

Topic Page: [Classicism](#)

Definition: **classicism** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Art history term used to describe both an aesthetic attitude and an artistic tradition. The artistic tradition refers to the classical antiquity of Greece and Rome, its art, literature and criticism, and the subsequent periods that looked back to Greece and Rome for their prototypes, such as the Carolingian Renaissance, Renaissance, and neo-classicism. Its aesthetic use suggests the classical characteristics of clarity, order, balance, unity, symmetry, and dignity.



Image from: [The Panthéon \(formerly the Church of St... in Philip's Encyclopedia](#)

Summary Article: **classicism**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

a term that, when applied generally, means clearness, elegance, symmetry, and repose produced by attention to traditional forms. It is sometimes synonymous with excellence or artistic quality of high distinction. More precisely, the term refers to the admiration and imitation of Greek and Roman literature, art, and architecture. Because the principles of classicism were derived from the rules and practices of the ancients, the term came to mean the adherence to specific academic canons.

The Renaissance and Thereafter

The first major revival of classicism occurred during the Renaissance (c.1400–1600). As a result of the intensified interest in Greek and Roman culture, especially the works of Plato and Cicero, classical standards were reinstated as the ideal norm in literature. In Florence, the early center of Renaissance learning, Cosimo de' Medici gathered a circle of humanists (see humanism) who collected, studied, expounded, and imitated the classics. Outside Italy writers affected by the revival of classical conventions included Francis Bacon and Ben Jonson in England and Pierre Corneille and Jean Racine in France.

Renaissance painters and sculptors whose works reflect the classical influence include Andrea Mantegna, Raphael, and Michelangelo. The Greek and Roman orders of architecture were also revived during the Renaissance and applied to ecclesiastical designs. Leone Battista Alberti wrote the first of several Renaissance treatises on architecture (1485), based on his reading of Vitruvius. The writers and artists of the baroque and rococo periods (c.1600–1750) that followed the Renaissance elaborated on many of the same classical themes, although their work is often characterized by a new exuberance of form and complexity of subject matter.

The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

Following the archaeological rediscovery of Herculaneum and Pompeii in the 18th cent. there was a renewed interest in the culture of ancient Rome and, subsequently, ancient Greece. This period is generally designated as neoclassicism, and it is considered to be the first phase in the larger romantic movement. The revival of antiquity in the 18th cent. was closely tied to such political events as the American and French revolutions, in which parallels were drawn between ancient and modern forms of government.

In German literature the classical stream was deflected in the last quarter of the 18th cent. by the

romantic period of Sturm und Drang, but it was revived later in the century when Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich von Schiller wrote classical drama. Classicism is also applied to the music of this period, especially the works of Franz Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Ludwig van Beethoven. In art and architecture classicism remained fashionable throughout the 19th cent. and into the early 20th cent. largely through the influence of the *école des Beaux-Arts* in France, whose curriculum was imitated in many countries.

The Twentieth Century

In early 20th-century Europe and the United States there was a renewed interest in Greek literature, and classical models were somewhat revived, as in the work of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. Abstracted classical elements can be found in the paintings of Paul Cézanne and Pablo Picasso, and in the architecture of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. A more overt classicism has found renewed acceptance among many postmodern architects in recent years. Spearheading the 20th-century neoclassical revival in music were Sergei Sergeyeovich Prokofiev, Igor Stravinsky, and Béla Bartók.

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