



PHAIDON







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**Opposite**  
**Johann**  
**Zoffany,**  
*The Tribuna*  
*of the Uffizi*  
(detail),  
1772–7,  
Oil on canvas;  
123.5×154.9 cm,  
48¾×61 in.  
Royal Collection,  
Buckingham  
Palace

Napoleon's favourite style in art was Neoclassical. Monuments erected to commemorate Nelson's achievements were Neoclassical. They and their contemporaries lived through a period of ferment, political as well as cultural. Their lives, in terms of the visual arts, were dominated by one style: Neoclassicism. Houses, churches, museums, banks and shops were frequently designed in the new style. It was the form of building and decoration that emigrants took with them to the developing colonies. Teapots, buckles and lamp-posts were among the daily reminders of the wide-ranging influence of the classical past of Greece and Rome on contemporary taste. Today we take for granted a much more diffuse situation, with no single style predominating. The period between about 1750 and 1830, however, was more clear-cut. Neoclassicism held sway for roughly eighty years, with medieval and exotic alternative styles either scarcely gaining a hold or being absorbed into the classical idiom. Neoclassicism was a very pervasive style. Originating in France and Italy, it spread in all directions, as far as St Petersburg, Edinburgh, Philadelphia and Sydney, and penetrated all levels of society. Only after 1830 was its leading position seriously undermined.

This book embraces all manifestations of the Neoclassical style, looking not only at the movement's unusually broad territorial scope, but also at its versatility in every branch of art. In its comprehensiveness the book aims to provide an insight into the richness and variety of one of the most fertile and dynamic styles in the history of art that affected the lives of so many people. That is the first reason why Neoclassicism is important. There is also a second. While being deeply conscious of the past, the period also saw the laying of foundations for the later development of modern art, from the 1880s onwards. Leading Neoclassicists questioned some of the basic fundamentals of art which had been accepted

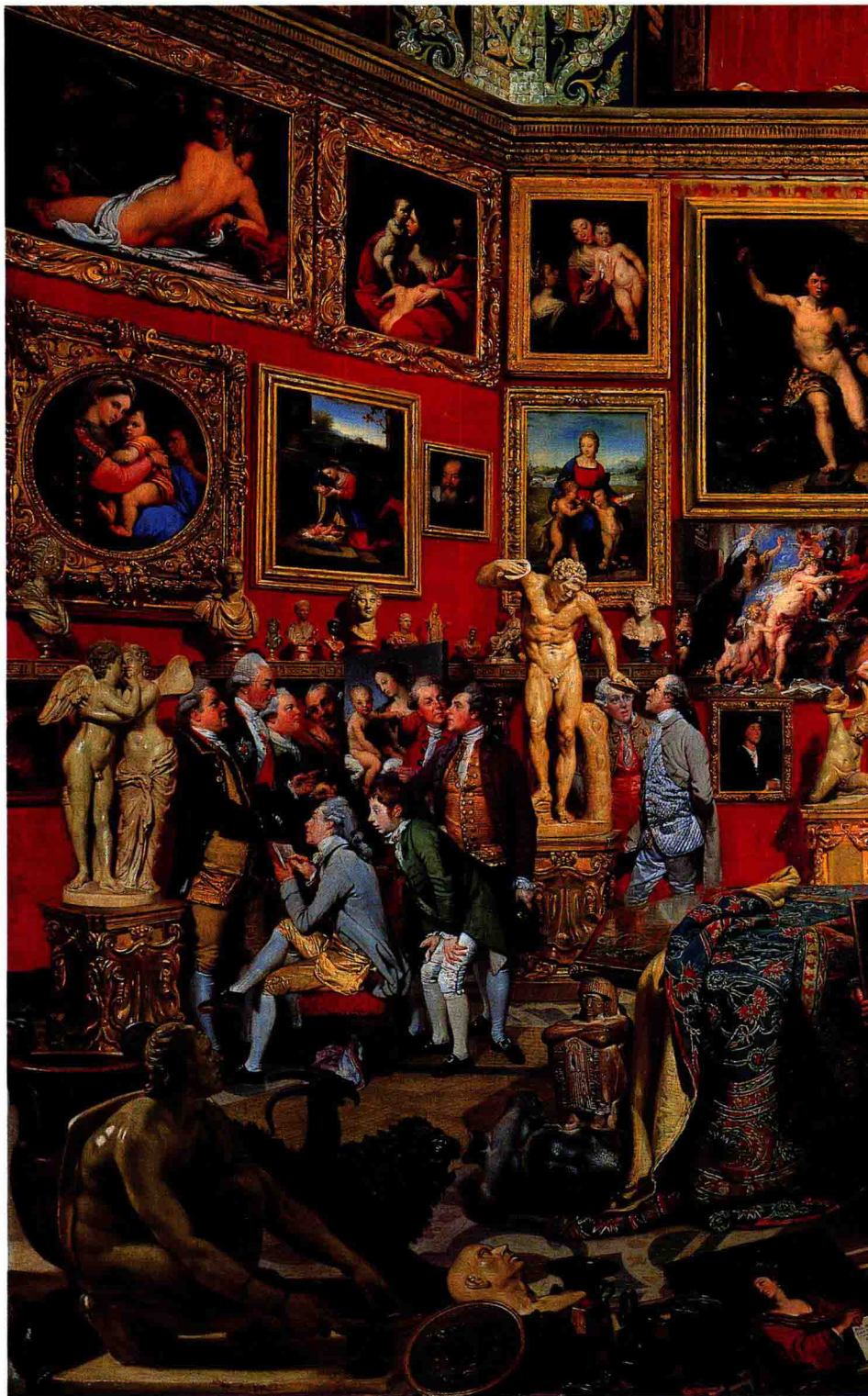
from the Renaissance onwards. Gauguin, Matisse and other modern masters were to inherit and explore further ideas that had originated about 1800. Like the two-faced classical god Janus, Neoclassicism looked both behind and ahead.

Since the fall of the Roman Empire, a strand of the classical past has been continuously alive, sometimes hardly perceptible, but on occasions more obviously discernible in the form of classical revivals. The civilization of ancient Greece and Rome was viewed as a state of perfection, a Golden Age. Different generations took it as a model, to be emulated in contemporary thought, literature and art. The Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was the most famous of these revivals. It had been preceded by two earlier ones, but the more important of these, in the twelfth century, had not been as wide in either intellectual or territorial scope as the later Renaissance.

The classical tradition as embodied in the Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries lived on uninterrupted through succeeding centuries. Classicism remained of fundamental importance to the development of European art right through the period from Raphael to the advent of Neoclassicism in the mid-eighteenth century. That movement learnt a great deal not only from Raphael and his contemporaries, but also from their successors in the seventeenth century. Although often called the Age of the Baroque, the art of the seventeenth century was not wholly swept up in the extravaganza of that style. Concurrent with the Baroque, indeed interwoven with it, was a seventeenth-century classicism, embodied in the work of such painters as Poussin and Claude, as well as like-minded architects and sculptors. This form of classicism was well known to the Neoclassical generation, who derived much inspiration from it, especially in the early development of the style.

In the eighteenth century itself, classicism was still alive throughout Europe in the first fifty years. However, it was also the period of the Rococo style, against which the Neoclassical generation reacted vehemently, dismissing the art of Boucher and his







1  
**Johann Zoffany,**  
*The Tribuna of the Uffizi,*  
1772-7.  
Oil on canvas;  
123.5 x 154.9 cm,  
48 3/4 x 61 in.  
Royal Collection,  
Buckingham  
Palace



contemporaries as frivolous, or worse. The rejection of Rococo – for varying reasons in different countries – helped to galvanize a strong resurgence of classicism.

This new classicism, to be subsequently labelled ‘Neoclassicism’, was stimulated by a vastly increased first-hand knowledge of classical antiquity. The second half of the eighteenth century knew far more about ancient Roman, and subsequently ancient Greek, art than any previous century since the fall of those civilizations. Herculaneum and Pompeii were excavated for the first time, and important sites on the Greek mainland and islands were measured and published, also for the first time. This explosion of knowledge about classical art and society went hand in hand with influential theoretical and historical writings and contributed as strongly as the ancient artefacts themselves to a change in taste.

The Neoclassical style is therefore characterized by a strong classical influence, derived not only directly from the antique past, but also from the filtering of that tradition through the Renaissance and the seventeenth century. This did not mean, however, that the Neoclassical style was exclusively antique, in either form or content. Other styles made minor contributions, such as medieval and Egyptian, together with elements from cultures further east. Content, as far as painters and sculptors were concerned, although often determined by classical history and mythology, also embraced a wide range of other sources for subject matter. Even contemporary subject matter, however, could be treated in the Neoclassical style. Out of all this material evolved an art that suited many tastes and requirements. It could be intellectually exacting or charmingly decorative. It could be manipulated for political propaganda or commercial gain. It was, above all, very versatile.

The noun ‘Neoclassicism’ was first used in its present-day meaning only a hundred years ago, and is therefore not contemporary with the movement itself, unlike the use of the word ‘Romantic’. Reviewing the current annual exhibition at the Royal Academy in London, a leading newspaper critic in 1893 said of one artist’s

history piece entitled *The Sleep of the Gods* that 'a man must be a scholar before he can make neoclassicism even tolerable in art'. This derogatory comment on a minor Victorian painting was an unspectacular adoption of the word 'neoclassicism'. The term had already been in use in art criticism, from 1881 onwards, but only to describe the style of Poussin. But in describing his art with such adjectives as 'noble', 'solemn' and 'austere', a vocabulary was beginning to emerge that would be applied subsequently to the art of the period from 1750 to 1830. From the 1920s onwards, 'Neoclassicism' acquired its now generally accepted sense. Rather confusingly, however, literary historians apply the same term to English writings in the first half of the eighteenth century, while musicologists apply it to certain composers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (including Stravinsky).

During the writing of this book, the controversy raged about the possible export from Britain of an important marble group of the *Three Graces* by the great Italian Neoclassicist Antonio Canova, bought by a landed aristocrat in the early nineteenth century for his country house, and recently sold by a descendant. During the fund-raising campaign, one newspaper columnist noted: 'Poor old *Three Graces*! As a popular work of art it has everything going against it. It is Neoclassical – a style which has been revised in esteem but never taken to heart.' The journalist was the latest in a long line of commentators in the twentieth century who have shown little sympathy for the style. Kandinsky dismissed Neoclassicism as 'a still-born child'; the potter Bernard Leach dismissed the Neoclassical products of Wedgwood as 'unnatural, useless and false'; while Kenneth Clark labelled the style 'frigid'. In the 1990s Neoclassicism has indeed been revised in esteem; but 'never taken to heart'? An Empress of Russia, a President of the newly formed United States of America, an English industrialist – these would be among the countless objectors from the Neoclassical period itself to the use of 'never'. The style appealed to both mind and heart then, and as one of the most important movements in the history of art can do so today.

The story of Neoclassicism can be viewed in three phases.

The first, the period from about 1750 to 1790, was the age of the Grand Tour, which formed a vital part of the education of many artists, writers and aristocrats, and which provides the background to the development of a taste for classical styles born of first-hand experience of Italian and, later, Greek sites. Architects who espoused Neoclassicism at this time include such great names of the century as Soufflot, Ledoux and Boullée in France, Adam in Britain and Piranesi in Italy, while history painting formed a major part of the output of artists ranging from early pioneers like Benjamin West to the most famous of all Neoclassical painters, Jacques-Louis David. The response of the Neoclassical generation to landscape embraced a new kind of 'picturesque' or natural style of garden design, incorporating Neoclassical buildings and sculptural ornaments, as well as the idealized classical landscapes created on canvas by such artists as Turner. In the decorative arts, Neoclassicism flourished in the ceramic products of such firms as Wedgwood and Sèvres, as well as other items such as wallpapers and textiles.

The period from 1790 to 1830 saw the Neoclassical style change in character, becoming more austere, increasingly influenced by ancient Greece rather than Rome. Neoclassical themes informed the use of art as patriotic propaganda at the time of the French Revolution and Napoleonic period, and continued to be explored in the paintings, sculptures and buildings of the post-1790 period. Prominent among the architects are Soane in Britain and Schinkel in Germany, where he created a modern Berlin. Neoclassicism became an influential style in the newly independent United States, together with the British colonies in India and Australia, and featured prominently in early industrial design.

The final phase is from 1830 to the present day. Although no longer dominant, Neoclassicism nevertheless continued to exert an influence, as can be seen from works as disparate as sculptures shown at the Crystal Palace in 1851 and buildings erected by Hitler during the Third Reich. Neoclassicism is still with us today.



# 1



Wearing his new, red silk suit acquired in Lyons on his journey south, a young British architect travelled in his own green and gold coach, hoping to make an impression as he passed through Italy. Like many other eighteenth-century artists he was making a journey that he felt was obligatory. It was both a real journey and a journey of ideas. As he travelled to Italy he looked at many works of art, as tourists still do. However, at a deeper level, those same works were shaping contemporary taste and ideas about art. Classical archaeology, in particular, was changing perceptions of the past.

2

David Allan,  
*The Arrival of a  
Young Traveller  
and his Suite  
during the  
Carnival in  
Rome, c.1775.*  
Pen and  
brown wash;  
40 x 54 cm,  
15 3/4 x 21 1/4 in.  
Royal Collection,  
Windsor Castle

The young man was the 26-year-old Robert Adam (1728–92), who knew how to project an image of himself that would inspire confidence in potential clients. Not all artists splashed out on fancy suits and coaches, but they did have other things in common while on their travels in Italy. They hoped to invest in their future success by gaining knowledge and skills, combined with a modest amount of social life that might lead to commissions. The aristocracy and gentry, on the other hand, treated their tour as a continuation of their education, combined with a whirl of social activity, and possibly a shopping spree for their art collections. Adam was one of the many thousands of the rich and the educated from all over Europe who travelled south to Italy during the eighteenth century: a journey which became known as the Grand Tour (2). British travellers were predominant, and have left numerous autobiographical accounts of Italy; fewer came from France and Germany, and smaller numbers still from such countries as Russia, Denmark and the newly independent United States. In terms of the number of artists on the move, however, the French and Germans do not seem to have been outnumbered by the British.

There were two main routes to Italy for those travelling from



Britain: from Paris through Switzerland (via Mont Cenis) to Turin, Milan, Florence, and then south; or via Lyons to Nice, and then by boat first to Genoa then Livorno (Leghorn) or occasionally further north to Lerici. Whichever route was chosen, however, travelling was tedious and expensive. Letters and journals are full of accounts of inns with poor accommodation and food, of carriages that were uncomfortable and got stuck in ruts or snow, and of sea-crossings delayed for days or even weeks by bad weather. Tourists also found some of the scenery on the way depressing or, worse still, alarming – some travelled through the Alps with their coach blinds drawn down.

Whatever the rigours, however, the goal of Italy made the journey worthwhile. 'There is certainly no place in the world where a man may travel with greater pleasure and advantage than in Italy', run the opening words of a guidebook by Joseph Addison (1672–1719), the famous essayist and critic contributing to the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*. First published in 1705 and frequently reprinted throughout the century, Addison's *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy* found its way into the luggage of many British travellers. Its compact, pocket-sized format contained a wealth of basic facts combined with an erudite commentary, interspersed with numerous classical quotations. The era of the modern guidebook had arrived, with publishers across Europe supplying a rapidly expanding demand from both travellers and armchair readers.

On his first page, Addison summarized Italy's varied attractions. The landscape was 'more astonishing than anywhere else in Europe'. It was the 'great school' of music and painting. It contained 'all the noblest productions of statuary and architecture, both ancient and modern', and it 'abounds with cabinets of curiosities, and vast collections of all kinds of classical antiquities'. For those interested in politics, 'no other country in the world has such a variety of governments' (Italy was not united until late in the nineteenth century). And for those concerned with history, 'there is scarce any part of the nation that is not famous, nor so

much as a mountain or river, that has not been the scene of some extraordinary action' Italy could provide something to suit all tastes. In days long before tourist boards and travel agents' brochures, Addison did a good job in promoting Italy's longstanding attractions. By the mid-eighteenth century, Italy already had a booming tourist industry.

The 'advantage' of Italy – which Addison's readers would have taken for granted – meant the furthering of one's education, the acquisition of intellectual and cultural knowledge that was an integral part of the upbringing of the aristocracy, gentry, writers and artists. Travelling to Italy was not just for fun, although there was plenty of enjoyable social life available on arrival. According to some commentators on education, this Grand Tour should begin around the age of twenty. By then the traveller would have acquired a sound basis in classical history and literature – the foundation of European education in the eighteenth century. Many travellers were of course older, but all shared this classical background, and their imaginations were well prepared long before they set foot on Italian soil.

Most of the towns *en route* to Rome merited only brief stays to see the sites. Florence, however, attracted visitors for longer periods because of its greater artistic riches. These were greatly enhanced by the Duke of Tuscany's removal of his antique sculptures from the Villa Medici in Rome in 1770 to the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. The city then became the only one in Italy that could compete with Rome and Naples for classical statuary.

In the Uffizi Gallery, one of the greatest art collections in Europe, the focal point was the Tribuna. Specially built to display some of the most famous works in the collection, its crimson velvet walls were thickly hung with Old Master paintings. They provided a dazzling, if bewildering, backdrop for a group of major antique sculptures. In the best eighteenth-century visual record of the Tribuna (see 1), a large group of British tourists – or 'flock of travelling boys' as one contemporary waspishly described them – is shown examining and copying works in the room. Although the

