HUMANISM and the CLASSICAL TRADITION:

NEOCLASSICISM:

(Neoclassical Art of France, England, and America)
NEOCLASSICISM

Online Links:

[Thomas Jefferson's Monticello – Smarthistory](#)

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[Jefferson's Monticello - Smithsonian Video - YouTube](#)

[Canova's Paolina Borghese as Venus Victorious – Smarthistory](#)

[Houdon's George Washington - Smarthistory](#)
In England, the Baroque- and especially Rococo, with all its frills – was rejected in the eighteenth century in favor of renewed interest in the ordered, classicizing appearance of Palladian architecture. Palladio’s *Four Books of Architecture* was published in an English translation in 1715, and exerted widespread influence. An early example of English Palladian style is Chiswick House on the southwestern outskirts of London, which Lord Burlington (1695-1753) began in 1725 as a library and place for entertainments.

Burlington based Chiswick House loosely on Palladio’s Villa Rotonda, although it is on a smaller scale, and there are some significant differences in the plans.
In Rome, Burlington had persuaded an English expatriate, William Kent (1685-1748), to return to London as his collaborator. Kent designed Chiswick’s surprisingly ornate interior as well as the grounds, the latter in a style that became known throughout Europe as the “English landscape garden.”

Kent’s garden, in contrast to the regularity and rigid formality of Baroque gardens, featured winding paths, a lake with a cascade, irregular plantings and shrubs, and other effects imitating the appearance of the natural rural landscape. The English landscape garden was another indication of the growing Enlightenment emphasis on the natural.
At the time the Baroque style was identified with papist Rome by English Protestants, with absolutist France by George I, and with Tory policies by the Whig opposition. Thus began an association with between Neoclassicism and liberal politics that was to continue through the French Revolution. The appeal to reason found support in Palladio himself, who decried abuses “contrary to natural reason” on the grounds that “architecture, as well as all other arts, being an imitation of nature, can suffer nothing that either alienates or deviates from that which is agreeable to nature.”

This rationalism helps to explain the abstract, segmented look of Chiswick House on Burlington’s estate. Adapted by Burlington and Kent from the Villa Rotonda, as well as other Italian sources, it is compact, simple, and geometric- the antithesis of the Baroque pomp of Blenheim Palace (below left).
In 1743, the banker Henry Hoare redid the grounds of his estate at Stourhead in Wiltshire with the assistance of Flitcroft, a protégé of Burlington. The resulting gardens at Stourhead carried William Kent’s ideas much further. Stourhead is, in effect, an exposition of the picturesque, with orchestrated views dotted with Greek and Roman temples, grottoes, copies of antique statues, and such added delights as a rural cottage, a Chinese bridge, a Gothic spire, and a Turkish tent.
Left: Stourhead House, 1721-1725
Right: Chiswick House
Thomas Jefferson. Monticello (Charlottesville, Virginia, US), 1770-1806
In the period after the War of Independence, called the Federal Period (1783-1830), Neoclassicism dominated American architecture. Despite the recent hostilities with Britain, American domestic architecture remained tied to developments in that country.

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), principal author of the Declaration of Independence, designed his residence, Monticello, in a style much influenced by British examples.

Jefferson was a self-taught architect who in the period before the American Revolution shared the British aristocratic taste for Palladio. His first version of Monticello, built in the 1770s, was based on a design in Palladio’s *Four Books on Architecture.*
Built of brick with wood trim, it is not so doctrinaire in design as Chiswick House. (Note the less compact plan and the numerous windows.) It nevertheless stands as a monument to the Enlightenment ideals of order and harmony, with which Jefferson was fully in sympathy.

The original plan was adapted from a book of English designs, then gradually modified as Jefferson was exposed to other treatises. The scheme of about 1770 featured an Ionic portico placed over a Doric one and surmounted by a pediment. However, the building was remodeled during Jefferson’s presidency, and in its final form Monticello has a façade inspired by Palladio, though the plan itself was modified only slightly.
Based on the ancient concept of democracy, Jefferson recognized a basic ruled-based principle of order in ancient architecture. In a society based on universal equality, architecture must not be overpowering and diffuse but simple and comprehensible. For Jefferson, Republican Rome was the social and architectural model which he saw as re-emerging in the USA. Monticello, which was the center of a working farm and estate, recalls the life of ancient Roman farms or villas as evoked in the writings of Virgil, Cicero, Horace, Varro or Pliny the younger.
Jefferson changed political parties and was a Democratic-Republican by the time he was elected president. He believed the young United States needed to forge a strong diplomatic relationship with France, a country Jefferson and his political brethren believed were our revolutionary brothers in arms. With this in mind, it is unsurprising that Jefferson designed his own home after the neoclassicism then popular in France, a mode of architecture that was distinct from the style then fashionable in Great Britain. This neoclassicism—with roots in the architecture of ancient Rome—was something Jefferson was able to visit while abroad.
Antonio Canova. *Pauli ne Borghese as Venus*, 1808, marble
Napoleon Bonaparte’s favorite sister, Paulina Borghese, reclines half-draped on an Empire couch in the guise of Venus, holding in one hand the golden apple she received from Paris for her beauty. Antonio Canova (1747-1822) has carved her delicate features and perfect form which were once so famous in the Neoclassical style. Paulina was a manipulative minx. She was outstandingly vain, vastly extravagant, and surrounded herself with admirers and a procession of lovers. She liked to use her ladies-in-waiting as foot-stools, warming her feet on their bosoms, and to be carried to and from her bath, wrapped in a towel, by a gigantic Negro. As she held court, a naked boy covered in gold would spray her with scent.
In 1803 Napoleon arranged for his wayward twenty-three-year-old sister to marry for the second time the enormously rich Prince Camillo Borghese. Soon afterwards Canova was given the commission. Later, it was said that the Prince guarded it jealously letting few people see it, preferring to look at it at night, lit only by a single candle. Paulina sat for it at her own suggestion and the half-naked statue caused quite a scandal.
Antonio Canova. *Perseus*, 1801, marble

Canova’s friends included Jacques-Louis David, who helped to spread his fame in France. In 1802, Canova was invited to Paris by Napoleon, who wanted his portrait done by the greatest sculptor of the age.

With Napoleon’s approval, he made a colossal nude figure in marble showing the conqueror as a victorious and peace-giving Mars.
A major factor for the widespread interest in antiquity, and one that made eighteenth-century neoclassicism unique, was the scientific uncovering of ancient classical ruins.

In 1738, the king of Naples sponsored the first archeological excavations at Herculaneum, one of the two Roman cities in Southern Italy buried under volcanic ash by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE. The excavations at Pompeii would follow in 1748.

Despite the mounting evidence that the ancients had painted their statues and mixed their materials, the coloring of sculpture remained a taboo subject in academic circles until well into the nineteenth century.
Antonio Canova. *Theseus and the Minotaur*, 1782, marble

Canova’s arrival in Rome, on 28 December 1780, marks a new era in his life. It was here he was to perfect himself by a study of the most splendid relics of antiquity, and to put his talents to the severest test by a competition with the living masters of the art. The result was equal to the highest hopes cherished either by himself or by his friends. The work which first established his fame at Rome was *Theseus and the Minotaur*.

The figures are of the heroic size. The victorious Theseus is represented as seated on the lifeless body of the monster. The exhaustion which visibly pervades his whole frame proves the terrible nature of the conflict in which he has been engaged. Simplicity and natural expression had hitherto characterized Canova's style; with these were now united more exalted conceptions of grandeur and of truth. The Theseus was regarded with fervent admiration.
Jacques-Germain Soufflot. The Pantheon, or Sainte-Genevieve (Paris), 1755-92

The Panthéon is a building in Paris, originally built as a church dedicated to St. Genevieve, now functions as a secular mausoleum containing the remains of distinguished French citizens. It is an example of Neoclassicism, with a façade modeled on the Pantheon in Rome, surmounted by a dome that owes some of its character to Bramante’s Tempietto.
The overall design was that of a Greek cross with a massive portico of Corinthian columns. Its ambitious lines called for a vast building 110 meters long by 84 meters wide, and 83 meters high.

No less vast was its crypt. Soufflot's masterstroke is concealed from casual view: the triple dome, each shell fitted within the others, permits a view through the oculus of the coffered inner dome of the second dome, frescoed by Antoine Gros with *The Apotheosis of Saint Genevieve*.

The outermost dome is built of stone bound together with iron cramps and covered with lead sheathing, rather than of carpentry construction, as was the common French practice of the period. Concealed flying buttresses pass the massive weight of the triple construction outwards to the portico columns.
Soufflot had the intention of combining the lightness and brightness of the Gothic cathedral with classical principles, but its role as a mausoleum required the great Gothic windows to be blocked.

The foundations were laid in 1758, but due to the economic problems in France at this time, work proceeded slowly. In 1780, Soufflot died and was replaced by his student, Jean-Baptiste Rondelet. The remodeled Abbey of St. Genevieve was finally completed in 1790, coinciding with the early stages of the French Revolution.
While neoclassicism was the ‘official’ style of the French Revolution, it soon became the vehicle of French imperialism. Under the leadership of Napoleon Bonaparte, the imagery of classical Greece and republican Rome was abandoned for the more appropriate imagery of Augustan Rome. Like the Roman emperors, Napoleon used the arts to magnify his greatness.
The book under the table is *Plutarch’s Lives*, a great work written at the height of the Roman Empire. It contains learned biographies of military heroes such as Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar.

The document on the desk at which Napoleon has been working is the *Code Napoleon*, the codification of law that is the basis of the French legal system today. One of his greatest achievements was to establish an efficient system of civil administration throughout continental Europe.

The clock hands point to 13 minutes past four in the morning. The candles have burned low, and Napoleon rises heavy-eyed from his desk, where he has been working on state papers.
David’s work was fundamental in the creation of the French Empire style. The throne-like chair, designed by David, is a magnificent example of this style. It is inscribed with the initial “N.”

Surprisingly, this painting was commissioned by a British nobleman, the Duke of Hamilton, who planned a series of portraits of European rulers. The Duke also had a political agenda, which drew him close to Napoleon: as a Catholic and a nationalist, he dreamed that Napoleon might restore the Catholic Stuarts to the British throne.

The rolled-up document on the floor beside the desk is a map of France, bearing the artist’s name. The name is inscribed in Latin, “This is the work of Louis David.”
Jacques-Louis David. *The Coronation of Napoleon*, 1805-8, oil on canvas
This large scale work documents the pomp and pageantry of Napoleon’s coronation in December of 1804. David conceptually divided the painting to reveal polarities. In this case, the pope, prelates, and priests representing the Catholic Church appear on the right, contrasting with members of Napoleon’s imperial court on the left. The relationship between church and state was one of this period’s most contentious issues. Napoleon insisted that the painter depict the pope with his hand raised in blessing.
David took certain liberties with history and protocol: he downsized the structure of Notre-Dame Cathedral to give the figures greater impact; on Napoleon's orders, he included Letizia Bonaparte ("Madame Mère") in his painting, although she had not attended the coronation ceremony, of which she disapproved; again on the Emperor's instructions, he portrayed the Pope making a gesture of blessing, having originally represented him with his hands on his knees; and the Emperor's sisters stand immobile, though they held the Empress's train at the ceremony itself.

These various artistic solutions, designed to suit this monumental painting and its fascinating hero, fully satisfied the Emperor: "What relief, what truthfulness! This is not a painting; one walks in this picture." David realized the significance of this work for the future and for his personal fame, saying "I shall slide into posterity in the shadow of my hero."
At the actual event, Napoleon’s decision to crown himself, rather than to allow the pope to perform the coronation, as was traditional, revealed Napoleon’s concern about the power relationship between church and state. Napoleon’s insistence on emphasizing his authority is evidenced by his selection of the moment depicted; having already crowned himself, Napoleon places a crown on his wife’s head.
David drew inspiration for the layout of his painting from Rubens's Coronation of Marie de Medici (in the Louvre).

He witnessed the ceremony first-hand and had most of its participants pose for him, also reconstructing the scene in his purpose-built studio with cardboard models and wax figurines.
Baron Antoine-Jean Gros (1771-1835), also known as Jean-Antoine Gros, entered the studio of Jacques Louis David in 1785 while also taking classes at the College Mazarin. Disturbed by the development of the Revolution, he left France for Italy in 1793.

Gros, living in Italy, painted the seminal image of the young Napoleon — eager, resolute, the leader of his troops but not yet the all-powerful dictator. This painting is an image of military determination rather than political authority. Napoleon’s first Italian campaign against Austrian forces in 1796 was ultimately a great success, but his troops were poorly fed and undisciplined.
Antoine-Jean Gros. *Napoleon at the Pesthouse at Jaffa*, 1804, oil on canvas
Antoine-Jean Gros (1771-1835) helped launch French Romanticism with his *Napoleon in the Plague House at Jaffa*, a commission from the man crowned emperor in 1804, Napoleon Bonaparte, the year of its completion. The painting is an idealized account of an actual incident. During Napoleon’s campaign against the Turks in 1799, bubonic plague broke out among his troops. Napoleon decided to quiet the fears of the healthy by visiting the sick and dying, who were housed and treated in a converted mosque.

To calm the panic that followed, the general entered the pesthouse and walked fearlessly among the patients—an event that soon became legendary. The painting is a carefully calculated piece of propaganda that ignores the fact that Napoleon ordered the execution of hundreds of prisoners.
The focus is on the general’s courage in touching the sick and dying. (Note the officer covering his face with a kerchief against the odor.) Many of the figures are paraphrased from Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment*. The burning ruins in the background heighten the apocalyptic aura of the scene. But what really excited the artist’s imagination was the alien surroundings.

*Napoleon in the Pesthouse at Jaffa* is one of the first symptoms of Orientalism: the Romantic fascination with the Arab world that preoccupied European artists and writers. (Jaffa is in present-day Israel.)
Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy-Trioson. *Ossian receiving the Ghosts of the French Heroes*, 1801, oil on canvas

Napoleon was drawn to creating a mythic image of himself. Part of this mythology was an attraction to a heroic saga written by “Ossian”. *Ossian* is the narrator and purported author of a cycle of epic poems published by the Scottish poet James Macpherson from 1760. Even though many critics doubted the work’s authenticity from the beginning, Napoleon, Diderot, and Thomas Jefferson were great admirers. A heroic mythology, illustrated in works such as this painting by Girodet, could be used to distance the horrors of war.
This complex allegory alluded to the current political scene, though it was soon overtaken by events. Its full title described how the shades of the French heroes, “led by Victory, arrive to live in the aerial Elysium where the ghosts of Ossian and his valiant warriors gather to render to them in their voyage of immortality and glory a festival of peace and friendship.”

Girodet painted the picture at a time when there was hope of negotiating an end to the Napoleonic Wars, but the British were still resistant.
Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780-1867) was a French Neoclassical painter. In March 1797, the Academy awarded Ingres first prize in drawing, and in August he traveled to Paris to study with Jacques Louis David.

He remained in David’s studio for four years. Ingres followed his master’s example but revealed, according to David, a tendency toward exaggeration in his studies.
This portrait of Napoleon depicts the emperor in his coronation costume. In his right hand he holds the scepter of Charlemagne and in his left the hand of justice. On his head is a golden laurel wreath, similar to one worn by Caesar. He also wears an ermine hood under the great collar of the Légion d'honneur, a gold-embroidered satin tunic and an ermine-lined purple velvet cloak decorated with gold bees.

At the Salon, it produced a disturbing impression on the public, due not only to Ingres's stylistic idiosyncrasies but also to his depiction of the Carolingian imagery worn by Napoleon at his coronation.
David (who finished his own *The Coronation of Napoleon* the following year) delivered a severe judgment, and the critics were uniformly hostile, finding fault with the strange discordances of colour, the want of sculptural relief, the chilly precision of contour, and the self-consciously archaic quality.

From the beginning of his career, Ingres freely borrowed from earlier art, adopting the historical style appropriate to his subject, leading critics to charge him with plundering the past.
For the art historian Robert Rosenblum, Ingres's model was the figure of God the Father on the *Ghent Altarpiece* by Jan van Eyck, which was in the Louvre at the time Ingres painted this portrait.

The Arc de Triomphe was commissioned in 1806 after the victory at Austerlitz by Napoleon at the peak of his fortunes. Laying the foundations alone took two years and, in 1810, when Napoleon entered Paris from the west with his bride Marie-Louise of Austria, he had a wooden mock-up of the completed arch constructed.
In the attic above the richly sculptured frieze of soldiers are 30 shields engraved with the names of major Revolutionary and Napoleonic military victories. Following its construction, the arch became the rallying point of French troops parading after successful military campaigns and for the annual Bastille Day Military Parade.
Designed by Pierre Vignon (1763-1828), this grandiose temple includes a high podium and broad flight of stairs leading to a deep porch in the front. As the church of St. Mary Magdalene, known as La Madeleine, it stands on top of an imposing sweep of steps facing the rue Royale, commanding a view towards the Place de la Concorde.

After many vicissitudes and changes of plan the present building is now a windowless edifice with a Greek temple façade of Corinthian columns. Work on the church was begun in 1764 but after the death of the architect in 1777 a new scheme was considered, and a Greek-cross building begun.

Well before its completion the revolutionary government dreamt up more rational uses for the building in progress. Napoleon decided on a Temple of Glory dedicated to the Great Army and in 1806 commissioned Vignon to build it.
After the fall of Napoleon, with the Catholic reaction during the Restoration, King Louis XVIII determined that the structure would be used as a church, dedicated to Mary Magdalene. Vignon died in 1828 before completing the project.

This sculptor, Jean-Antoine Houdon, made a commitment to Neoclassicism began during his stay in Rome, where he came into contact with some of the leading artists and theorists of the movement.

On the basis of his bust of the American ambassador to France, Benjamin Franklin, Houdon was commissioned by the Virginia state legislature to do a portrait of its native son *George Washington*. Houdon traveled to the United States in 1785 to make a cast of Washington’s features and a bust in plaster. He then executed a lifesize marble figure in Paris.
The plow behind Washington alludes to Cincinnatus, a Roman soldier of the fifth century BCE who was appointed dictator. After defeating the Aequi, he resigned the dictatorship and returned to his farm. Washington’s contemporaries compared him to Cincinnatus because, after leading the Americans to victory over the British, he resigned his commission and went back to farming rather than seeking political power.

Just below Washington’s waistcoat hangs the badge of the Society of the Cincinnati, founded in 1783 by the officers of the disbanding Continental Army who were returning to their peacetime occupations. Washington lived in retirement at his Mount Vernon, Virginia, plantation for five years before his 1789 election as the first president of the United States.
Although the military leader of the American Revolution of 1776 is dressed in his general’s uniform, Washington’s serene expression and relaxed contrapposto pose derive from sculpted images of classical athletes.

Washington’s left hand rests on a fasces, a bundle of rods tied together with an axe face, used in Roman times as a symbol of authority. The thirteen rods bound together are also a reference to the union formed by the original states. Attached to the fasces are a sword of war and a plowshare of peace. Significantly, Houdon’s Washington does not touch the sword.
Evidence suggests that Houdon was to remain in Paris and sculpt Washington from a likeness Charles Wilson Peale had drawn. Dissatisfied, and uncomfortable with carving in three dimensions what Peale had rendered in two, Houdon made plans to visit Washington in person.

Houdon departed for the United States in July 1785 and was joined by Benjamin Franklin—who he had sculpted in 1778—and two assistants.

The group sailed into Philadelphia about seven weeks later and Houdon and his assistants arrived at Mount Vernon—Washington’s home in Virginia—by early October. There they took detailed measurements of Washington’s body and sculpted a life mask of the future president’s face.
The “pedestrian statue,” as Jefferson called it (meaning a standing figure, on its own feet), was the by-product of a large deal, for in 1783 Congress had authorized the commissioning of an equestrian statue of the *pater patriae*, and Houdon was to do that too: his studio was already set up with the expensive gear and furnaces needed to cast a bronze figure of Louis XV on horseback. Jefferson was horrified by its prospective cost and he decided to get two figures from Houdon, if not for the price of one, then at least at a discount.

In the end, the bronze Washington on horseback was never done, but the marble one was delivered and installed in the rotunda of the Virginia State House in 1792. Jefferson had insisted that ‘the size should be precisely that of a man.’ Anything bigger would have been pretentious. It shows the statesman as citizen, *primus inter pares* in the Latin phrase that meant so much to the Founding Fathers— not a king, not a god, but first among equals.
Divine presence, however, is implied by its placement in the State House; Houdon’s Washington stands where the effigy of the god would have stood in a real Roman temple. The plinth, and the obstructive and ugly iron railing around the figure, was not part of Houdon’s design, but added much later, in nineteenth century.

His plough is the symbol of agrarian virtue, and implies the planting of a new political order. The final, almost subliminal touch is a missing button on the right lapel of Washington’s coat, which lets you know that the great man is capable of a certain negligence in *tenue* and is not a stickler for protocol—democracy in dress, as it were.
Horatio Greenough (1805 –1852) was an American sculptor best known for his United States government commissions *The Rescue* (1837–50) and *George Washington* (1840).
Greenough modeled his massive (30 tons) figure of “Enthroned Washington” on the great statue of *Zeus Olympios*, which was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World (and which was destroyed in late Antiquity).

The seated and sandal wearing Washington gazes sternly ahead. He is bare-chested and his right arm and hand gesture with upraised index finger toward heaven. His left palm and forearm cradle a sheathed sword, hilt forward, symbolizing Washington turning over power to the people at the conclusion of the American Revolutionary War.
The U. S. Congress commissioned Greenough to create a statue of Washington for display in the U.S. Capitol rotunda. When the marble statue arrived in Washington, DC, in 1841, however, it immediately generated controversy and criticism. Many found the sight of a half-naked Washington offensive, even comical.

The statue was relocated to the east lawn of the Capitol in 1843. Disapproval continued and some joked that Washington was desperately reaching for his clothes, then on exhibit at the Patent Office several blocks to the north. In 1908, the statue was brought back indoors when Congress transferred it to the Smithsonian Castle, where it remained until 1964. It was then moved to the new Museum of History and Technology (now the National Museum of American History).
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ACTIVITIES and REVIEW
STUDENT PRESENTATION #1:

After completing your research on Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello, devise a question to present to and answer for the class. Create a five-point rubric in which a ten-minute response might be formally assessed.
STUDENT PRESENTATION #2:

After completing your research on Houdon’s George Washington, devise a question to present to and answer for the class. Create a five-point rubric in which a ten-minute response might be formally assessed.
What does this drawing to the left by Ingres reveal about the way he approached portraiture in painted works as the work shown above?