commemorations invoked the heroism of Greece and achievements of Rome to remind Americans of their glorious heritage.

Into the Lesson

In the nineteenth century the study of ancient history became foundational in the American curriculum. The classics were used to deduce right and wrong for the individual and the state, providing sources of authority equaled only by the Bible. Americans read the classics for instruction and pleasure, many of them enjoying classical stories while they learned lessons from the past.

By the 1840s, for many Americans the downward trajectory of the Roman Empire had taken on a lurid aspect. It was a popular cautionary tale. Historian Caroline Winterer suggests why it had enduring popular appeal:

Sometimes everyday life was wholesome and virtuous, and sometimes it was deliciously not, especially as the republic degenerated into debauched empire. But that was part of the appeal of Rome and cyclical history. Readers knew what was coming, as day followed night. So after sitting patiently through the agrarian republic of virtuous frugality when simple farmers ate porridge out of wooden bowls and fought for Rome, ... the part with the bad emperors and the orgies, the naked slaves, and the dinners of peacock tongues and parrot heads. It was all a bit *de trop*, but such books would not have sold (in multiple editions and translations) if there had not been a market for this kind of thing.

The Lessons of Antiquity

The rise and fall of ancient civilizations was of deep interest to Americans. For Americans before Edward Gibbon, including the Founders, the story of the Roman empire had been confined mainly to evil Caesar (military autocrat and enemy of the republic) and Nero (libertine and burner of Christian martyrs). Gibbon's admiration for the second-century empire and antagonism to Christianity made him, in the eyes of some early nineteenth-century Americans, a heathen and atheist. *Decline and Fall* nonetheless became an essential book of the nineteenth century. In 1857, the abridged *Student's Gibbon* (New York: Harper and Brothers) appeared, becoming a staple in U.S. libraries and classrooms for the next seventy-five years.

- How did Gibbon's view of Rome's decline clash with nineteenth-century American political and religious main-currents?

Published between 1776 and 1788 in several volumes, Gibbon's opus had immediate and lasting public impact in London. It was a great critical success, and it remains a definitive history to this day. Its popularity in the U.S. grew steadily throughout the nineteenth century. It is valuable to keep in mind that Gibbon did not at first have a monopoly on the subject of ancient history.

During the eighteenth century Charles Rollin's ancient history dating from the 1730s was the leading authority on classical antiquity. For more detail about the influence of Charles Rollin in America, see:

Peter S. Walch, "Charles Rollin and Early Neoclassicism," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (Jun., 1967), pp. 123-126. (JSTOR only)

William Gribbin, "Rollin's Histories and American Republicanism," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 29, No. 4 (Oct., 1972), pp. 611-622. (JSTOR only)

Rollin was superseded by other works of scholarship, not only Gibbon, some of the greatest histories ever written. The histories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries include a formidable list of great works and scholarship. Consider some of most prominent eighteenth-century English-language histories of Rome other than Gibbon. These books were widely known to English and American readers:

Nathaniel Hooke, *The Roman History, from the Building of Rome to the Ruin of the Commonwealth* (London: James Bettenham, 1745).

Edward Wortley Montagu, *Reflections on the Rise and Fall of Ancient Republicks. Adapted to the Present State of Great Britain* (London: A. Millar, 1760).

Oliver Goldsmith, *Roman History from the Foundation of the City of Rome, to the Destruction of the Western Empire*, 2 vols. (London: S. Baker and G. Leigh, 1769).

Adam Ferguson, *The History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic*, 3 vols. (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1783).

And of Greece:

Temple Stanyan, *The Grecian History. From the End of the Peloponnesian War to the Death of Philip of Macedon. Containing the Space of Sixty-Eight Years* (vol.1 published in 1707; volume 2, London: J. and R. Tonson, 1739).

Oliver Goldsmith, *The Grecian History, from the Earliest State to the Death of Alexander the Great* (London: J. and F. Rivington, T. Longman, G. Kearsley, W. Griffin, G. Robinson et al., 1774).

William Mitford, *The History of Greece* (vol. 1, London: T. Wright for J. Murray and J. Robson, 1784).

John Gillies, *The History of Ancient Greece, Its Colonies and Conquests* (London: A. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1786).

- Try to find one of these works in a local library. The works were published in many subsequent editions for a very long time. What do these books indicate about the depth of eighteenth-century historical interest and demand for information about the ancient world?
 - Why did Gibbon's history over time outshine other histories in popularity and influence?

Constantin Volney and *The Ruins*

Americans read Constantin Volney's *The Ruins*, first published in French in 1793. A friend of Thomas Jefferson, Volney was visiting Virginia in the United States from France three years later. Together they decided to translate *The Ruins* into English. As Vice-President, Jefferson was spending most of his time rebuilding Monticello. (There was no Washington D.C. and Jefferson had few public responsibilities.) Abraham Lincoln was an avid reader of *The Ruins* as a young man. A long meditation on antiquity, Volney's tome sought a new world political order based on reason and equality. Volney says in his invocation:

HAIL solitary ruins, holy sepulchres and silent walls! you I invoke; to you I address my prayer. While your aspect averts, with secret terror, the vulgar regard, it excites in my heart the charm of delicious sentiments -- sublime contemplations. What useful lessons, what affecting and profound reflections you suggest to him who knows how to consult you! When the whole earth, in chains and silence, bowed the neck before its

tyrants, you had already proclaimed the truths which they abhor; and confounding the dust of the king with that of the meanest slave, had announced to man the sacred dogma of Equality. Within your pale, in solitary adoration of Liberty, I saw her Genius arise from the mansions of the dead ... O Tombs! what virtues are yours! You appall the tyrant's heart, and poison with secret alarm his impious joys. ... Aware that all must return to you, the wise man loadeth not himself with the burdens of grandeur and of useless wealth: he restrains his desires within the limits of justice; yet, knowing that he must run his destined course of life, he fills with employment all its hours, and enjoys the comforts that fortune has allotted him. You thus impose on the impetuous sallies of cupidity a salutary rein! you calm the feverish ardor of enjoyments which disturb the senses; you free the soul from the fatiguing conflict of the passions; elevate it above the paltry interests which torment the crowd; and surveying, from your commanding position, the expanse of ages and nations, the mind is only accessible to the great affections -- to the solid ideas of virtue and of glory.

- From reading Volney's invocation to *The Ruins* what would you conclude are Volney's uses for ruins? Why are they to be studied and contemplated?
- Compare Volney's sentiments to those in Percy Bysshe Shelley's famous poem, *Ozymandias* (1818).
- How is Volney's view of antique ruins an expression of "romantic classicism"? What does Volney mean by "sublime"?
- Hubert Robert (1733-1808), the French artist who painted the *Maison Carrée* in 1786, shown in Lesson 2, reflects on the fate of empires in *Ruins of the Louvre*, shown above. What is his "message" to contemporaries and how does he try to convey it? What may Robert be suggesting about the politics of contemporary France in 1796?

Thomas Cole and *The Course of Empire*

[Course of Empire: the five paintings](#)

Thomas Cole's *Course of Empire*, a five-painting narrative cycle, was completed in 1834. Thomas Cole was the leading American painter of his generation. *Course of Empire* illustrates, in five related panels, what the artist called Savage State, Pastoral State, Consummation of Empire, Destruction, and Desolation. *Course of Empire* arguably embodies better than any other work American thought-lines about the lessons of the classical past. It is a cautionary tale. It depicts and spans the rise and fall of an unknown (but distinctly classical) civilization.

- Identify the symbols that Cole uses to convey each particular stage of civilization. Why are these chosen and to what allegorical effect?
- What is the viewer's perspective? What lessons is the viewer intended to draw from the cycle? About empire?
- How does this cycle convey distinctly Victorian moral lessons about antiquity and the "lessons of history"?
- How does this warning compare with rising American wealth, including early nineteenth century taste for large classical houses and public buildings, fine furniture, dress? To what degree is Cole warning against luxury?

- How do these moralizing themes echo – and differ from -- earlier neoclassical themes and ambitions?
- How does Thomas Cole’s view of empire compare with Gibbon’s?

Thomas Couture and *Romans of the Decadence*



Romans of the Decadence, 1847



Detail

Thomas Couture quoted the second-century Roman poet Juvenal in the catalogue for the 1847 Salon where the painting *Romans of the Decadence* was first exhibited: "Crueller than war, vice fell upon Rome and avenged the conquered world." Thanks to cheap engraved reproductions, this lurid view of Rome was extremely well known to Americans by the late nineteenth century. It became the image of the late Roman Empire, the moment of abandonment and peacock tongues, one observed critically by two philosophers (possibly foreign visitors to Rome) in the foreground and right. *Romans of the Decadence* imagined the Roman orgy, taking place in the great halls amid the statues of virtuous republican or Augustan ancestors, false in every way, but with immense popular appeal. Widely reproduced, *Romans of the Decadence* became the mother of all toga parties.

In the nineteenth century artists often used classical themes to make comment about current events, and history painting often invoked the theme of liberty. Apart from illustrating an ancient text, Couture was alluding to French society of his time. A Republican, Couture opposed restoration of the monarchy.

- Compare the symbols and narrative used by Couture in “The Romans of the Decadence” to those used in Cole’s “Consummation.”
- Who is Juvenal? Explain his role in Roman letters and his view of Roman society. According to Juvenal, what was wrong with imperial Rome? How do his views contrast with Gibbon’s? Why would Americans read Juvenal for moral instruction and vicarious pleasure?
- Investigate Petronius’ *Satyricon* and in it, Trimalchio’s Feast, as tales of excess, considered considered semi-pornographic in the nineteenth century, filmed lavishly by Federico Fellini in 1969.

Everett at Gettysburg: The Classics and Heroes



Edward Everett

Edward Everett was the greatest academic of his generation.

Who is Edward Everett and why is he giving an address at Gettysburg in 1863 alongside President Abraham Lincoln? What images of the classical past does Everett invoke? Why were these powerful symbols to the audience gathered at Gettysburg?

Just as the classics were mined for virtue and vice and political guidance, nineteenth-century statesmen and public figures used antiquity to highlight and compare contemporary events and commemorate heroes. These classical allusions signaled the gravity, solemn simplicity, grandeur, and magnitude of public occasions of all kinds.

One of the towering figures in nineteenth-century American intellectual history, Edward Everett, born in 1794, was professor of Greek literature at Harvard University. He served five terms in Congress. He was Governor of Massachusetts, United States minister to Great Britain, president of Harvard University, and Secretary of State under President Millard Fillmore (to fill the vacancy caused by the death of Daniel Webster). Everett was elected as a Whig to the Senate from Massachusetts in 1854 and was an unsuccessful candidate for vice president in 1860. Everett spoke at Gettysburg with President Abraham Lincoln in 1863. These words open Everett's famously long and wordy speech at Gettysburg:

Such were the tokens of respect required to be paid at Athens to the memory of those who had fallen in the cause of their country. For those alone who fell at Marathon a special honor was reserved. As the battle fought upon that immortal field was distinguished from all others in Grecian history for its influence over the fortunes of Hellas - as it depended upon the event of that day whether Greece should live, a glory and a light to all coming time, or should expire like the meteor of a moment; so the honors awarded to its martyrs - heroes were such as were bestowed by Athens on no other occasion. They alone of all her sons were

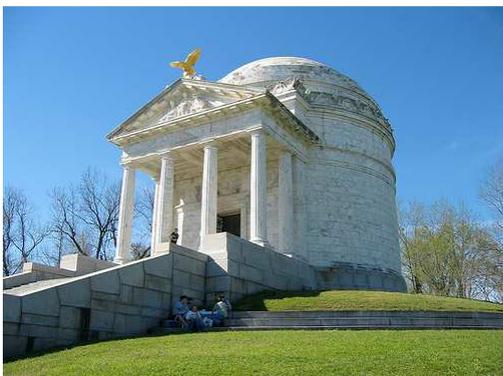
entombed upon the spot which they had forever rendered famous ... those who rolled back the tide of Persian invasion, and rescued the land of popular liberty, of letters, and of arts, from the ruthless foe, stand unmoved over the graves of our dear brethren, who so lately, on three of the all-important days which decide a nation's history, days on whose issue it depended whether this august republican Union, founded by some of the wisest statesmen that ever lived, cemented with the blood of some of the purest patriots that ever died, should perish or endure rolled back the tide of an invasion, not less unprovoked, not less ruthless, than that which came to plant the dark banner of Asiatic despotism and slavery on the free soil of Greece?" Heaven forbid! And ... fellow citizens, gathered, many of you from distant States, who have come to take part in these pious offices of gratitude you, respected fathers, brethren, matrons, sisters, who surround me.

- Who is Everett's audience?
- How do Everett's references to *Marathon*, *august republican Union*, and *Asiatic despotism and slavery on the free soil of Greece* act as rhetorical tools, helping Everett to advance the mood and emotions of the audience and elaborate the theme of his address? What is he referring to?
- How does this introductory passage invoke classical ideas of glory, sacrifice, heroism and nobility?

For extended study of Edward Everett, consult Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, especially Ch. 1, "Oratory of the Greek Revival," and *Edward Everett Papers*, edited by Frederick S. Allis, Jr., Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1972.

For Further Study: Neoclassicism Around Us

- In the twentieth century classical forms continued to dominate U.S. public buildings such as government buildings, universities, museums, and banks. The Supreme Court and Jefferson Memorial in Washington D.C. are outstanding examples of late neoclassical architecture as is the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo, New York.
- Why did these forms have continuing appeal and what emotions were to be invoked by such forms? Search out and identify local examples of the neoclassical style in your locality.



Illinois Memorial, Vicksburg, 1906



Navy Memorial, 1911

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This site was made possible by a grant for Teaching and Learning Resources funded by the Education Division of the National Endowment for the Humanities. It is a We the People Project designed to advance history and civic excellence. It extends an NEH-funded Faculty Humanities Workshop for Los Angeles teachers on Neoclassicism held at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, in June 2006.

We are grateful for the help from the Musée du Louvre, Manhattan Rare Book Company, and museum staffs nationwide that have helped with permissions and copyrights of illustrations.

Special thanks for this site and project goes to the many people who shared their time, talent, encouragement, and insights: Barbara Ashbrook, Gifford Combs, Stapley Emberling, Richard Fonte, Constance Haydock, Michael Poliakoff, Carl J. Richard, Richard Wendorf, Caroline Winterer, and David Zeidberg.

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