Hugh Honour

Style and Civilization

Neo-classicism

With 109 illustrations

Penguin Books

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England
Penguin Books, 625 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10022, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Limited, 2801 John Street, Markham, Ontario, Canada L3R 1B4
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182–190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

First published 1968
Reprinted 1973, 1975
Reprinted with revisions 1977
Reprinted 1979, 1981, 1983

Printed in Great Britain by
Fletcher & Son Ltd, Norwich
Set in Monotype Garamond

Designed by Gerald Cinamon

Contents

Editorial Foreword

The series to which this book belongs is devoted to both the history and the problems of style in European art. It is expository rather than critical. The aim is to discuss each important style in relation to contemporary shifts in emphasis and direction both in the other, non-visual arts and in thought and civilization as a whole. By examining artistic styles in this wider context it is hoped that closer definitions and a deeper understanding of their fundamental character and motivation will be reached.

The series is intended for the general reader but it is written at a level which should interest the specialist as well. Beyond this there has been no attempt at uniformity. Each author has had complete liberty in his mode of treatment and has been free to be as selective as he wished – for selection and compression are inevitable in a series such as this, whose scope extends beyond the history of art. Not all great artists or great works of art can be mentioned, far less discussed. Nor, more specifically, is it intended to provide anything in the nature of an historical survey, period by period, but rather a discussion of the artistic concepts dominant in each successive period. And, for this purpose, the detailed analysis of a few carefully chosen issues is more revealing than the bird's-eye view.

Acknowledgements

First of all I should like to thank the Ingram–Merrill Foundation for a generous grant without which I should not have been able to study – or even see – a great many buildings and works of art. Many friends have helped to guide my footsteps and drawn my attention to works I should otherwise have overlooked. I should particularly like to thank Mr Anthony M. Clark for ideas and information generously imparted over many years. And I must also thank Miss Jennifer Montagu for speedy help with a last-minute problem. I am deeply indebted to Professor Robert Rosenblum for providing me with a proof copy of *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art* while my work was in its final stage and for commenting most helpfully on my typescript. My thanks are due also to Professor Leopold Ettlinger, Professor Francis Haskell and Mr Michael Levey for reading my typescript and enabling me to improve it in many places. But my greatest debt of gratitude is to Mr John Fleming who has helped me at every stage and whose name should really be placed with mine on the title page.

For permission to reproduce photographs I am indebted to Her Majesty the Queen, Major Crompton-Inglefield, Mr Brinsley Ford, the Viscountess Galway, Herr Georg Schäfer, the Hon. Andrew Vanneck and the trustees of the several public collections named in the catalogue of plates. For help in obtaining photographs I should like to thank especially Miss N. Cossareva, Mr John Harris, Mrs Francis Haskell, Professor W. S. Heckscher, Mr Bevis Hillier, Mr Terence Hodgkinson, M. Daniel Meyer, Dr Oscar Reutersvard, M. Pierre Rosenberg and Mr Robert Rowe.

H.H.

Tofori, September 1967

Introduction

Neo-classicism is the style of the late eighteenth century, of the culminating, revolutionary phase in that great outburst of human inquiry known as the Enlightenment. The moral earnestness, the urgent seriousness, the high-minded, sometimes starry-eyed, idealism of the free-thinkers, *philosophes* and *Aufklärer* were all reflected in it. For Neo-classicism, in its most vital expressions, fully shared their spirit of reform which sought to bring about – whether by patient scientific advance or by a purgative return *à la* Rousseau to primitive simplicity and purity – a new and better world governed by the immutable laws of reason and equity, a world in which *l'infâme* would be for ever *écrasé*.

Yet the art of a period which witnessed political and social revolutions greater than any since the fall of the Roman Empire, which overturned long-established institutions and out of which modern Europe and America were to emerge, such an art could not have been 'classical' in any *simpliste* sense of the term. It was deeply marked by underlying and suppressed contradictions: and its increasingly uncompromising stance derived from the pressure of these inner tensions. But important though these subversive undercurrents were – especially for what was to follow – it is the more positive, conscious aspects of this complex style with which I shall be mainly concerned in this book. For it is in them that its true nature can most easily be seen and its links with the general aspirations of the period most clearly observed. The French Revolution was dedicated, in the words of Sir Isaiah Berlin, 'to the creation or restoration of a static and harmonious society, founded on unaltering principles, a dream of classic perfection, or at least the closest approximation to it feasible on earth. It preached a peaceful universalism and a rational humanitarianism.' If the word 'art' were substituted for 'society' these sentences might well be adopted to characterize the essence of the Neo-classical revolution.

It is difficult for us now to see Neo-classicism as a youthful, fiery, rebellious movement. The name itself is a stumbling block. It was invented in the mid nineteenth century as a pejorative term for what was then thought to be a lifeless, chilly and impersonal 'antique revival' style expressed in still-born imitations of Graeco-Roman sculpture: and these negative connotations still cling to it. (One still reads today of Canova's smooth and icy marbles, of the 'erotic frigidaire'.) Furthermore, the term Neo-classicism invites us to conceive the style as having been opposed to Romanticism – a conception quite foreign to the eighteenth century and very misleading if it tempts us to read back into it that *querelle* between Classics and Romantics which was an exclusively nineteenth-century phenomenon.

Neither the term 'Neo-classicism' nor even 'Classicism' was used in the late eighteenth century to describe the style which is the subject of this book. Critics, theorists and the artists themselves called it simply the 'true style' and referred to it as a 'revival of the arts' or a *risorgimento* of the arts, conceiving it as a new Renaissance, a reassertion of timeless truths and in no sense a mere mode or fashion. The fashion-conscious mania for novelty was among those aspects of the Rococo which were most abhorred by protagonists of the 'true style'.

But it is not only the name which hinders an understanding of Neo-classicism. By a curious reversal of values, the essential has become confused with the incidental, the main plant with its sports and suckers. Neo-classicism has come to mean a decorative style: interiors by Robert Adam and James Wyatt, furniture by Riesener and Weisweiler, silver by Auguste and Paul Storr, late Sèvres porcelain and early Wedgwood pottery. Flaxman is now known for his elegant pottery designs while his austerely primitive line engravings, which once fired the artistic youth of Europe, are neglected. And the great masterpieces of Neo-classicism – the paintings of David, the sculpture of Canova, the architecture of Ledoux, Soane and Latrobe – fit still less easily than Flaxman into this decorative strait-jacket. So they have tended to be absorbed into Romanticism or proto-Romanticism or into a hybrid Romantic-Classical style excogitated by art historians solely in order to cope with them.

Neo-classicism matured very rapidly, its moment of flowering was brief and followed by a period of no less rapid deterioration and devaluation during the Empire – often (and

how ironically) regarded as its climax. Of course, many elements survived into the Empire and became transmuted into Romantic art; others provided convenient motives and formulae for the academies and art schools – so rational a style had always been eminently teachable – and finally became the stock in trade of *l'art officiel* and *l'art pompier* of the mid nineteenth century. But worse was to follow. Fascists and Nazis propagated a so-called Neo-classical architecture, thus bringing the style's history full circle and making it the embodiment of the most reactionary of political programmes. This long line of bastard progeny looms large in the perspective of history, overshadowing the movement itself and its true aspirations. But like other styles which have begotten similar offspring, Neo-classicism should be seen for what it was rather than for what it became. We do not allow the Pall Mall clubs to colour our attitude to Renaissance architecture, or 'dainty rogues in porcelain' to trouble our enjoyment of Rococo sculpture.

In groping my way through the semantic jungle which threatens to smother Neo-classicism – through the variety of terms and myriad shades of interpretation, not to mention the bewildering variety of visual expressions associated with them – I have done my best to listen only to what the writers and artists themselves have to tell us. When we try to understand the art of the late eighteenth century it does not matter very much which aspects seem most appealing now or which seem true or false by present-day standards. What matters is whether our conception of the whole, and hence the definition of our term, corresponds to what the artists thought and believed themselves. It seems to me therefore that the most valid and useful definition of Neo-classicism will be that which comes closest to what these men understood by the 'true style' and the new Renaissance of the arts.

To go back to original sources in the period itself and start again from scratch is a process which the Neo-classical artists would thoroughly have approved; and fortunately there is no shortage of first-hand evidence. The period which saw the first appearance of the art critic (as opposed to art theorist) and invented the term 'aesthetics' is nothing if not articulate. And on one point – the outright rejection of the Baroque and Rococo – *avant garde* artists and writers were all very early united. In their attacks on these styles we find the first clear indications of the new artistic principles they sought to establish.

I

Classicism and Neo-classicism

1. A CHANGE OF HEART

'A most remarkable change in our ideas is taking place,' wrote d'Alembert in 1759, 'one of such rapidity that it seems to promise a greater change still to come. It will be for the future to decide the aim, the nature and the limits of this revolution, the drawbacks and disadvantages of which posterity will be able to judge better than we can.' He was, of course, writing of philosophy but his words could be as easily applied to the arts. For it was at this moment that a wind of change began to sweep through the Parisian *salons*, freshening up their close and perfumed atmospheres, smoothing out Rococo curves and curlicues, blowing away the delicately fragile ornaments – rosebuds and shells and powdered cupids with their behinds as delicately rouged as their cheeks, all the posturing *Commedia dell'Arte* figures and other exquisite frivolities and perversities which had delighted a fastidious, over-sophisticated society.

The change to which d'Alembert referred was the triumph of the *philosophes* whose rigorously rational views on everything from astronomy to zoology are enshrined in the great *Encyclopédie* of which he and Diderot were co-editors. But this moment also marked a shift in the direction of the Enlightenment itself. It had now begun to take on a more earnest, moralizing tone and to concentrate less on attacking superstition and dogma than on building a new world. Voltaire, the witty, mocking, elegantly shocking author of *La Pucelle* was beginning to develop into the outraged and passionately committed champion of the French Protestant, Jean Calas, whose persecutors he attacked with savage indignation. Rousseau also had appeared on the scene, questioning the accepted values of civilized society, suggesting that the arts and sciences had corrupted mankind and declaring the right of liberty for all men. The notion that infidelity, like hair powder, was a privilege of the aristocracy was giving way to a more general demand for tolerance. In this new world there were to be no

double values, no compromise with truth – if truth could be established.

The intellectual reaction against flippancy, cynicism and all the iniquities summed up by *l'infâme* was paralleled in the arts by a rejection of the Rococo. This was no modish change from one fashion to another, from the *genre pittoresque* to the *goût grec*. It was as radical a rejection as that of the philosophers and differs from most previous stylistic changes in the history of art by its self-awareness. Nor was it confined to artistic and intellectual circles in Paris: a similar revulsion occurred contemporaneously throughout Europe, though in modified and usually less positive forms outside France. In Germany, paradoxically, it allied itself with anti-Gallican sentiment since the Rococo had been so closely associated with French taste. But it had become so general by the 1770s that artists, architects and theorists in France, Italy, Germany and England were congratulating themselves in almost identical terms on its success. The Rococo had not, of course, been crushed as thoroughly as they would have us believe: it persisted in certain quarters until almost the end of the century – but it lingered on merely as a survival of *ancien régime* taste and attitudes.

This revulsion against the Rococo and all the values it was felt to express, or at any rate to imply and condone, amounted in certain cases to an instinctive nausea; but in general the new moralizing fervour which began to penetrate the arts around the mid century was rational and stoic in tone and can be paralleled in contemporary literature, in the novels of Richardson, for example, and the plays of Diderot. To relate this movement to the growth of bourgeois patronage – identifying the Rococo with aristocratic taste and Neo-classicism with that of the rising middle-classes – is very tempting. But, as we shall see later, this would be a gross over-simplification of a very complex situation. For although anti-Rococo criticism was frequently directed against the rich, and the corrupting or trivializing influence of their taste for luxury, it is by no means clear to what extent such polemics reflect the writers' actual first-hand knowledge and experience of contemporary patronage. It is certain that Neo-classical artists found as much if not more support and encouragement among the aristocrats and wealthy as they did among the bourgeois. (Indeed, a case – though not a very plausible one – could even be made out for the interpretation of Neo-classicism as an aristocratic and Rococo as a bourgeois style.)

At all events the missionary zeal of the critics was now focused not only against Rococo subject matter with its hedonistic and licentious overtones, its *fêtes galantes* and scenes of casual dalliance suggestive of the boudoir and feminine voluptuousness, but also against all those sensuous qualities on which Rococo art was based – *esprit*, *charme*, grace and the free play of the artist's fancy – which appeal not to the mind but to the grosser sense perceptions and are by definition amoral. A high-minded puritan contempt for the mundane and elegant, a distrust of virtuosity, of being taken in by mere dexterity and deftness of touch, was probably at the bottom of this. Deep suspicion of all those painterly, illusionistic devices employed by Baroque and Rococo artists for their atmospheric and textural effects, was combined with a distaste for 'fine quality', the sheer beauty of *facture* and all the other exquisite surface effects which seemed to typify an art in the service of private and self-indulgent luxury. It was the attitude of mind which made Flaxman dismiss the highly accomplished sculptors Rysbrack and Scheemakers as 'mere workmen' and Winckelmann advise painters to 'dip their brush in intellect'. And it implied a new and more elevated estimate of the artist and his role in society. He should raise himself above the status of the complaisant craftsman, patiently answering the whims of his patron, titillating his jaded appetite, perpetually seeking to delight him with novelties. He should take on the mantle of the high priest of eternal truths, the public educator. And it was to the public at large, not to the private patron, that he should address his message. As the German aesthetician Sulzer remarked in 1771, the use of the arts 'for display and luxury' reveals a failure to understand 'their divine power . . . and their high value'. For, if art follows the 'dictates of fashion, or a patron's whims', wrote Fuseli, 'then its dissolution is at hand'.

In place of the Rococo Olympus of amorous gods and goddesses and that perennial *fête champêtre* in which the *jeunesse dorée* philandered through an eternal, languorous afternoon, we now find themes and subjects of a very different kind: sobering lessons in the more homely virtues, stoic exemplars of unspoilt and uncorrupted simplicity, of abstinence and continence, of noble self-sacrifice and heroic patriotism. The stark death-bed and the virtuous widow replace the *chaise longue* and the pampered *cocotte* (just as in literature Cowper's *Task* takes the place of Crébillon's *Sopha*). And an

equally severe and chastened style was required for the expression of these noble and edifying themes: an honest, straightforward anti-illusionistic style capable of blunt uncompromising statements – of sober clarity and archaic purity.

And so the flickering highlights and impulsive, nervous modelling which give so much Rococo painting its subtlety and sparkle – that delicate surface sheen akin to shot silk – was sacrificed in favour of firm and unequivocal contours and bold flat areas of paint. In composition, the diagonal gave way to the rigorously frontal view, the sinuous, oblique complexities of Rococo space to the elementary clarity of a simple perspective box. Powdery pastel hues were replaced by clear though often sombre colours which tended towards the primary and eventually, in the interests of truth and honesty, to the elimination of colour altogether in favour of the most rudimentary linear techniques. There could be no visual deception with pure unshaded outline.

In architecture a similarly ruthless process of purification and simplification can be observed, leading eventually to even more extreme and abstract results, in this case to a symbolic architecture of pure geometry and Platonic essences. Rejecting the Rococo conception of architecture as a matter primarily of intimate, informal environments on the small and unpretentious scale demanded by good breeding and polite manners – *boudoirs* and *Spiegelzimmer* in which space is enclosed and defined, or rather left deliberately undefined, by a shimmering net of intricate and highly coloured, gauzy decorations which lead the eye a restless dance over a rippling surface of perpetually merging and interweaving asymmetries – the Neo-classical architect sought effects of solidity and permanence, of solemnity and rigidity, of a stillness and silence evocative of that archaic world of timeless truths from which his architectural principles were drawn. In place of a composite art – for it was in the Rococo style that the intricate fusion of painting, sculpture and architecture reached its apogee – he sought an architecture of primitive purity, stripped of all colouring, mouldings and sculptured ornaments so that it might be reduced to its primal and strictly autonomous state. Such radical ideals were not likely to be shared by many private patrons, but this did not unduly disturb the Neo-classical architect whose ambitions were increasingly directed towards public commissions and, failing them, posterity, which might better understand the exalted nature of his

Utopian conceptions and have adequate means to execute works on the vast and frequently megalomaniac scale he demanded.

Significantly enough it was in music – the most abstract of arts – that these artistic ideals found one of their more explicit expressions. In the dedicatory epistle to his opera *Alceste* (1769), Gluck pleaded for a 'noble simplicity', condemned 'superfluous ornament' and stated that he had avoided 'parading difficulties at the expense of clearness'. 'When I undertook to write the music for *Alceste*,' he tells us, 'I resolved to divest it entirely of all those abuses, introduced either by the mistaken vanity of singers or by the too great complaisance of composers, which have so long disfigured Italian opera and made the most splendid and most beautiful of spectacles the most ridiculous and wearisome.' His designs, he went on, 'were wonderfully furthered by the libretto' in which Calzabigi had expressed 'strong passions' in 'heartfelt language' and had eliminated altogether the 'florid descriptions, unnatural paragons and sententious, cold morality' of Rococo libretti.

In the vast and seemingly interminable literature of anti-Rococo abuse, it is to classical antiquity that writers regularly appeal to establish the principles of the 'true style'. The only way to become great, wrote Winckelmann, 'is to imitate antiquity'. By imitation he did not, of course, mean copying. Imitation implied a rigorous process of extraction and distillation. It was 'to attain the real simplicity of Nature' that Reynolds recommended the study of antiquity – and both Diderot and Winckelmann said the same in almost identical terms. This is of fundamental importance for an understanding of the Neo-classical attitude to the antique.

Of course, not all artists and theorists regarded antiquity in this way, as a regenerative and virile source of new artistic truths and ideals. Indeed, classical precedents were very often quoted in the most perfunctory manner, very much as poets would rephrase a tag from Juvenal to castigate the society of Régence Paris or early Georgian London. Nor do classicistic condemnations of lavish complexity and irrationality in the arts (or even the frivolous tastes of opulent patrons) necessarily imply a desire for classical standards: many are no more than *topoi* – rhetorical clichés or commonplaces. In an attack on contemporary Parisian architecture published in 1738, for example, A.-F. Frézier just lifted bodily, in his own translation,

a passage from Vitruvius denouncing certain architects of the age of Augustus. And even more extreme instances of the unmeaningful use of classical authority can be found – sometimes passing beyond mere lip-service into the realms of the higher double-talk. Pöppelmann, most wilful and fancy-free of Rococo architects, went to the length of publishing a pamphlet about his fantastically frothy masterpiece, the Zwinger in Dresden, from which an innocent reader might well imagine that he had faithfully obeyed the tenets of Vitruvius.

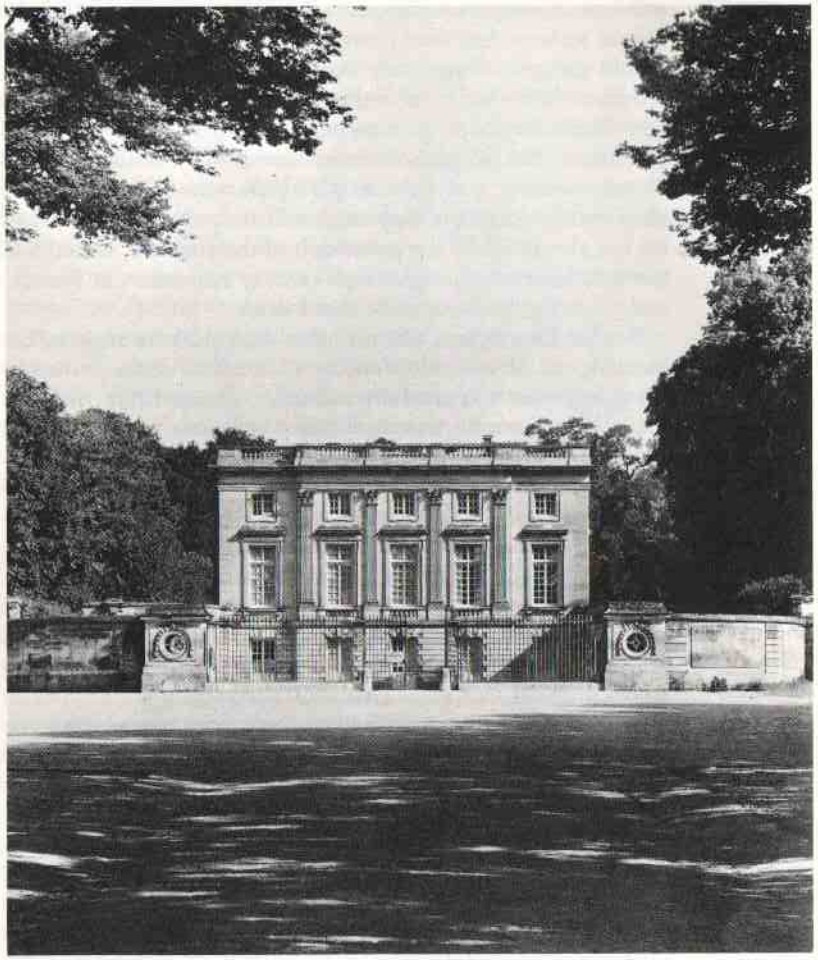
In most cases, however, antiquity was neither deliberately abused nor freshly studied. For it had long since become part of the furniture of the educated mind. In France its authority was established early in the seventeenth century by Poussin and had subsequently been entrenched in the official programme of the Académie Royale (the enormous production and wide circulation of reproductive engravings after Poussin testifying to his continuing authority throughout the eighteenth century). While in Italy a classicizing tradition had persisted with fluctuating vitality ever since the Renaissance. This classical 'survival' raises awkward problems in the early eighteenth century and later, when the first stirrings of the Neo-classical movement become visible. But such accomplished and delicately classicizing painters as Houasse in Paris or Benefial and Trevisani in Rome, are better understood as last-ditch survivors of the seventeenth-century classical tradition than as Neo-classical artists *avant la lettre*. The position of some other comparable though slightly later figures is more difficult to define, but I think they are best seen in the context of that Louis XIV revival which dominated the official artistic scene in France around the mid century. Similarly in England, the early eighteenth-century Neo-Palladian architects were inspired by or formed part of an Inigo Jones revival rather than a precociously Neo-classical movement.

For some thirty years after the death of Louis XIV the arts in France had been used by the Crown almost exclusively for the decoration of exquisite, intimate interiors. But in 1745 Mme de Pompadour's uncle, Lenormant de Tournehem was appointed *Directeur Générale des Bâtiments du Roi* and promptly began to sweep a new broom through the dusty offices of official patronage. He conceived his first duty to be that of reinstating the classical, academic hierarchy of subjects which the Rococo, with its looser scale of values, had disrupted by unduly elevating the portrait and landscape, genre scenes and

still-life. History painting was to resume its primacy and the official scale of fees was accordingly readjusted so that artists would receive substantially more for history pieces than for portraits. With the same end in view he established in 1748 a new École Royale to give young art students a wider general education with emphasis on history: Livy, Tacitus, Rollin's *Histoire ancienne* and Bossuet's *Histoire universelle* were their chief textbooks. Thus they received instruction not merely in art but also imbibed the moral cult of the ancients, which was the backbone of all eighteenth-century education in France, and throughout Europe for that matter.

But de Tournehem was no more than the precursor of his nephew, the Marquis de Vandières (later and better known as Marigny) who was carefully trained to succeed him. In 1749 the young marquis was sent off to inspect the ancient and modern wonders of Italy accompanied by the architect Soufflot and the engraver C.-N. Cochin the younger who was later to write one of the wittiest and most influential attacks on the Rococo (he later became secretary of the Academy and Marigny's main adviser on artistic matters). Marigny returned home in 1751 to take up the appointment he was to hold until 1773. Almost immediately he began to commission paintings, sculpture and several notable buildings in Paris, including the École Militaire, the Place Louis XV (now the Place de la Concorde) and the church of Sainte Geneviève (later called the Panthéon).

This programme of patronage was inspired by a conscious desire to recapture the glories of the *grand siècle*. Within a few years of the death of Louis XIV his reign had been added to the canonical series of great historical periods – the reigns of Alexander, Julius Caesar, Augustus, Pope Julius II and Pope Leo X. But the corollary to such an age of splendour was one of decadence: as d'Alembert remarked in 1751, 'the century of Demetrius Phalerus succeeded that of Demosthenes, the century of Lucan and Seneca that of Cicero and Virgil, and our own century that of Louis XIV'. And Voltaire in his *Siècle de Louis XIV*, also of 1751, echoed the same views in the nostalgia with which he looked back to the literary glories of the preceding period. Similarly, it was to the Grande Galerie at Versailles 'where the immortal Le Brun displayed the extent of his genius' that the first French art critic, La Font de Saint-Yenne, had directed the attention of artists in 1747. In a pamphlet significantly entitled *L'ombre du grand Colbert* he



1. The Petit Trianon, Versailles, 1761–8. J.-A. Gabriel

eulogized Perrault's east façade of the Louvre and pleaded for the restoration and completion of the building. At the same time the influential teacher of architecture, J.-F. Blondel, was preaching a return to the grandeur and elegance of the *grand siècle*. There was even a revival of interest in the music of this period – the 'elegant simplicity' of the songs of Lully being contrasted with the puerile sallies, the confusion and affectation of his successors.

This nostalgic hankering after the *gloire* of Louis XIV is most apparent in architecture – in the spectacular monumentality of Gabriel's École Militaire (begun in 1751), in his two buildings in the Place de la Concorde, which are heavily indebted to the Louvre façade, and to some extent also in the monumental scale and noble simplicity of Soufflot's Sainte Geneviève. Gabriel's masterpiece, the Petit Trianon was perhaps rather less dependent on this revivalism [1]. As careful to avoid the pomposity of Versailles as the wilful preciosity of the *petits appartements*, he took from the one a classical regard for decorum and simplicity, from the others a feeling for elegance and poise, to create what is not only the perfect expression of the nascent Louis XVI style but one of the most beautiful buildings in the world. Here we find a volumetric clarity and stress on the cubic mass of a building which clearly looks forward to Neo-classical architecture. Perfect balance and uniformity is maintained without any loss of vivacity, by the most subtle variations in decorative detail and the most delicate adjustments of proportion between one façade and another.

A similar combination of unpedantic correctness and unfrivolous elegance marks the sculpture of Edmé Bouchardon. The statue he modelled to stand in the middle of Gabriel's Place de la Concorde [2] is inspired by both Girardon's statue of Louis XIV and the most famous equestrian statue of antiquity – the Marcus Aurelius in Rome. But Bouchardon's horse is more naturalistic than the antique and less animated and high spirited than Girardon's. The rider is dressed wholly *à l'antique* and seated in a position at once restful and commanding – unlike Louis XIV who sports a billowing peruke over his Roman armour and turns his head in one direction while pointing in the other, as if communicating with some aide or general. It is easy to see why Diderot should have thought Bouchardon's works were infused with the spirit of 'nature and antiquity, that is to say simplicity, strength, grace and truth'.

Not only in court and official circles was the rejection of the Rococo associated with a return to Louis XIV classicism. In Parisian interior decoration a style thought to be *à la grecque* began to emerge in the 1750s. But it was Greek in name only. No attempt was made to copy the form and structure of Greek or even Roman chairs and other pieces of antique furniture already familiar from ancient paintings and sculpture. Rectilinear forms were, however, substituted for Rococo curves, whimsical ornaments were swept away and replaced by such architectural embellishments as the Vitruvian scroll and heavy swags – similar to those used on the east façade of the Louvre which Gabriel had imitated in the Place de la Concorde and Petit Trianon. Significantly enough, the most notable of these

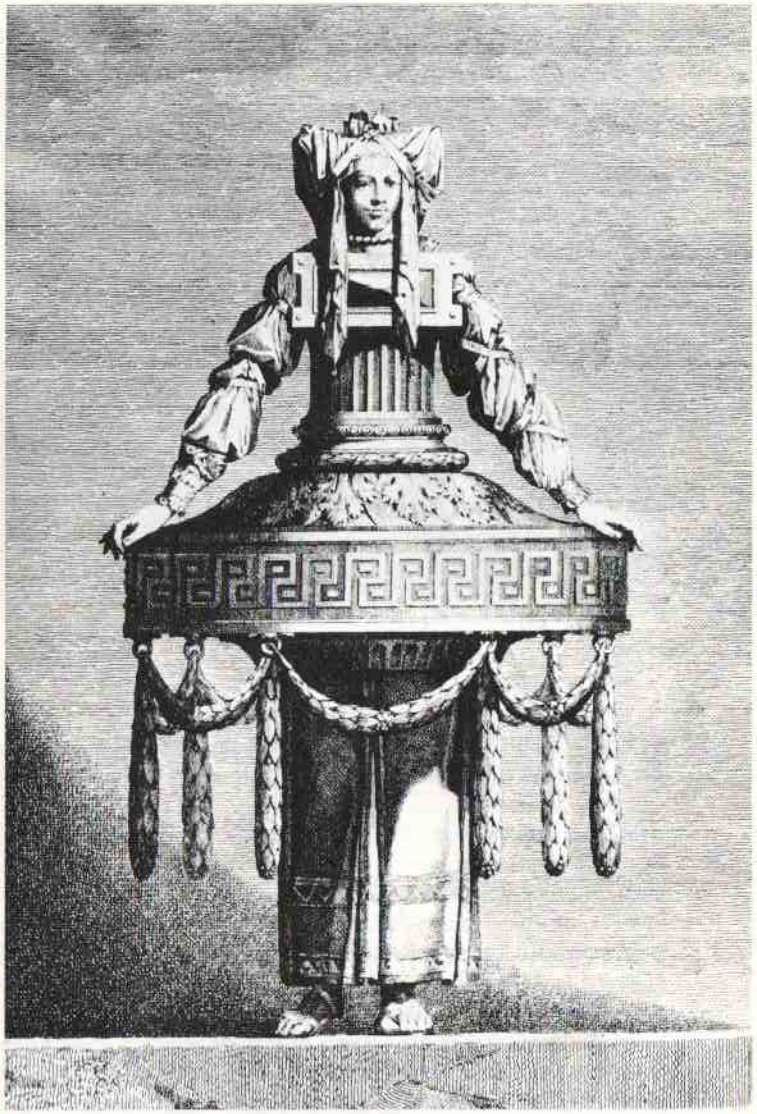
2. *Louis XV* after Edmé Bouchardon, *c.* 1762–70

3. Writing-table, *c.* 1756. L.-J. Le Lorraine

pieces of furniture [3] was until recently thought to date from the Louis XIV period. It is, in fact, a perfect example of the Louis XIV revival.

Within a few years the 'Grecian taste' became a mania: everything in Paris was *à la grecque* wrote Grimm in 1763 – exteriors and interiors of buildings, furniture, fabrics, jewellery. 'Our ladies have their hair done *à la grecque*, our *petits maîtres* would be ashamed to carry a snuff-box that was not *à la grecque*.' And though he scoffed at the absurdity of the fashion, he admitted that it was preferable to the Rococo. '*Si l'abus ne peut s'éviter, il vaut mieux qu'on abuse d'une bonne chose que d'une mauvaise.*' This remark should put us on our guard against attributing any very great importance to the

4. Masquerade costume design, 1771. E.-A. Petitot



so-called Grecian style in the development of Neo-classicism. It found its best expression perhaps in masquerade costumes [4] which are as superficially related to their classical source as are chinoiserie *brûle-parfums* to the arts of the Sung dynasty. The *goût grec*, like the *style étrusque* which succeeded it, is but an offshoot, a branch of prettily variegated leaves, stemming from the main trunk of the Neo-classical movement.

The Louis XIV revival was, of course, peculiar to France. In Germany and Switzerland and to some extent in England and Italy as well, the revulsion from the Rococo was partly a reaction against French taste. (Both Winckelmann and Lessing nursed an almost pathological hatred of the French.) But other motives played a part. One of the most vociferous Italian sponsors of the attack on the Baroque (the Rococo hardly mattered outside Venice and Piedmont) was Mgr Bottari, a prominent Jansenist who associated the style with the Jesuits. In England, on the other hand, the Neo-classical style was linked with a patriotic desire to aggrandize the arts and create a national school on a par with those of Italy and France. It was an expression of the mood in which Robert Adam dedicated his *Ruins of Spalatro* (1764) to George III:

> At this happy Period, when Great Britain enjoys in Peace the Reputation and Power she has acquired by Arms, Your Majesty's singular attention to the Arts of Elegance, promises an Age of Perfection that will complete the Glories of your Reign, and fix an Aera no less remarkable than that of Pericles, Augustus or the Medicis.

But though the circumstances of the rejection of the Rococo differed widely from country to country, the new style rapidly acquired an extraordinarily homogeneous international character. Universality was, of course, one of its prime aims. The Neo-classical artist sought to appeal not to the individual of his own time but to all men in all times. As Reynolds wrote: 'That wit is false, which can subsist only in one language; and that picture which pleases only one age or nation, owes its reception to some local or accidental association of ideas.' But the speed with which stylistic unity was attained is none the less remarkable.

A voracious appetite for works of artistic theory secured their quick diffusion throughout Europe. Laugier's *Essai sur l'Architecture* published in France in 1753 was available in English in 1755. Winckelmann's *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke* of 1755 was translated into English (by

Fuseli) in 1765, and his greater *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* of 1764 was available in French by 1766. Daniel Webb's *Inquiry into the Beauties of Painting* which plagiarized some ideas he had picked up in conversation with Mengs, appeared in England in 1760 and was quickly translated into French (1765), German (1766) and Italian (1791). Mengs's own *Gedanken über die Schönheit* first published in 1762 later came out in Italian and Spanish in 1780, in French in 1781 and English in 1792.

Another factor which assisted the rapid development of the new style was the emergence of Rome as a kind of free port for the exchange of artistic ideas. Nearly every artist of any importance spent a few years there studying antiquities and High Renaissance paintings. Rome was also the Mecca for the dilettanti of all nations. The education of an English gentleman or German princeling was not complete until he had visited the Eternal City under the guidance of a bear leader

5. *Lord Dundas*, 1764. Pompeo Batoni

or *cicerone* who instilled in him a taste for the most famous buildings, statues and paintings. Many of these grand tourists commissioned commemorative portraits of themselves from Pompeo Batoni who developed a knack for rendering their nonchalant airs, their pink faces and languid bodies in close proximity to some of the objects they were being taught to admire [5].

Works of art executed in Rome were displayed before an international audience. Hence the importance of, for example, Gavin Hamilton's vast, solemn, static pictures of Homeric subjects, painted in Rome in the 1760s. A preference for serious themes and an almost contemptuous disregard for subtleties of handling and colour mark these large-scale anti-Rococo manifestoes. Of greater contemporary renown was the more ably painted *Parnassus* which Anton Raphael Mengs executed in 1761 for the main room of the villa where Cardinal Albani

6. *Parnassus*, 1760–61. A. R. Mengs

displayed his collection of antique sculpture. There can be little doubt that Winckelmann, the Cardinal's librarian and a friend of Mengs – whom he considered 'the greatest artist of his own, and perhaps of later times' – had a hand in the conception of this work which reflects so many of the ideas of early Neo-classical theorists and artists [6]. Striving for the 'noble simplicity and calm grandeur' extolled by Winckelmann, Mengs eschewed colouristic effects, the closely integrated compositions, deep recessions and illusionistic devices of Baroque ceiling painters – and to make this abundantly clear he flanked

the *Parnassus* with two roundels painted in hotter colours, bolder chiaroscuro and *trompe l'œil* perspective. And in innumerable details he paraded his considerable erudition. If, by taking thought, it were possible to produce a masterpiece, this would be one. It is easy to see why it appealed to those who admired the Graeco-Roman marbles displayed beneath it, but rather difficult to admire it nowadays. Belonging to the early, negative anti-Rococo phase of Neo-classicism, it seeks to do no more than recreate a dream of classical perfection by a synthesis of antique sculpture and Raphael's paintings. For the constructive and forward-looking aspects of the style we must turn to later works, also executed in Rome, by David and Canova.

2. THE RISORGIMENTO OF THE ARTS

The various and sometimes complex tendencies which had begun to emerge around the middle of the century – tendencies towards high-minded and instructive themes of an austere and stoic morality, secular in tone even when ostensibly Christian in subject, and corresponding tendencies in style towards an equally radical purification and Spartan simplicity – all coalesced in the 1780s to produce a sudden crop of masterpieces: David's *Oath of the Horatii* [8], Canova's monument to Clement XIV [10] and Ledoux's Parisian *barrières* [13]. All these powerful and revolutionary works were created simultaneously between 1783 and 1789. The fact that they were the distillation and culmination of three individual processes of artistic development, and in fact produced quite independently of each other, only serves to make their stylistic affinities still more striking.

The sudden, explosive nature of this artistic phenomenon was fully recognized at the time – it was called a *risorgimento* of the arts – and was patently inspired by a new, almost militant fervour and purposefulness. Yet despite the fact that these works were produced on the eve of the French Revolution they had as little specifically political implication as the word *risorgimento* itself at this date – indeed, some of the most revolutionary in an artistic sense, were, as we shall see, created by and for political reactionaries. The immediate public acclaim which greeted David's *Oath of the Horatii* both in Rome and Paris, no less than the similarities between the plaudits which were bestowed on it and on Canova's Papal monument, should

be enough to put us on our guard against reading any explicit political meaning into it.

David began in the Rococo shadow of his distant relation, Boucher, who recommended him to join the studio of Vien, a sophisticated purveyor of fashionable erotica who had remained fully Rococo in feeling while paying lip-service to the new classicizing trends of taste [15]. Under his guidance David won a place among the *élèves protegés* of the Academy school – where his education, classical as well as artistic, was continued – and in 1775 at the French Academy in Rome. He went to Italy convinced that he had little to learn from the antique. But a meeting in Naples with the theorist Quatremère de Quincy, who considered himself a disciple of Winckelmann, had the effect, as he later remarked, of a cataract operation which enabled him to see and understand antiquity for the first time.

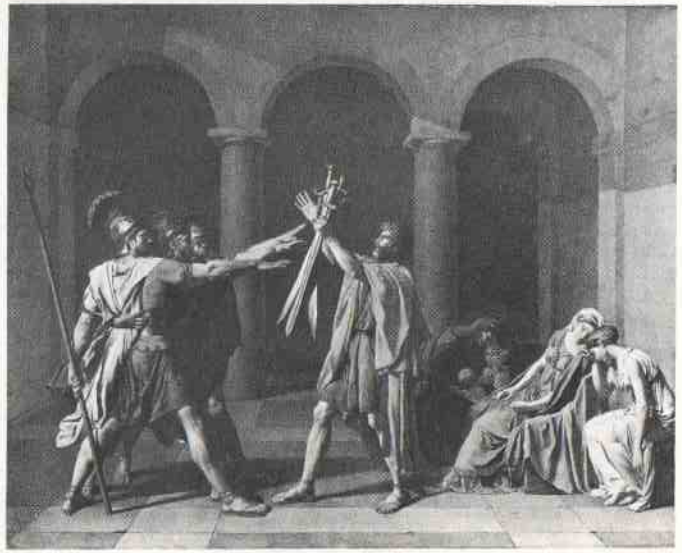
The result was his *Belisarius Receiving Alms* [7]. A soldier who had served under Belisarius recognizes his former general,

7. *Belisarius Receiving Alms*, 1780–81. J.-L. David

now old, blind and forsaken, with a child who holds out his helmet to take a coin from a passer-by. The subject had been represented before, but never with such an austere concentration on essentials. David elevated an historical anecdote into a theme of universal significance, a poignant lament for the transience of human glory, the helplessness of age, combined with a meditation on moral heroism in adversity. The dignity of the message is reflected in the sobriety of the handling; gestures are restrained, colours subdued. Its truth is emphasized by the accuracy with which historical details are rendered. It reminds one of Diderot's advice to '*peindre comme on parlait à Sparte*'. Indeed, it was exactly the type of picture, heroic in subject and grand in manner, which Diderot had been demanding since the 1750s, and he saluted the young David with the heartfelt words: '*il a de l'âme*'. Yet this work still harks back to the Louis XIV revival in its amplitude and *mesure*: it belongs to Neo-Poussinism rather than Neo-classicism.

With the *Oath of the Horatii* [8] David suddenly reached full maturity. Completely emancipated and completely in command of a new and rigorously purified style, he now achieved a perfect fusion of form and content in an image of extra-

8. *Oath of the Horatii*, 1784–5. J.-L. David



ordinary lucidity and visual punch. This is no consoling lament, like the *Belisarius*, with warm and reassuringly Poussinesque overtones, but a clarion call to civic virtue and patriotism.

The choice of subject is extremely revealing of David's aims and intentions. Perhaps stirred by a performance of Corneille's *Horace*, he seems to have turned to Livy for a 'true' account, both historically and morally, of how the three Horatii brothers agreed to settle a war between Rome and Alba by personal combat with the three Curiatii brothers and how the only survivor, returning to Rome in triumph, found his sister mourning one of the Curiatii to whom she was betrothed. The survivor thereupon killed his sister, was condemned to death and only reprieved after his father pleaded publicly for clemency. Yet even this version of the story – though an improvement on Corneille's which implied the supremacy of patriotism over all other moral imperatives – did not illustrate Roman virtue in a sufficiently pure and exemplary form for David. As Livy himself admitted, Horatius was acquitted more in admiration for his valour than for the justice of his cause. He had displayed an admirable patriotism but a deplorable lack of the main stoic virtue, self-control. David therefore abandoned Livy's version of the story, after basing a preliminary sketch on it, and selected for his subject a moment not mentioned by any historian (though suggested by Dionysius of Halicarnassus whom there is no reason to suppose David had read) – the one moment in which the highest Roman virtues were crystallized in their finest and purest form. This was the moment of the oath when the three youths selflessly resolved to sacrifice their lives for their country.

By selecting this scene David was able to extract and isolate the essence of the story and reveal its inner meaning, the nobility of Roman stoicism, with a correspondingly stoic directness and economy of visual means. Moreover, the solemnity of the oath-taking heightened the effect by adding an extra dimension to the moral, universalizing it and generalizing its human relevance. Thus, while the message is conveyed in personal terms which were immediately understood by David's contemporaries, it was clearly intended as a lesson applicable to all men and for all time.

David extols an heroic world of simple, uncomplicated passions and blunt, uncompromising truths. Masculine courage and resolve is contrasted with feminine tenderness and

acquiescence: the taut muscles of the brothers, vibrant with an almost electric energy, are balanced, across the noble, aspiring stance of the father, by the softly pliant draperies and meltingly compassionate gestures of the women – to point up the pathos he added to the sisters the figures of a widow and two children, though they are not mentioned in any of the sources. This tonic compositional lucidity is reinforced by the limpid early-morning clarity of lighting and pristine purity of colour, as well as the rudimentary simplicity of the setting with its primitive Doric columns and semicircular arches. Significantly enough, a critic remarked in 1785 that 'the simplicity and energy of the Order is worthy of the simple and heroic times of which we are here given a true portrayal'.

Though archaeological accuracy was considered a *sine qua non* for any 'true' depiction of such high Roman themes, David probably owed less to antique art than might at first seem likely. The sculptural grouping of the figures and their rigid rectilinear alignment across the elementary box space, exactly parallel with the picture plane, inevitably suggests a direct borrowing from Roman low reliefs. And indeed this had already become a critical cliché in the 1780s. But it was one which met with a good deal of ridicule from David's friends. Certainly the creative process is seldom if ever as simple a matter as this.

Some indication of the multiple sources out of which David distilled his masterpiece may be gleaned from the origins of the compositional principle of dissociation or isolation of parts from which so much of the picture's power derives. This was the one element in the painting to be adversely criticized when it was first exhibited in 1785 – for it was thought, not without reason, to be the cause of all its most novel and disconcerting features: its hard-edge clarity, its abrupt transitions, its large sonorous areas of empty canvas. Yet the origin of this Davidian 'brutalism' lay in accepted academic theory taught at the École for twenty years and stressed by David's teacher Dandré Bardon in his *Traité de peinture* (1765) which stated that groups of figures should be formally contrasted with each other, and the contrasts reinforced by the expressions. But no one before David had pushed this academic doctrine to its logical extreme. In the process he called in the aid of antique sculpture, descriptions of paintings by Polygnotus and the 'single plane' compositions of Perugino and 'certain of his predecessors', which, according

to his pupil Delécluze, he was later extolling. He may even have looked at Giotto whose monumental groupings, clarity of composition and calm serenity of tone reflects a similar depth and strength of conviction. For it was at this moment in the 1780s that Giotto and earlier Italian painters were arousing the interest not only of historian-collectors like Seroux d'Agincourt (the 'Winckelmann des peintres Barbares'), whom David knew in Rome, but also of such artists as Canova and Flaxman.

Canova's early development took a course similar to that of David who was nine years his senior. Trained in Rococo Venice, he soon achieved a degree of technical virtuosity, naturalistic elegance and sophistication which delighted his compatriots on the lagoon. But he displayed no rebellious tendencies until after 1780 when he went to Rome, fell in with an international set of artists and theorists (notably Gavin Hamilton), renounced the laurels he had already won and applied himself to the creation of a new style, revolutionary in its severity and uncompromising in its idealistic purity. His *Theseus and the Dead Minotaur* was the result [9]. At first he

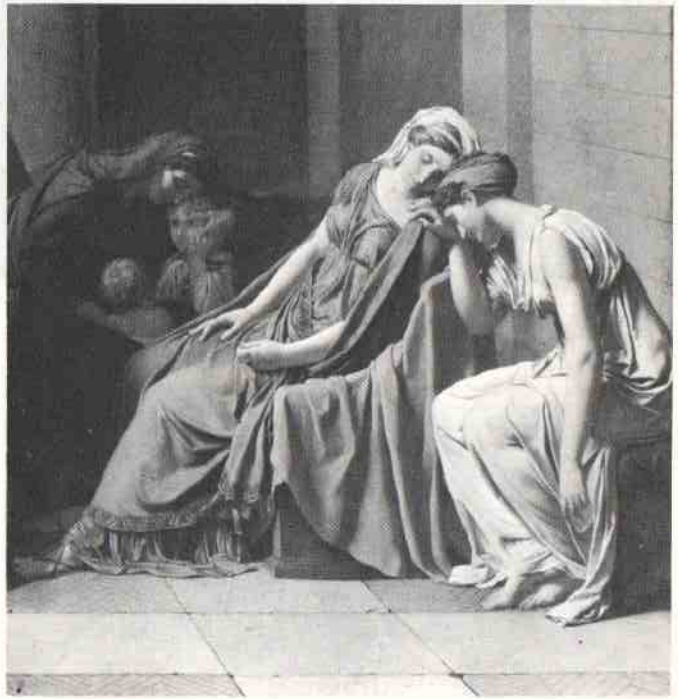
9. *Theseus and the Dead Minotaur*, 1781–2.
Antonio Canova

10. Monument to Pope Clement XIV, 1783–7. Antonio Canova

had intended to represent the two figures in combat but, partly on Hamilton's advice, decided to show the moment of calm after victory. It is tempting to see in the group a symbol of his own stylistic conversion – the corpse of his effete Venetian naturalism represented by the carefully rendered skin and entrails of the monster, and the champion of Idealism in the solidly robust, slightly abstracted young hero. Executed at a time when most sculptors in Rome were still working in the late Baroque style or else engaged in slavish imitations of ancient marbles – a practice which Canova deplored – it won him the title not merely of 'restorer' but also 'continuer' of the antique tradition. And he was promptly engaged to execute two Papal monuments – the most important commissions that could be given to any sculptor in Rome.

In his monument to Clement XIV [10], though bound to respect some of the conventions of the Papal monuments in St Peter's – notably Bernini's great Baroque masterpieces –

11. Detail from *Oath of the Horatii*, 1784–5. J.-L. David



Canova did away with their billowing draperies, their multi-coloured marbles and rich ornaments, their illusionistic devices and intricately symmetrical compositions. It was almost as if he had consciously set out to purify and correct the Baroque Papal monument with reference to Winckelmann's strictures on the 'forced' expressions, 'ignoble' types and exaggerated emotionalism of Bernini. Instead of the usual Baroque allegorical figures, Canova rendered the personifications of Humility and Temperance as mourners lamenting the death of the Pope in the silence of profound grief. And he infused the whole work with a 'noble simplicity and calm grandeur'. Not surprisingly it won plaudits from all the more forward-looking artists and critics such as Milizia who declared when it was unveiled in 1787: 'The three statues appear to have been carved in the best period of Greek art, for composition, expression and draperies; and the accessories, the symbols and the architecture have the same regularity.'

David could have seen models for the Clement XIV monument in an advanced state while he was working on the *Oath of the Horatii*. Yet the similarity between Canova's seated figure of Humility and David's sisters of the Horatii is probably fortuitous [11]. More significant affinities seem to derive from identity of purpose rather than any direct dependence of one work on the other. It is not merely that both share a distaste for unnecessary ornament and a desire for simplicity, clarity and gravity; these qualities are attained by similar means. Horizontality is emphasized in both works. The figures are placed either in profile or full face. The closely integrated type of composition evolved in the High Renaissance and developed

12. Hôtel d'Hallwyl, Paris, *c.* 1790. C.-N. Ledoux

13. Barrière de la Villette, Paris, 1785–9. C.-N. Ledoux

under the Baroque has been rejected in favour of one in which the various elements are deliberately separated from one another and juxtaposed. Milizia commented on the 'few and great divisions' in the design of the monument.

A like process of dissociation and juxtaposition of parts is evident in Ledoux's design for the Barrière de la Villette in Paris – a work allied to the *Oath of the Horatii* by its austerely simplified architectural vocabulary and to the Clement XIV monument by its use of geometrically pure forms. Born in 1736, C.-N. Ledoux was almost a generation older than David and Canova. But the massively rusticated façade of his early masterpiece, the Hôtel d'Hallwyl which still dominates the rue Michel le Comte in Paris, is already of a remarkable austerity. A debt to the simple Orangerie at Versailles and the chunky military architecture of Vauban, associates it with the Louis XIV revival of the mid-century. Significantly, Ledoux simplified it still further when, some forty years later, he prepared his designs for publication [12]. The Barrière de la Villette of 1785–9 [13] is much more original. Its practical function was to provide a hall for the payment of the hated *octroi* tax; but it also served with forty-five others to mark the boundary of Paris and impress the approaching visitor. Consisting of a Greek cross surmounted by a cylinder, it relies for its imposing effect on the bold contrast between these two simple forms, between solids and voids, the square windows of the attic and the semicircular arches beneath them. The Tuscan columns and pilasters without bases and with only the most rudimentary capitals are emphatically, almost wilfully, severe – so much so that one tends to forget that they and indeed the rotunda itself have no practical function whatever. Neither utilitarian nor merely ornamental, neither anti-classical nor revivalist, this strange building is an essay in pure architectural form of a type peculiar to Neo-classicism.

2

The Vision of Antiquity

1. HERCULANEUM AND POMPEII

The stylistic change which took place in the mid eighteenth century has often been attributed to a new appreciation and better understanding of antiquity in general and, in particular, to the discovery of Herculaneum in 1738 and Pompeii in 1748. Yet such an explanation comes too pat. The cult of antiquity played as important a part in the new artistic movement as it had in the development of the Enlightenment, but as a catalyst rather than a driving force. Just as the *philosophes*, who were steeped in the culture of antiquity, found in it germs of a non-religious viewpoint from which Christians had averted their eyes, so artists brought up to pay lip-service to the antique found on closer examination that previously neglected aspects could help them to create a style of greater truth, purity and simplicity. The late eighteenth-century attitude to antiquity was as much a result as a cause of the reaction against the Rococo.

One aspect of the profound change which the vision of antiquity underwent in the eighteenth century may be seen in the shifting attitudes to pagan mythology. The gods of Greece and Rome had been condemned as demons or converted into saints by early Christians, rescued as links with Imperial Roman grandeur at the court of Charlemagne, allegorized by the schoolmen of the Middle Ages, metamorphosed into symbols by Renaissance humanists, and drummed into service of Church and State in the Baroque period – and even made to father some Italian princely families. By the time they reached the eighteenth century they were fit for nothing better than a voluptuous dream world in which, with eternal lustiness, they indulged in a most unedifying succession of amorous intrigues. But they had a new role to play in the Enlightenment. The *philosophes* observed that pagan superstition might be used as a stalking horse for Christianity. By unveiling the clay feet of the gods in whom the most intelligent nations of antiquity had put their faith, doubt could be thrown on the very idea of

divinity. The gods were thus rationalized and explained away, on good ancient authority, either as the inventions of priests and tyrants or as benefactors of mankind (inventors of bread-making, wine-making and so on), or as elemental powers or as fertility symbols.

But classical mythology was also open to attack on ethical grounds. As Rousseau wrote in 1750:

> Our gardens are adorned with statues and our galleries with pictures. What would you imagine that these masterpieces of art, thus held up to public admiration, represent? The men who have defended their country, or those still greater who have enriched it by their genius? No. They are images of every perversion of heart and mind, drawn ingeniously from ancient mythology and presented to the early curiosity of our children, doubtless that they may have before their eyes models of vicious actions, even before they have learned to read.

The gods might survive in art as types of physical beauty; but, by the end of the century, only the more retrograde patrons wanted, and only a few frivolous painters and sculptors cared to produce, works of art which expressed the old voluptuous vision of antiquity.

As the gods, fauns and satyrs receded into the background, their place was taken by men – by the warriors, law-givers and great philosophers of antiquity. Attacking mythological subjects as absurd and immoral, La Font de Saint-Yenne in 1754 demanded history paintings which could provide '*une école des mœurs*', representing 'the virtuous and heroic actions of great men, exemplars of humanity, generosity, grandeur, courage, disdain for danger and even for life itself, of passionate zeal for the honour and safety of the country'. Plutarch, he said, could alone supply all the appropriate subjects; and he named Socrates, Epaminondas, Decius, Marcus Curtius and Brutus the first consul. Such paragons of virtue were, of course, more readily found in Greece and Republican Rome than in the Roman Empire. Indeed, the Empire which, since the days of Charlemagne, had been revered as the greatest era in the history of mankind, was now judged to have been an age of decadence. And this revaluation of antiquity (to be completely reversed a few years later under Napoleon) inevitably influenced and was itself influenced by works of art and artistic theory.

Several aspects of these changes in attitude to antiquity are evident in the curiously ambivalent reactions to what we now regard as the greatest archaeological event of the century – the

excavation of Herculaneum and Pompeii. Early accounts were surprisingly cool. Some writers, such as the Abbé Raynal, were even sceptical, though acknowledging that 'a city buried for more than sixteen hundred years and restored to some degree of light, has without doubt something to awaken even the most extreme indifference'. But the discovery inspired no eulogy comparable with that which Fontenelle had devoted to Bianchini's excavations on the Palatine in 1726.

The most important finds at Herculaneum and Pompeii were the large-scale wall paintings. Very few antique figure paintings (notably the *Aldobrandini Marriage* which had been found in 1606) had hitherto been known. But those found in the buried cities aroused puzzled curiosity rather than enthusiastic admiration. Of one Cochin and Bellicard wrote in their *Observations sur les antiquités d'Herculaneum* (1754): 'The Theseus is badly drawn, without knowledge and without refinement; only the head is fairly beautiful and in a good style. The other figures are no better in point of drawing; though one can say that the style of the picture is great and the brushwork easy: but the work is hardly finished and can be regarded as only an advanced sketch.' Others they found poorly drawn, incorrect in anatomy, feeble in expression or weak in composition while the colours had 'neither refinement, nor beauty, nor variety'. How were such works to be reconciled with the dogma of classical perfection? Winckelmann suggested that they must date from the time of Nero when, according to Pliny, the art of painting languished. Mengs agreed that they could not represent the flower of antique art. Among artists, Gavin Hamilton – as much an archaeologist-cum-dealer as a painter – was almost unique in his enthusiasm. And it was to the antiquaries, notably the anticomane comte de Caylus (so much despised by Winckelmann and by Diderot and his friends) that these relics of antiquity made their strongest appeal.

The newly discovered paintings were therefore accepted as reflections, very weak reflections, of the lost masterpieces of Polygnotus, Zeuxis and Apelles. And the purely decorative works were roundly condemned. A snide English writer compared the landscapes with those of the Chinese; others identified the grotesques and fantastic architectural prospects with those derided by Vitruvius. But as the excavations continued, yet more disturbing discoveries were made. Just at the moment when artistic theorists were complaining about Rococo amorality and propounding their Neo-classical vision

of a pure, noble and uncorrupted antique world, the Herculaneum Academy brought out a volume largely devoted to engravings of lamps and charms wrought in the form of furiously triumphant phalluses. They were, wrote a priggish English reviewer, 'abominably indecent'. Rome had evidently sunk to a level of luxurious depravity still lower than that from which eighteenth-century Europe was then struggling to emerge.

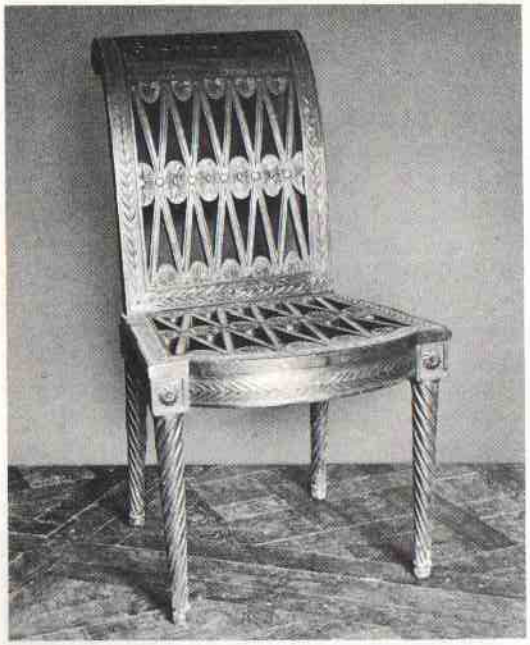
Contemporary works of art clearly reflect these ambivalent attitudes to the discoveries at Herculaneum and Pompeii. It was not until the very last years of the century that the Pompeiian style of decorative painting began to oust grotesques of the type devised by Raphael and his assistants. The figure paintings were used as sources for correct details of costume and décor but provided little, if any, stylistic inspiration. Mengs executed one direct imitation of Herculaneum painting, but only as a fake to deceive Winckelmann, unkindly selecting a subject peculiarly dear to his friend's heart [14].

14. *Jupiter and Ganymede*, 1758–9. A. R. Mengs

When he took over figures from antique paintings for his *Parnassus* [6] – notably the Apollo and the two dancers on the left – he 'improved' them very nearly out of all recognition by reference to Raphael. Similarly, Vien took from the antique little more than the subject and general disposition of his *The Cupid Seller* [15]. He elaborated and prettified the original by filling in the blank background, adding elegant Louis XVI-style furniture, investing the figures with a simpering sentiment and giving the cupid an obscene gesture which he probably felt to be perfectly in tune with the spirit of the antique painting. Even David, when he made a drawing from a print of the same painting in the late 1770s, could not disguise its elegance and frivolity.

Another painting by Vien, *La Vertueuse Athénienne*, included an antique altar which was to provide *ébénistes* with the design for a piece of decorative furniture thereafter called an *Athénienne*. Realized in polished wood and sparkling ormolu, objects of this type were soon adorning the more modish boudoirs of Paris. Yet despite the pervasiveness of the cult of antiquity – to which the owner of an *Athénienne* paid chic lip-service – few if any efforts were made to imitate the real furniture of Greece and Rome before the last years of the century. A chair

15. *The Cupid Seller*, 1763. J.-M.Vien



16. Chair in the 'Etruscan style', 1787. Georges Jacob

which its maker described as '*de forme nouvelle du genre étrusque*' [16] is neither strikingly new in form nor antique – let alone Etruscan – in anything but surface detail. An 'Etruscan style' pedestal designed by James Wyatt [17] combines a Roman altar with a Greek vase to provide a decorative object singularly unlike anything found in the houses of Herculaneum and Pompeii. The 'Etruscan' dinner service made at the Neapolitan porcelain factory was decorated with paintings of ancient vases [18]. Wedgwood came nearer to imitating the forms of Greek pottery in the first products of his factory – but these seem to have been no more than demonstrations that he could do what the Greeks had done. Generally he 'improved' the colour scheme by making it cooler and prettier, and had the figurative decorations applied in delicate relief.

These objects, like Vien's paintings, exploited the cult of antiquity for purely decorative ends. They really perpetuate *ancien régime* Rococo taste in antique fancy dress. Attractive

17. Pedestal and vase in the Etruscan taste, *c.* 1795. James Wyatt

18. Royal Neapolitan Porcelain Factory plate, 1785–7

by-products of a hybrid Rococo–Neo-classicism, they represent a vision of the ancient world only superficially different from that of the earlier eighteenth century, which was modified but not radically altered by new attitudes. For a truer understanding of the part played by antiquity in the development of Neo-classicism we must turn to the prints of Piranesi and the writings of Winckelmann.

2. PIRANESI AND WINCKELMANN

Much of the artistic literature of the eighteenth century is taken up with a long, acrimonious and singularly tedious squabble about the respective merits of Greek and Roman architecture. Both sides took their main argument from Vitruvius who had said that the Greeks derived their architecture from Egypt, perfected the orders and passed them on to Rome. Those in favour of Greece (few of whom had ever seen a Greek building) declared for primitive purity and

suggested that Roman architecture was merely derivative. Others argued that the Greeks were themselves dependent on the Egyptians, and that it was the Romans who had raised architecture to its summit of perfection. In this dispute Piranesi was as furiously pro-Roman as Winckelmann was passionately Philhellene. And the fact that both exerted a profound and by no means mutually exclusive influence on Neo-classicism illustrates once again how ambiguous a part historical revivalism played in its development.

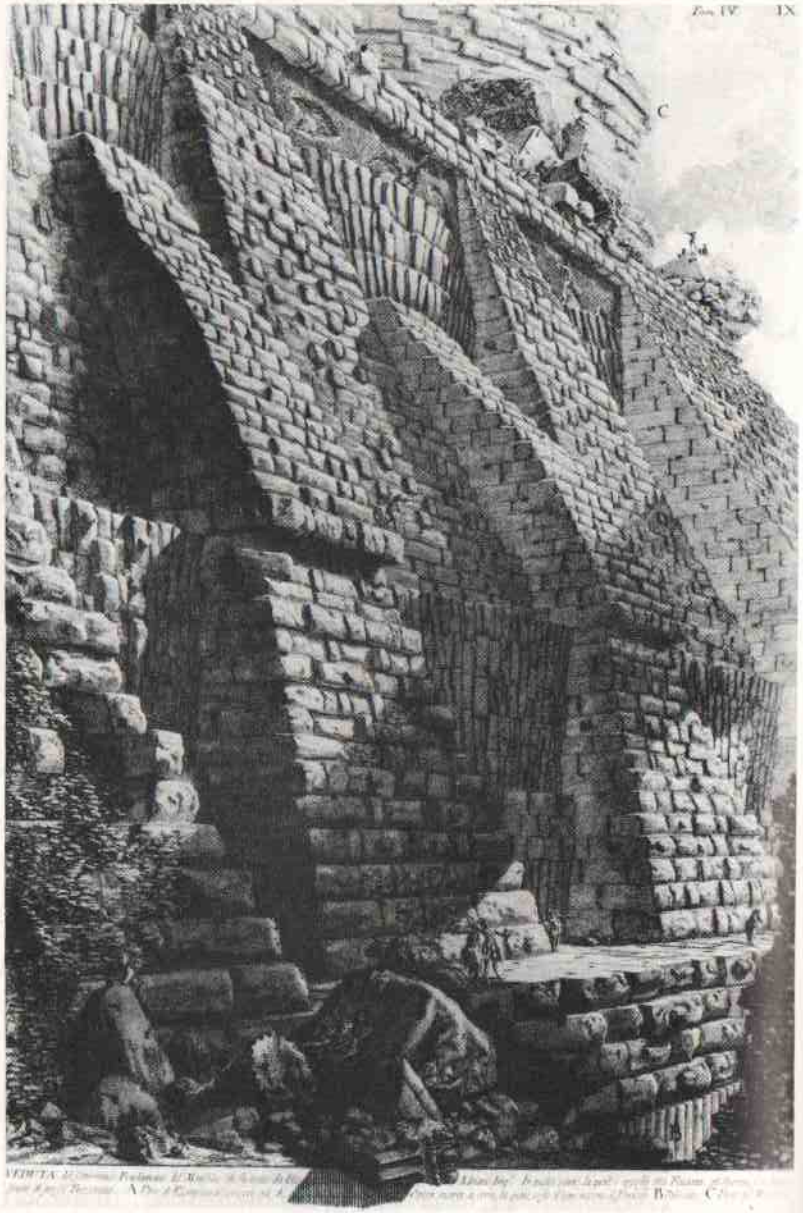
Piranesi, who was trained as an architect in Venice, settled in Rome in 1744. At this time the ruins of the city were regarded mainly as a useful source of ornamental motifs and as quarries of interesting evocative curiosities. Pathetic reminders of passing glory, the words *sic transit* seemed to be inscribed on every stone, and never more clearly than when they were depicted in pleasing decay, a playground for ragamuffins, a camping place for banditti, or – final degradation – a mere background for conversation piece groups of supercilious English *milordi*. They must have appeared to Piranesi rather as John Dyer described them in *The Ruins of Rome* (1740):

> Fall'n, fall'n, a silent Heap; her Heroes all
> Sunk in their Urns; behold the Pride of Pomp,
> The Throne of Nations fall'n; obscur'd in dust;
> Ev'n yet Majestical . . .

In a series of etchings called *Grotteschi*, he stressed the *sic transit* element, though he replaced the conventional figures with serpents slithering among the riven and crumbling marbles. But soon he came to recognize the ruins as still vivid, still grandiose records of the *gloria mundi* of ancient Rome, a source of living inspiration rather than of melancholy regret. The etched views which diffused his vision of Roman greatness throughout Europe were inspired not by pity for the fall of an empire but by awestruck veneration for the sublime magnificence of Roman architecture.

By a cunning choice of viewpoints, a dramatic use of light and shade, a ruthless process of selection and rejection, Piranesi added new dimensions to the ruins of Rome. He invested the columns of the temple of Jupiter Stator with a proud isolation. The vaulted interiors of Hadrian's villa or the nymphaeum in the garden of Sallust [22] he made more cavernously vast, more oppressively overbearing. To the neat

19. *Castel' S. Angelo, Rome*, 1756. G. B. Piranesi



pyramid of Caius Cestius he gave the superhuman grandeur of the Pharaohs. The Castel' S. Angelo [19] he converted into a titanic mountain of masonry. Such was the force of his imagination that he compelled his contemporaries and posterity to look at Roman architecture through his eyes. Some travellers like Goethe and Flaxman were disappointed to find Roman ruins smaller in scale than Piranesi had led them to expect. But most responded to his vision, even on the spot, if not always with the emotion of Fuseli's *The Artist moved by the grandeur of ancient ruins* [20].

20. *The Artist moved by the grandeur of ancient ruins*, 1778–9. H. Fuseli

In 1755 Robert Adam wrote of Piranesi whom he had just met, that 'so amazing and ingenious fancies as he has produced in the different plans of the Temples, Baths and Palaces and other buildings I never saw and are the greatest fund for inspiring and instilling invention in any lover of architecture that can be imagined'. Piranesi had not only replaced the Rococo image of antiquity with one that was bolder and stronger, but suggested new concepts of architectural mass and space. Believing that 'Roman dignity and amplitude' was expressed by mass, he emphasized the vast solidity of walls and bastions. Rejecting delicate surface decoration, he liked to show bold ornaments deeply cut into the stone as if to stress its weight and solidity. He hankered after a megalomaniac scale – walls towering upwards and stretching far into the distance. His views of interiors imply a limitless space channelled through massive gorges of stone beneath vaults and domes which seem to be weighed down by the masonry above them. With little regard for the niceties of the orders – which had obsessed earlier archaeologists – he appears to have agreed with Goethe that the artist's aim should be to take from antiquity not just measurable proportions but that which is unmeasurable – *das Unmessbare*. And this was probably his most notable contribution to Neo-classical architecture.

Piranesi first committed his ideas on architecture to print in a polemical volume entitled *Della magnificenza ed architettura de'Romani* (1761) in which he declared that the Etruscans had brought painting, sculpture, architecture, mathematics and the technical arts to a perfection that was maintained by their natural heirs, the Romans, and debased by the Greeks. This farrago of nonsense drew from Winckelmann the oblique reply it deserved and a solemn cannonade from the French theorist Mariette. The rejoinder Piranesi published in 1765 is still more wildly misinformed but much more interesting to the student of Neo-classicism. After rebutting Mariette, he proceeded to a dialogue entitled *Parere sul'architettura* in which he attacked the idea of simplicity as an architectural virtue, stated that both Etruscan and Roman architecture was highly ornamented and condemned the Vitruvian rules. To 'prove' his argument he illustrated the book with some original inventions showing façades loaded to breaking-point with massive, angular, deeply carved reliefs which completely mask the structure. The moral of this was that architects should free themselves from the shackles of academic theory to create a

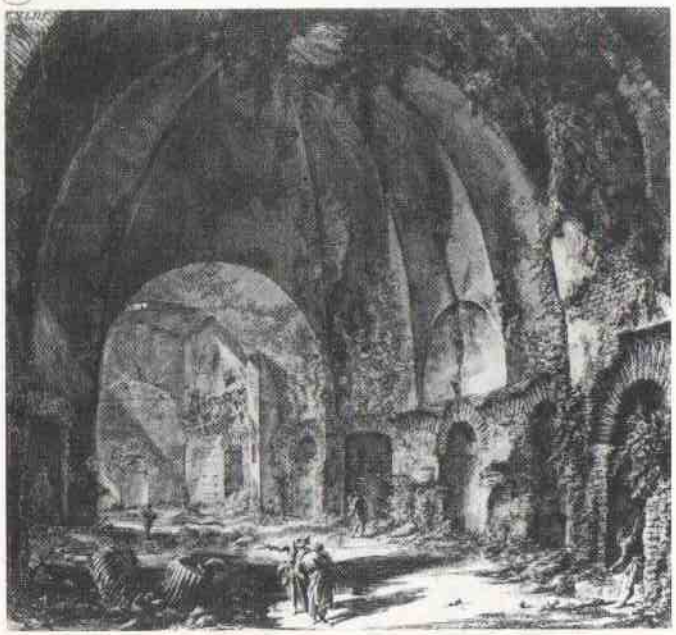
21.
Candelabrum,
c. 1770–78.
G. B. Piranesi

new style inspired by but not directly imitative of Roman architecture. His first illustration bears a text from Terence – 'It is reasonable to know yourself, and not to search into what the ancients have made if the moderns can make it.' While the last bears an adaptation from Sallust: 'They scorn my novelty, I their timidity.'

In this spirit he fabricated, as an ornament for his own tomb, a preposterous candlestick composed of antique marble fragments – pieces of thrones, altars, sarcophagi, vases, columns, capitals, piled on top of one another to realize a Neo-classicist's dream and an archaeologist's nightmare [21]. But he had few opportunities to put his architectural ideas into practice. His only building – the church of S. Maria del Priorato, Rome – is tame in comparison with his tragic visions of Roman grandeur in decay and the polemical diatribes that accompany them. So far as architecture is concerned, he merely sowed the wind and left others to reap the whirlwind.

His influence was disseminated mainly through his etchings of Roman ruins. Some architects took from them purely

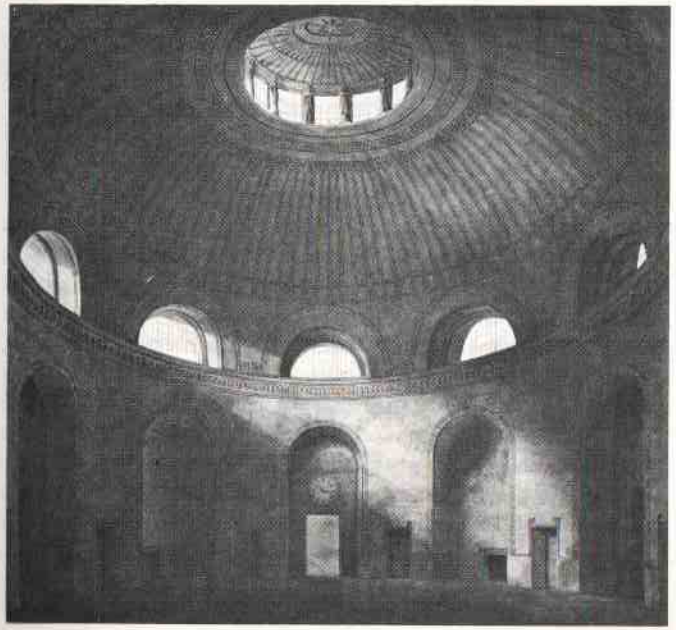
22. *Nymphaeum in the Gardens of Sallust*, 1762. G. B. Piranesi



accidental elements such as the form of an archway with its base buried in the earth, giving it a low-slung emphasis and stressing the semicircular simplicity of the upper part, which appealed especially to Ledoux with his sense of the primeval. The oppressive and cavernous effects of Piranesi's views of domed interiors [22] were caught by Soane in his designs for the rotunda of the Bank of England, where Roman architecture appears stripped of all unnecessary detail, ironed out into its basic form and geometrical purity [23]. Through Soane, Piranesi's bold sense of spatial composition found expression in Latrobe's Baltimore Cathedral with its smooth planar surfaces and low domes which seem to weigh down the segmental arches supporting them [24]. And in practically every country from Russia to America there was a response to his megalomaniac and dramatic vision of architecture, as well as to his challenge of originality, from those who worked in Greek as well as Roman styles.

What Piranesi did for Roman architecture, Winckelmann achieved for Greek art. There had, of course, been no shortage

23. Design for interior, Bank of England, 1798. John Soane



24. Baltimore Cathedral, 1805–18. Benjamin Latrobe

of books on antiquities before he published his first work in 1755. But they had been written almost exclusively by and for archaeologists and like many of the most highly esteemed archaeological publications of our own time seldom suggested that antiquities might be beautiful, still less that they might inspire. Winckelmann wrote from the point of view of an aesthete, an *Aufklärer*, and a man of sentiment. The passionate urgency and almost missionary zeal of the Enlightenment break through his pages as he stresses again and again that antique statues are not merely relics of a vanished civilization, but living works of art of relevance to his contemporaries because they embodied the essence of the Greek spirit. He was, in fact, too passionate and tremulously responsive to be a scholarly archaeologist, too poetic and unsystematic to become an aesthetic philosopher. His genius lay in interpretative writing. He taught his age to look with new eyes not only at antique statues and vases but at Greek civilization as a whole. As Goethe remarked, 'we learn nothing by reading Winckelmann, but we *become* something'.

Before Winckelmann the word 'antiquity' suggested a long period stretching from the fifth century B.C. to the reign of the Byzantine emperor, Phocas. Its artistic products were generally thought to be very much on a par with one another. The term 'antique' covered only slightly fewer and less diverse works of art than it had in the Renaissance. Winckelmann was the first to apply historical method to the study of these works. Adopting the belief that history moved in cycles of growth and decay, he conceived the history of ancient art as an organic process, dividing it into four periods, each with its own style: the early or archaic style (before Phidias), the sublime or grand (Phidias and his contemporaries), the beautiful (Praxiteles to Lysippos) and finally the long period of the imitative style which persisted until the fall of the Roman Empire. This same process was, he thought, repeated in the Italian Renaissance and he called the painters before Raphael archaic, Raphael and Michelangelo sublime, Correggio beautiful, and later masters imitative.

To account in rational terms for the superiority of Greek art at its greatest moment, he absorbed another notion that was then much in the air: the influence of 'climate' or environment on human development. Believing Greek art to be naturalistically idealistic, he concluded that the Greeks themselves had been the most beautiful race that had ever walked the earth. And this he attributed partly to the geographical climate, 'where a temperature prevails that is balanced between winter and summer' (he had never been to Greece), and partly to the political climate. 'Liberty,' he wrote, 'had always held her seat in this country, even near the thrones of kings – whose rule was paternal – before the increasing light of reason had shown to its inhabitants the blessings of entire freedom.' Conversely he appears to have seen the ugly flat-footed Egyptians as the products of a sultry clime and a despotic rule, and hence unable to develop, let alone represent, the physically perfect human form.

In his adoration of Greek statues he was doubtless influenced to some extent by his homosexuality: certainly his vision of a country populated by beautiful and often naked youths is tinged with a personal yearning. It was with an almost audible smack of the lips that he referred to the athletes in the stadium at Olympia, or dilated on the beauty of marble genitals and, more coyly, 'those parts of Bathyle's body which, much to Anacreon's grief, the painter was unable to depict'.

Emotionally drawn to effortlessly athletic, smooth-limbed youths, his ideal in life as in art was the Apollo Belvedere. Here, rather freely translated, is his account of it:

> The artist created a purely ideal figure, employing the only material in which he could realize his idea. This statue surpasses all other representations of the god, just as Homer's description surpasses those attempted by all other poets. His height is above that of man and his attitude declares his divine grandeur. An eternal springtime, like that which reigns in the happy fields of Elysium, clothes his body with the charms of youth and softly shines on the proud structure of his limbs. To understand this masterpiece you must fathom intellectual beauties and become, if possible, a divine creator; for here there is nothing mortal, nothing subject to human needs. This body, marked by no vein, moved by no nerve, is animated by a celestial spirit which courses like a sweet vapour through every part. He has pursued the python and against it used his bow for the first time; with a vigorous stride he has overtaken the monster and slain it. His lofty look, filled with a consciousness of power, seems to rise above his victory and gaze into eternity. Disdain is seated on his brow and his eye is full of gentleness as when the muses caress him. . . . Like the soft tendrils of the vine, his beautiful hair flows round his head, as if gently brushed by the breath of the zephyr. It seems to be perfumed by the essence of the gods, and tied with charming care by the hands of the Graces. In the presence of this miracle of art I forget the whole universe and my soul acquires a loftiness appropriate to its dignity. From admiration I pass to ecstasy, I feel my breast dilate and rise as if I were filled with the spirit of prophecy; I am transported to Delos and the sacred groves of Lycia – places Apollo honoured with his presence – and the statue seems to come alive like the beautiful creation of Pygmalion.

No work of art, ancient or modern, had ever been described in such terms as these. Greatly admired though the Apollo Belvedere had been since its discovery in the fifteenth century, it had never provoked such an ecstatic tribute. No one had seen that it was clothed with eternal springtime or been aware of the faint fragrance blown from its soft hair. Nor had any other aesthetic experience previously been recounted in such terms. Indeed, the only precedent for this passage is to be found in the Christian mystics. And it is with Winckelmann that art begins to replace religion and the aesthetic experience the mystical revelation. It is clearly no coincidence that in terminology, tone and even rhythm, this description should seem to anticipate by a century Walter Pater's celebrated dithyramb on the *Mona Lisa*.

Phrases from Winckelmann are echoed in Byron's stanzas on the Apollo Belvedere in that eminently Romantic poem *Childe Harold*. Nor is this surprising. For Winckelmann had opened the door to subjective criticism and impressionistic verbal evocations. He had replaced the mimetic with an expressive theory of art, and this was to have far-reaching consequences. Similarly the conception of art as a manifestation of the *Zeitgeist* was first expounded in his interpretation of Greek art as embodying the spirit of Periclean Athens. And these new insights were only to be gained, Winckelmann held, by a quietist emotional response to the soul of the artist as expressed in his work – to 'that strength of spirit which he imprinted on his marble'. As Hegel later put it succinctly in a passage quoted, significantly enough, by Pater: 'Winckelmann by contemplation of the ideal works of the ancients, received a sort of inspiration, through which he opened a new sense for the study of art. He is to be regarded as one of those who, in the sphere of art, have known how to initiate a new organ of the human spirit.'

For Winckelmann the adoration of Greek art was a religion, and he wrote and spoke of it with the zeal of a proselytizer. 'For us,' he declared, 'the only way to become great and, if possible, inimitable is by imitation of the ancients.' Believing that 'the opposite of independent thought is the copy, not the imitation', he did not recommend the slavish copying of antique figures. He advocated a return to the spirit, not the letter of antiquity. In a famous phrase he summarized the outstanding qualities in antique art as '*eine edle Einfalt und eine stille Grösse*' – noble simplicity and calm grandeur. They were spiritual as well as aesthetic qualities, to be found in Laocoön's nobly silent heroic suffering, no less than in the statue which represented it. A vision of antiquity based on such a concept differed as much from that of the Renaissance as from that of the Baroque and Rococo. But such was the force of Winckelmann's writing that it was destined to persist into periods when such qualities were seen as weaknesses (the words could easily be mistranslated as precious emptiness and lifeless bombast) of Classical, or for that matter, Neo-classical art.

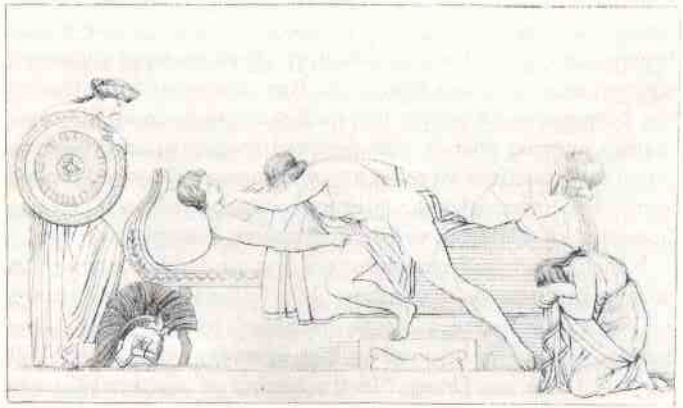
Winckelmann's direct influence was probably stronger on writers and patrons than artists. It is felt even in the writings of some who were violently opposed to his beliefs. For Herder was surely inspired by him when he wrote, in the full fury of *Sturm und Drang*: 'In the history of mankind Greece

will eternally remain the place where mankind experienced its fairest youth and bridal beauty . . . noble youth with fair anointed limbs, favourite of all the Graces, beloved of all the Muses, victor in Olympia and all the other games, spirit and body together one single flower in bloom.' In another passage he rhapsodized: 'Greece, type and exemplar of all beauty, grace and simplicity! Youthful blossoming of the human race – Oh would that it could have lasted for ever.' Such passages as these bear witness to the excitement inspired by Winckelmann's revelation. For it was his achievement to clothe with an eternal springtime not the Apollo Belvedere only but the whole of Greek art and literature. He has often been condemned as the theoretical pedant of the Neo-classical movement: he was, in fact, its poet and visionary.

3. HOMER

The revaluation of Homer which took place in the eighteenth century illustrates and, to some extent accounts for, a still more profound change in the attitude to antiquity and, by extension, to the value and purpose of all works of literature and art – a change which goes to the roots of Neo-classicism. At the beginning of the century Homer was regarded as one of the great ancient poets, to be compared favourably or unfavourably with Virgil. By the end of the century he towered above the ancient world. Dante and Shakespeare, the two 'modern' giants were his only peers. Such was his stature

25. *Achilles lamenting the death of Patroclus*, 1793. John Flaxman



that he could no longer be translated into contemporary language.

One aspect of this change is evident if a Gobelins tapestry of an Homeric scene – all plumes and flounces and pretty colours – is compared with one of John Flaxman's illustrations to the *Iliad*, with motionless figures drawn in the most archaic style of pure outline against a plain background [25]. But translations are no less revealing. The famous passage from the third book of the *Iliad* in which the elders comment on Helen's appearance was translated by Pope in about 1715 as:

> They cried, No wonder, such celestial charms
> For nine long years have set the world in arms;
> What winning graces! What majestic mien!
> She moves a goddess and she looks a queen!

Here are the same lines rendered by William Cowper seventy years later:

> Trojans and Grecians wage, with fair excuse,
> Long war for so much beauty. Oh, how like
> In feature to the Goddesses above!

Pope rendered Homer into the poetic idiom of his day – his Achilles sometimes seems to be on the point of taking snuff – though he was less high-handed than his French contemporary La Motte Houdar who frankly declared: 'I decided to change, cut and if need be invent and do what I imagined Homer would have done if he had lived in our time.' Pope did not scruple about expanding epithets, or sketching in conventional pastoral landscape backgrounds lacking in the original. Cowper, so far from wishing to modernize Homer, emphasized his antiquity by translating him into Miltonic blank verse – he had even thought of translating him into Chaucerian English! His comments on his own work are revealing:

> I have two French prints hanging in my study, both of *Iliad* subjects; and I have an English one in the parlour, on a subject from the same poem. In one of the former, Agamemnon addressed Achilles exactly in the attitude of a dancing-master turning miss in a minuet: in the latter, the figures are plain, and the attitudes plain also. This is, in some considerable measure, I believe, the difference between my translation and Pope's . . .

He strove to render the original as truthfully and starkly as did his German contemporary J. H. Voss whose translations

of the *Odyssey* (1781) and the *Iliad* (1793) into megalithic hexameters enthralled both Goethe and Schiller and were destined to exert a profound influence on German literature and life for more than a century.

To Pope the Homeric poems were a wilderness of savage beauties which could be improved by the use of the sickle and the shears. He was promptly pounced on by a French translator, Mme Dacier, who said that nothing could be more mischievous and unjust: 'So far from the *Iliad* being an untended wilderness it is the best laid out and most symmetrical garden that ever was. M. Le Nôtre, who led the world in this particular art, never achieved a more consummate regularity in his gardens than did Homer in his poetry.' But it was Pope's view that was to prevail, with a significant modification when untended savage beauties, in poetry as in the garden, came to be appreciated for their own sake. Thomas Blackwell's *Inquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* of 1735 and Robert Wood's *Essay on the Original Genius and Writings of Homer* of 1769 (translated into German in 1773 and French in 1775), held the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to be expressions of the poetic genius at the golden moment when the Greeks had just emerged from barbarism but before their purity and spontaneity of feeling had been corrupted by civilization. 'While manners were rude, when arts were little cultivated and before science was reduced to general principles, poetry had acquired a greater degree of perfection than it has ever since obtained,' Wood declared.

This reappraisal of Homer as the supreme primitive coincided with, if it did not lead to, a new appreciation of other early poetry, notably the stark elemental tragedies of Aeschylus, first translated into French and English in the 1770s (though earlier available in Latin translations), the 'iron age' works of Hesiod and Pindar and, very significantly, Dante, Shakespeare and the German *Nibelungenlied*. And it also produced the most extraordinary forgery of the century – *Fingal* and other prose poems published by James Macpherson in 1762–3 and ascribed to the mythical Gaelic bard, Ossian. The success of this work was as immediate as it was widespread. Klopstock was so overwhelmed that he claimed Ossian as a German. 'Ossian has replaced Homer in my heart,' wrote Goethe's Werther in 1774. Hamann and Herder were no less enthusiastic. Even in classic Italy the Abbate

Cesarotti turned from commenting on Homer to translating Ossian. In France the young *Primitifs* in David's studio took Ossian with Homer and the Bible as their sacred texts. 'Homer? Ossian?' one of them remarked. 'The sun? the moon? That is the question. In truth I believe that I prefer the moon. It is simpler, larger, it is more primitive.'

The conjunction of Homer and Ossian is no coincidence. Ossian was regarded as the northern equivalent of the Greek poet (on one occasion a painter represented him with all the Homeric attributes). And it is hard to resist the conclusion that Macpherson had intended this to be so. Supposedly written in the third century A.D. (Fingal being a contemporary of Caracalla who figures in the epic), the poems depict a society on the point of emerging from barbarism. They abound in Homeric devices rendered in the suitably archaic language of the Authorized Version of the Bible. And they pay scant attention to the more restrictive classical rules. But Macpherson also sought to improve on Homer and set to right what, in the 1760s, were thought to be his failings.

Though Wood had presented him as a Deist, Homer was generally supposed to have been woefully superstitious. Ossian, in contrast, had no Olympus of amoral gods. In his work the supernatural element, so essential for primitive poetry, was represented by spirits who, like Shakespeare's ghosts, may be construed as memories, dream visions and premonitions playing no decisive role in the lives of men. On sexual matters Homer was often frank and sometimes nasty: of the six hundred pages of Ossian there is not one that could bring a blush to the cheek of the demurest maiden. Homer's heroes are frequently deceitful or childishly petulant: Ossian's behave with a decorous nobility of soul which suggests that they have been brought up on the precepts of Cicero and Marcus Aurelius. Obeying no laws save those of nature, they are shown in triumphant conflict with evil men and with the elements.

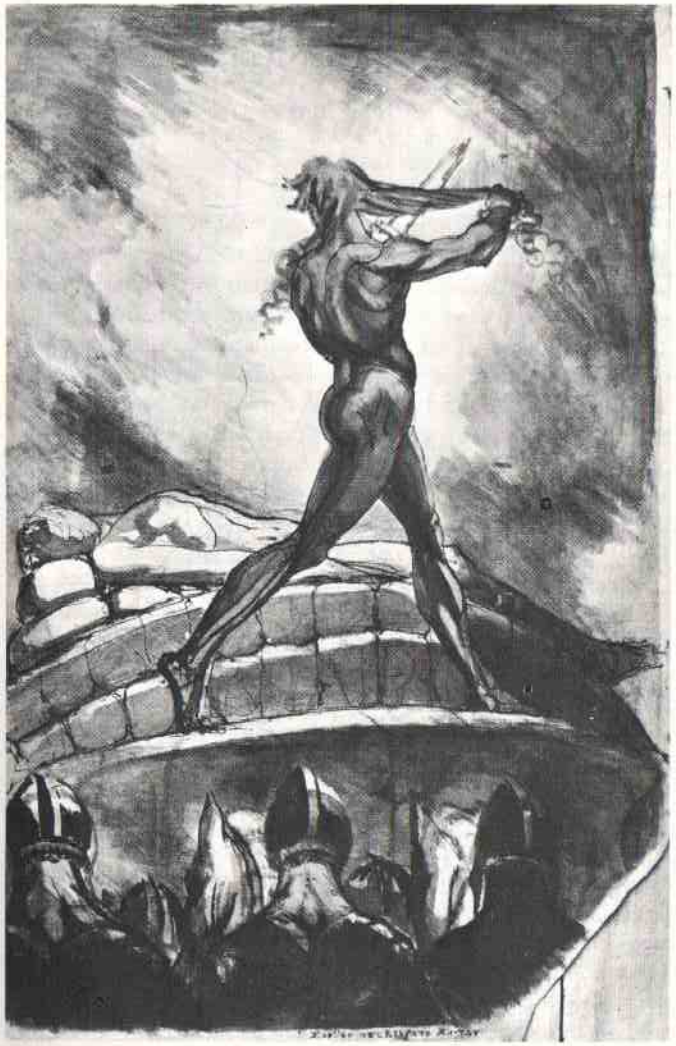
'In point of humanity, magnanimity, virtuous feeling of every kind,' wrote Macpherson's chief dupe and defender, the Rev. Hugh Blair, 'our rude Celtic bard should be distinguished to such a degree, that not only the heroes of Homer, but even those of the polite and refined Virgil are left far behind by those of Ossian.' Even the urbane Gibbon was struck by the contrast with Imperial Rome:

If we could, with safety, indulge the pleasing supposition, that Fingal lived and Ossian sang, the striking contrast of the situation and manners of the contending nations might amuse the philosophic mind. The parallel would be little to the advantage of the more civilized people, if we compared the unrelenting revenge of Severus with the generous clemency of Fingal; the timid and brutal cruelty of Caracalla, with the bravery, the tenderness, the elegant genius of Ossian; the mercenary chiefs who from motives of fear or interest, served under the Imperial standard, with the freeborn warriors who started to arms at the voice of the king of Morven; if, in a word, we contemplated the untutored Caledonians, glowing with the warm virtues of nature, and the degenerate Romans polluted with the vices of wealth and slavery.

The poems of Ossian present primitive poetry – and, indeed, primitive life – as the later eighteenth century wished to see it: simple, rugged, unsophisticated and, at the same time, moral, rational and touched with sentiment. This attitude is exactly paralleled in Neo-classical renderings of Homeric themes. Licentious or even mildly erotic subjects are spurned. Artists and patrons prefer those which illustrate grandeur of soul, heroic deeds, simple, powerful passions. When David painted *Paris and Helen* for the Comte d'Artois he was at pains to make the subject as unlascivious and give it as strong an appeal to sentiment as he could. But he was clearly happier and much more successful in showing Andromache mourning the dead Hector [80]. In a drawing of Achilles at the pyre of Patroclus, Fuseli shows the Homeric hero so much larger, so much nobler than life, rendering the emotion of grief in its purest and most primitive form [26], that one is reminded of another of his drawings in which he showed himself with a bust of Homer inscribed with the words: 'For the cure of the soul.'

All the trappings of 'period' costume have been banished from Fuseli's drawing of Achilles. Were it not for the Greek inscription, it might be taken to represent an Ossianic subject (just as some of his Shakespearean and Ossianic drawings might easily be mistaken for illustrations to Homer). He went to Homer not for picturesque subjects but for noble themes – themes which expressed the unaffected simplicity of primitive emotions, the natural nobility of heroic deeds. Similar themes were, of course, to be found in the work of other 'primitive' writers. It is significant that Flaxman chose to illustrate only Homer, Aeschylus, Hesiod and Dante.

26. *Achilles at the pyre of Patroclus*, c. 1795–1800. H. Fuseli



The qualities which distinguished ancient poetry could be visually represented only by a style of equally primitive simplicity. For the literary and artistic cults of the primitive were two manifestations of a more profound urge to purify society and re-establish natural laws which were based on reason and recognized the dignity of man.

3
Art and Revolution

1. ART AND POLITICS

'Liberty,' wrote Winckelmann in the 1760s, 'only liberty has elevated art to its perfection.' This association of art with politics and social conditions had first been proposed in the early years of the eighteenth century by Lord Shaftesbury to whom Winckelmann owed many of his ideas. Although it rapidly gained currency it was also attacked. The debate has continued ever since. And it is hardly surprising that it has raged most fiercely around the late eighteenth century when it might be supposed that the political sympathies of artists and the political content of their work would be overt and unambiguous. There were, as we have seen, strong links binding Neo-classicism to the Enlightenment and it is tempting to extend this to include that climate 'of critical analysis and doubt, of unrest among the educated classes, and of guilt-consciousness in the rulers' which, in Namier's words, preceded the Revolution of 1789. But the closer we look at individual artists and works of art, the more difficult it becomes to associate, let alone identify, the artistic with the political revolution.

When discussing the possible political motives of artists, it is as well to bear in mind the precise sequence of events in the Revolutionary years. A long struggle for power between the French Crown and certain sections of the privileged classes culminated in the so-called *révolte nobiliaire* of 1787. Matters came to a head over proposals to tax the aristocracy and the Church as a means of righting a disastrous financial situation aggravated by the expenses France had incurred in the American War of Independence. In 1788 the King capitulated to the aristocracy by agreeing to summon the States-General for the first time since 1614. When it met in May 1789 it brought to the fore the prosperous professional men and minor government officials of the *Tiers État* who, demanding popular sovereignty, met in the Tennis Court on 17 June and constituted themselves the National Assembly. In the

meantime bread and grain riots had broken out all over France. Lefebvre has shown this peasant revolt to have been an autonomous movement quite separate and distinct from the *révolte nobiliaire* and the subsequent bourgeois revolution of the *Tiers État*. It was a revolt against specific practical grievances and had, of course, no political theory behind it, nor did it need any. These disturbances culminated in the revolt of Paris, the storming of the Bastille on 14 July and of Versailles on 6 October 1789. Yet despite all this, the assembly, dominated by Robespierre, still voted for a constitutional monarchy rather than a republic and continued to do so even after the King's abortive flight to Varennes in 1791. It was not until September of the following year, under the impact of the Austrian invasion and attempts at a counter-revolution, that the monarchy was finally abolished and not until 21 January 1793 that the King was executed.

The French Revolution was a complex series of events, in fact a succession of overlapping revolutions with different origins and aims. It cannot be reduced to a simple causal sequence. Nor can any direct causal relationship between it and the Enlightenment be implied, since political theory seems to have had little influence on the Revolution's course and became useful mainly to justify it after the event.

Artists were not involved in the *révolte nobiliaire* and their political affiliations before 1789, if they had any, are now unknown. Their reactions to the events of 1789 are seldom explicit and can usually be implied only from negative evidence. (Though on 7 September a group of eleven wives and daughters of artists – including Mmes David, Moitte, Peyron and Vien – who sympathized with recent events, dressed themselves in white, stuck tricolour cockades in their hair and publicly gave their jewellery to the National Assembly.) But it is certain that some of the most artistically progressive were politically either indifferent or reactionary. Ledoux, for example, who built the toll houses for the farmer-generals' wall round Paris [13] – '*le mur murant Paris rend Paris murmurant*' – was, not unnaturally, imprisoned during the Revolution. Two other advanced architects seem to have sided with the *ancien régime*: Gondouin went into prudent hiding, Thomas de Thomon followed the Comte d'Artois into exile and then chose to work for the most reactionary courts in Europe, first Vienna, then St Petersburg [48]. Many progressive artists were financially ruined, like Greuze, whose

fortune vanished in *assignats* and who failed to find new patrons. On the other hand, the middle-of-the-road Vestier, though impoverished, found the hope of the new political order 'a joy which consoles me for my losses'. Many, of course, sided with the Revolution, whether from conviction or expediency. And as the Revolution pursued its tumultuous course, attitudes to it changed as rapidly (mainly as a result of the Terror) both in and outside France. André Chénier, Schiller and Vittorio Alfieri were among many who, like Wordsworth, greeted it with joy but were soon thrown 'out of the pale of love'. Flaxman, who seems to have shown little interest in politics even in the 1790s, later declared himself against the Revolution and refused to meet David because his hands were 'dyed beyond purification'.

David has been called 'the perfect political artist', but the connexion between his art and politics is much less straightforward than might be supposed. By his contemporaries he was represented both as a lifelong revolutionary and as a mere opportunist who attached himself to the leading party of the moment. His early *Belisarius* [7] has been described as a denunciation of kings in general and Louis XVI in particular. The same work, and other paintings he executed for the Crown, were cited in about 1793 as evidence of his complaisant support of the *ancien régime*. Reactionaries later found his works stained by the blood of the Terror and reported (on no evidence) how he would cry to his students 'let us grind enough *red*' while the tumbrils rattled past his windows. The left wing has generally seen in his pre-Napoleonic works a reflection of their own beliefs. On the eve of the Russian Revolution the Menshevik, Georgy Plekhanov, exhorted young Russians to go and bow before David's *Brutus* in the Louvre. More recently David has been artistically and politically condemned by the Marxist, Daniel Guérin, as a cynical bourgeois betrayer of the proletariat.

The painting around which discussion has raged most fiercely is the *Oath of the Horatii* of 1784 which has often been construed as an appeal to 'republican virtues and sentiments' and therefore as a manifesto of the Revolution [8]. Yet this work was commissioned for the Crown by the Comte d'Angiviller and won his official approval even though the canvas was not of the size required. It does not, in fact, represent a Roman Republican scene. Nor were there Republicans – in any meaningful sense of the word – in France at this date. Nor yet

does it suggest any general criticism of society such as is evident in Beaumarchais's *Le Mariage de Figaro* which had aroused widespread comment when it was first produced in 1784. None of the many comments made on the *Oath of the Horatii* when it was first exhibited in Rome – where princes of Church and State flocked to admire it – or in Paris, suggests that it contained any allusions, overt or otherwise, to any of the political issues of the day. As Prud'hon remarked in a letter of 1786, the Horatii swear with absolute steadfastness to shed their blood to the last drop for their *patrie*. And in France at this date patriotism still implied loyalty to the King. The painting is no more a celebration of Republicanism than David's *Death of Socrates* is a condemnation of demagogy.

For his *Brutus* [27] begun in 1788, David did choose a Roman Republican theme – the expulsion of a tyrant – though this was not the aspect of the story he chose to illustrate. And it is perhaps significant that in the very same year Alfieri, who was also in Paris, dedicated his tragedy *Bruto Primo* to George Washington with the words: 'Only the name of the liberator of America can stand on the opening page of the tragedy of the liberator of Rome.' But David took up the story where Alfieri had left off, showing Brutus – '*L'uom più infelice, che sia nato mai*' – seated in the atrium of his house while the lictors carry in the bodies of the sons he has condemned to death for treason. This illustration of stoic patriotism and sense of public duty at its most austere was, like the *Oath of the Horatii*, bought for the Crown by d'Angiviller. David himself, writing in 1789 to Wicar (who also became a Republican firebrand), described the work purely in terms of the passions it represented without hinting at any political overtones. When the picture was begun the Revolution was still in its first phase. But while David was at work on it there was a dramatic change in the political climate: and by the time it was completed for the Salon of 1789, the oath had been sworn in the Tennis Court, the *Tiers État* had taken over and the Bastille had been stormed.

David also presented for the 1789 Salon the *Paris and Helen* he had painted for the King's brother, the Comte d'Artois, and a portrait of Lavoisier and his wife [28]. Anxious lest the exhibition should inflame further disorders, the authorities decided not to exhibit the portrait of Lavoisier, then better known as a farmer-general than as a scientist. There was a brief delay before they put the *Brutus* on show but whether

27. *Brutus*, 1789. J.-L. David

28. *Antoine Lavoisier and his wife*, 1788. J.-L. David

this was diplomatic is not known. Nor is it known whether the painting had any precise political significance for those who saw it in the Salon in 1789. Of course, the cult of Brutus – though of the assassin of Caesar as much as Brutus the first consul and opponent of Tarquin – later became the centre of the imagery of the Revolution.

In the following year David was commissioned by the Jacobin club, of which he was himself a member, to execute the commemorative painting of 'the act of formal disobedience to the King', the oath in the Tennis Court. Announcing this decision, Dubois-Crancé declared: 'To immortalize our thoughts we have chosen the painter of the *Brutus* and the *Horatii*, the French patriot whose genius anticipated the Revolution.' This is the first recorded instance of any specifically political meaning being read into David's works – and it is significant that it should not occur until after he had begun to engage in active politics.

This is not to suggest that a revolutionary meaning was seen in his paintings only because he later became a politician. David was not the only genius, nor were his the only works, that were supposed to have anticipated the Revolution. Voltaire also was hailed as a prophet and his tragedy of *Brutus* (first performed sixty years earlier) was revived in the autumn of 1790 with David's picture staged as a *tableau vivant* at its close. Schiller's *Die Räuber*, published in 1781, was similarly interpreted as an expression of revolutionary sentiments and in 1792 he received, much to his embarrassment, a certificate of honorary French citizenship. And many prominent revolutionaries said in retrospect that a youthful reading of Plutarch's *Lives* had fired their souls with a passion for liberty. By 1795 the Comte de Volney was putting the blame for the Revolution on the whole cult of antiquity.

In painting the *Oath of the Horatii* and the *Brutus*, David expressed the mood of those French intellectuals who, like himself, were to be swept along on the wave of the Revolution. He rendered in artistic terms their stern morality, their idealism, their faith in reason and the rights of man, their willingness to sacrifice their friends, their relations and themselves to their new concept of patriotism. But he had also appealed to those who (like d'Angiviller) were to turn horror-stricken from the first practical application of these beliefs, and to those who were to be disillusioned by the course the Revolution took – like his friend André Chénier who lost first his

faith then his head. In 1789 no one could have realized the full implications of enlightened ideas, no one could have predicted how soon and how inexorably the moral lessons implicit in the *Oath of the Horatii* and *Brutus* were to be forced upon them.

David, who became a deputy and for a while chairman of the Convention, followed his beliefs through politically and artistically. In his paintings of the *Oath in the Tennis Court* and the three martyrs of the Revolution – Le Peletier, Marat and Bara – he was to adopt a still more severely uncompromising style. These works develop as logically, one might almost say inevitably, out of those that preceded them as the politician David of the 1790s out of the intellectual David of the 1780s. Yet he seems never to have become a fanatically doctrinaire Jacobin. His drawing of Marie Antoinette on her way to the guillotine reveals his tenderness for the woman, however much he may have hated and despised the Queen for whose execution he had voted [29]. It reminds one of Baudelaire's phrase – that David had '*quelquechose de tendre et poignant à la fois*'. And the large painting of the *Intervention of the Sabine*

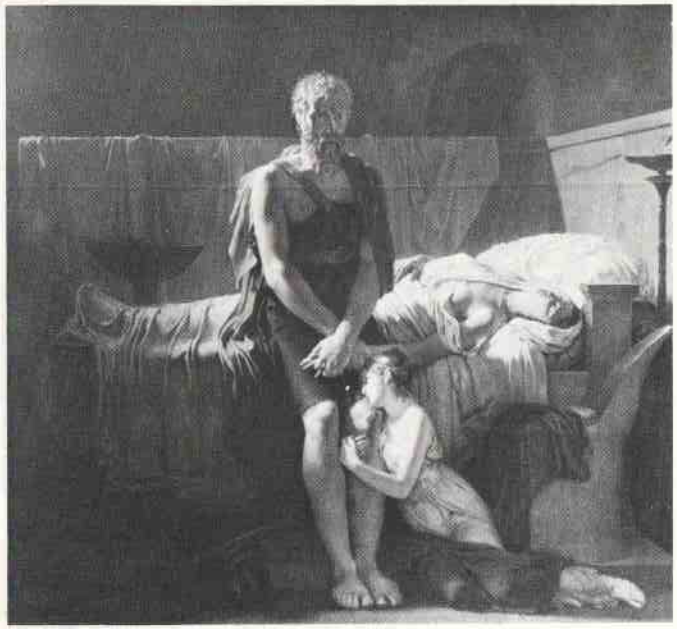
29. *Marie Antoinette on the way to the guillotine*, 1793. J.-L. David

30. *The Intervention of the Sabine Women*, 1799. J.-L. David

Women [30], which he began to sketch when imprisoned (as a friend and supporter of Robespierre) seems to have been intended as a plea for peace and reconciliation. It reflects the mood of revulsion from terror and blood-letting which marked the Directoire. Soon David, like the majority of his compatriots, was to see Napoleon – however mistakenly – as the one man capable of leading France out of the impasse of the Revolution without sacrificing the principles of 1789.

David must occupy the centre of any discussion of art and politics in this period. But there were other artists who engaged in politics and other works of art to which political significance was attached. Neo-classical paintings could also be hailed as counter-revolutionary statements. In 1799 one of David's best followers, P.-N. Guérin, exhibited in the Salon a painting of the *Return of Marcus Sextus* [31] – a man who, exiled by Sulla, had returned home to find his wife dead and his daughter distraught with grief. The *emigrés* who had just come back to France naturally saw this as an allegory of their own plight, though whether this was Guérin's intention when he began the picture in 1797 is extremely doubtful. (It was painted in Rome and could equally well refer to a revolutionary driven from his home by the Papal government.)

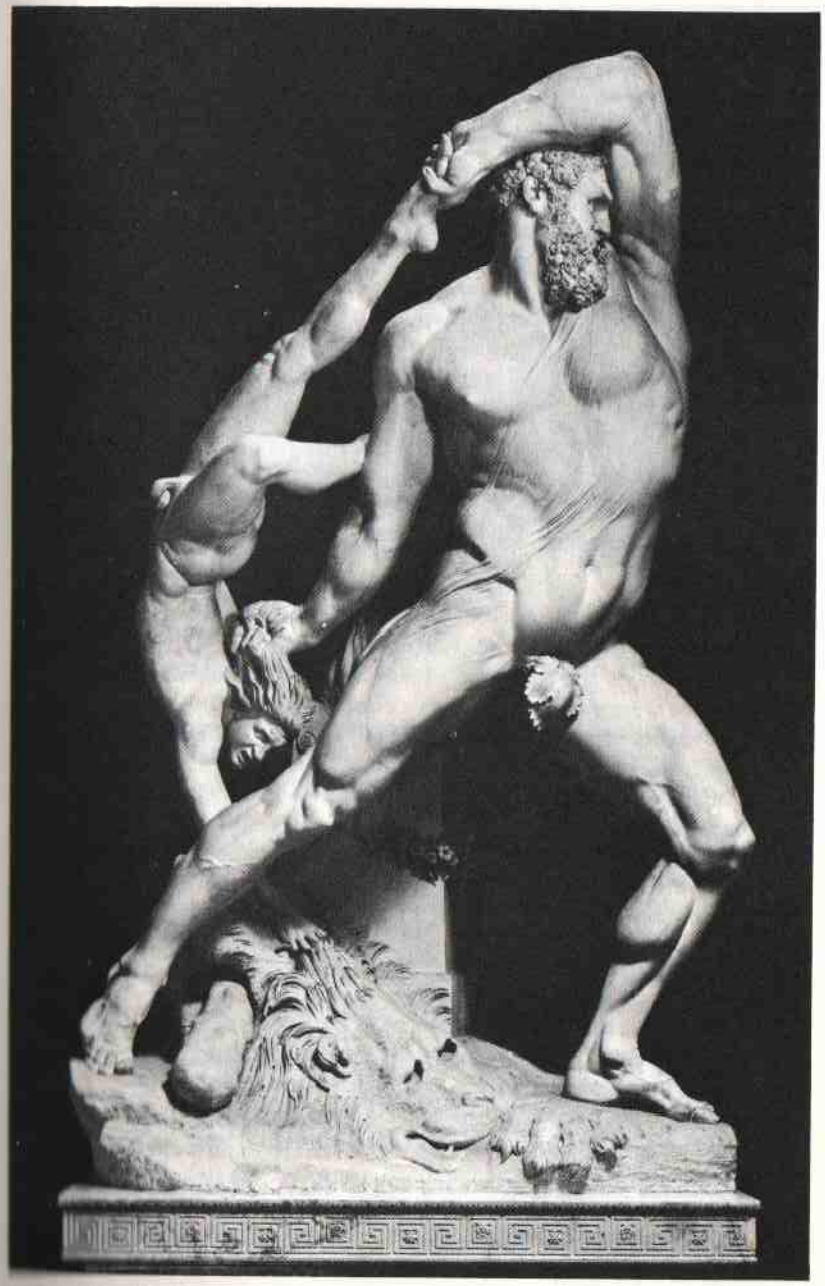
A story which Canova tells in a letter of 1799 provides an instance of how easily and plausibly – and how mistakenly – a



31. *The Return of Marcus Sextus*, 1797–9. P.-N. Guérin

topical meaning may be read into a work of art. Some Frenchmen who visited his studio much admired his colossal group of *Hercules and Lichas* [32]. It clearly represented, they said, the French Hercules casting Monarchy to the winds, to which Canova replied that he would never have represented such a theme for all the gold in the world and asked whether the figure of Lichas might not equally well be identified with 'licentious liberty'. He had, in fact, considered neither interpretation before. Nevertheless, the suggestion, a few years later, that the group should be raised as a monument to the Austrian army in Italy was vetoed by the Emperor, possibly because he thought its meaning too ambiguous.

A truly political work of art must necessarily be unambiguous. Such straightforward statements as caricatures and documentary records of notable events – the fall of the Bastille or the storming of the Tuileries – leave one in no doubt as to their purpose and meaning. But so closely are they involved in the passions of the moment that they can rarely move us today. Indeed, they serve to reinforce the Neo-classical belief



32. *Hercules and Lichas*, 1795–1802. Antonio Canova

that a great work of art should be devoted to a theme of universal significance. Goya's prints and paintings survive with terrifying force because they castigate not merely the superstitions of eighteenth-century Spaniards but all the malevolent powers of bigotry, the horrors not merely of the Napoleonic war in Spain but of all wars in all countries. In a rather different way, David lifted the revolutionary heroes out of the circumstances of their time, depicting the dead Marat [83] and the dying Bara not just as martyrs of the Revolution but as ennobling examples of those who die for their beliefs. In both works, contemporary allusions are reduced to their barest minimum, to the letter in Marat's hand and the tricolour cockade the young Bara clutches to his heart. And it is no coincidence that in the *Oath in the Tennis Court* David repeated the gesture with which the Horatii had sworn to shed their blood for their country even to the last drop.

2. EDUCATION

In 1793 Léopold Boilly, one of the most charming French painters of the day, was called before the *Société populaire et républicaine des arts* and accused of painting pictures of 'revolting obscenity to republican morals, the obscenity of which dirties the walls of the Republic'. He was no pornographer; his paintings were rarely more than delicately erotic. But he was never highly serious. Even his *Triumph of Marat*, which he cited in his defence, is unmistakably, if to modern eyes agreeably lighthearted. And it was to his incorrigible frivolity that the *Société populaire* objected. One of its members, Jacques Lebrun, described as 'counter-revolutionary' pictures not only those of overtly anti-civic or immoral subjects but also such frivolous and insignificant paintings as 'can serve at most merely to charm the boredom of our luxurious sybarites'.

A belief in the educative mission of artists, which found extreme expression in these remarks, was embedded in eighteenth-century theory. The *Encyclopédie* article 'Intéressant' states that a work of art owes its interest to its moral and social content and the artist must therefore be both '*philosophe et honnête homme*'. And Diderot summed up his philosophy of art in the famous sentence: 'To make virtue attractive, vice odious, ridicule forceful: that is the aim of every honest man who takes up the pen, the brush or the chisel' [33]. Nor were such ideas confined to France. In England Daniel Webb recommended paintings which 'melt the soul into a tender

33. *The Drunkard's Return*, *c.* 1780. G.-B. Greuze

participation of human miseries . . . give a turn to the mind advantageous to society . . . and quicken us to acts of humanity and benevolence'.

The corollary, that the arts might also deprave, was applied not only to representations of licentious or merely unedifying subjects but also to the 'impure' in style. 'There is a close analogy between the love of beauty in external objects, and a mind truly disposed to feeling all the softer and most amiable sensations,' wrote John Baptist Jackson (1754), who argued that a taste for bizarre Chinese or chinoiserie wallpapers indicated a love of the 'crooked, disproportioned and ugly . . . the ill Formation or Perversion of that mind which approves of preternatural Appearances'. Similar criticisms were applied to architecture by J. G. Sulzer in 1771: 'Bad buildings which have been planned or constructed without order or intelligence or which are overladen with foolish, grotesque, or exuberant decoration necessarily have a bad effect on the mentality of the people.' This revival of Platonic notions reflects the Enlightenment's preoccupation with education at a time when the power of the Churches was declining. A change in attitude to the rewards and penalties of the after-life was necessitating the substitution of an extra-Christian ethical code based on reason

and the 'law of nature'; or, in Diderot's words, substituting 'doing good' and 'doing harm' for religious concepts of virtue and vice.

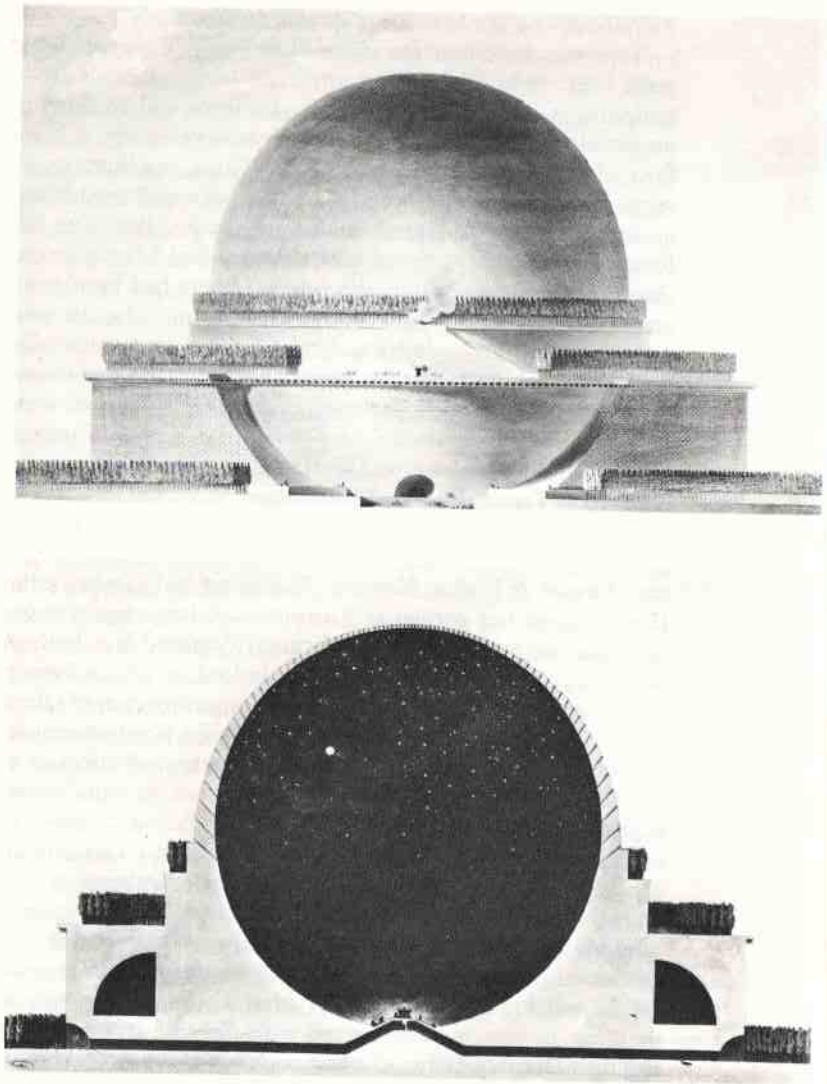
The effect of these notions is clearly evident in the official programme of Crown patronage of mid eighteenth-century France. As we have already seen, greater emphasis was placed on the intellectual training of artists and the painting of serious moralizing history pictures was encouraged. This programme was to a large extent inspired by nostalgia for the *grand siècle*. But in one respect the paintings it produced differed markedly from those of the Louis XIV period. Le Brun and the artists he employed had almost invariably celebrated the virtues, the power and the glory of Louis XIV himself. If abstract virtues were illustrated they were those associated with monarchy – justice, clemency, magnaminity, wisdom. Even religious pictures seemed to suggest that the King who ruled by right divine was the eldest and 'most beloved' son of the Church. But the works commissioned by d'Angiviller from 1774 onwards rarely refer to Louis XVI. The virtues they celebrate are those expected of the nation at large – courage, sobriety, continence, respect for the laws and, above all, patriotism. Their aim was not to reflect the glory of the Crown but to educate the people. It was to contribute to this series of educative works that David painted both the *Oath of the Horatii* and the *Brutus* which are the outstanding products of the programme – as stylistically pure as they are morally elevating and uncompromising.

When commissioning paintings in 1776 d'Angiviller very significantly placed the moral theme before the subject: 'Example of the encouragement of work among the Romans: Cressinus displaying his agricultural implements. . . . Example of disinterestedness among the Romans: Fabricius refusing the presents of the ambassadors of Pyrrhus. . . . Example of heroic resolution among the Romans: Portia proving to her husband Brutus that she has the courage to kill herself if the plot against Caesar fails.' Livy and Plutarch, those breviaries of the enlightened moralist, were scanned for suitable subjects. Others were found in French medieval and later history. And when commissioning sculptors to execute a series of statues of great Frenchmen, d'Angiviller included not only men of action like the Maréchals de Tourville and de Catinat but also Poussin and La Fontaine. Indeed, he remarked of Maréchal de Catinat that he was '*non moins recommendable par ses talents*

militaires que par son humanité et son esprit philosophique'.

Houdon, who carved the statue of de Tourville, wrote some years later: 'one of the finest attributes of the difficult art of sculpture is truthfully to preserve the form and render imperishable the image of men who have achieved glory or good for their country.' The idea that such statues and busts could serve as educative moral exemplars had been well established in ancient Rome and propounded by Cicero. But after the Renaissance the honours of civic statuary had been reserved almost exclusively for dynastic rulers. Others had been commemorated, if at all, only above their tombs. In the mid eighteenth century a desire to praise famous men, especially writers and philosophers, in imperishable marble or bronze, manifested itself in all parts of Europe. Monuments were raised to those long dead – to Galileo in S. Croce, Florence (1737), to Shakespeare in Westminster Abbey (1740), to Newton in Trinity College, Cambridge (1755), to Descartes in Stockholm (1780), to Grotius in Delft (1781). This cult was particularly strong in England where Queen Caroline in 1732 raised busts of Locke, Newton, Wollaston and Clarke in the Hermitage in her garden at Richmond. A large semicircular 'Temple' enshrining busts of 'British Worthies' was built in the park at Stowe, also in the 1730s. Indeed, in 1767 a French writer remarked that 'the practice of honouring men of talent with statues is still vigorously kept up by the English, emulators of the Greeks and Romans in their esteem of talent as in their love of liberty'. Westminster Abbey was, he said, '*comme le sanctuaire de la gloire nationale*'. And, in Rome, from 1776 onwards busts of artists and writers (of whom Winckelmann was the first) were accumulated in the Pantheon which was thus transformed into a temple of fame. In 1775 Andrea Memmo began to lay out the Prato della Valle in Padua as a garden adorned not, as would have been the case a few years earlier, with marble gods and goddesses, but with statues of the most famous men connected with the city. In France the architect Desprez designed a vast complex of sepulchral buildings to commemorate and house the remains of the greatest Frenchmen – he sent a print to Voltaire who said he could hardly wait to be buried in it.

Towards the end of the century this abstract generalizing tendency was carried a stage farther with the architectural (i.e. abstract) monument and with the erection (or more usually just the design) of monuments dedicated to general ideas as



34. Designs for a monument to Newton, *c.* 1780–90. E.-L. Boullée

well as individuals. The most notable were those to Newton – discoverer of order in infinity and thus a great Neo-classical hero – especially that drawn by Boullée [34]. 'O Newton,' wrote Boullée, 'as by the extent of your wisdom and the sublimity of your genius you determined the shape of the earth; I have conceived the idea of enveloping you in your own discovery.' The same idea lies behind Janus Genelli's designs for architectural monuments to Kant and Herder of 1808. In the newly founded United States those who petitioned for the purely architectural monument to George Washington – a simple column – claimed that its erection was in the public interest since 'trophies to the memory of great and good men are an encouragement to victorious and heroic deeds. They stimulate the young to emulation, to noble and honourable actions.' We are here as far from the world of the Baroque dynastic monument as from the notion that history is concerned more with the conquests of kings than the achievements of the human spirit.

The enlightened belief that the greatness of rulers – Pericles, Augustus, Julius II or Louis XIV – was to be judged less by their territorial conquests than by the works of art and literature produced under them acted as a further stimulus to the improvement of the arts. Academies began to proliferate (in 1720 there were only nineteen, few of which were actively engaged in artistic instruction; by 1790 there were more than a hundred from Philadelphia to Leningrad). As these institutions began to replace the master's studio as the main schools for young artists, so their attention was directed more to theory and less to craftsmanship. And it was this attitude that led to a demand for the public museum – the temple of art.

Great royal collections of works of art which had hitherto been regarded mainly as status symbols, as important adjuncts to a monarch's regalia, now came to be seen in a different light. In 1747 La Font de Saint-Yenne issued the first of a long series of pleas for the establishment of a royal museum in Paris as a remedy for the decadence of history painting. Three years later, more than a hundred paintings and drawings were hung in some rooms of the Luxembourg Palace, open to the public twice a week and to the protected students of the École Royale at practically any time. In Germany the Landgrave Frederick of Cassel began in 1769 what was to be the first museum ever built as such in Europe, the Fredericianum, to house antique statues, a library and a natural history collection. It was

designed in an appropriately, but for Germany at this date unusually severe and correct classical style. Still more advanced stylistically were the new rooms which, between 1772 and 1781, Pope Pius VI added to the Vatican for the display of antiquities [35].

35. The Rotonda, Museo Vaticano, Rome, 1776–80. M. Simonetti

Though open to the public, these museums were still essentially private collections like the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence. A new and revolutionary idea about the role of the museum was, however, already in the air. In 1779 Christian von Mechel, a friend of Winckelmann, was appointed to arrange and catalogue part of the Austrian Imperial collection in the Belvedere Museum in Vienna. 'The purpose was to use this building,' he wrote, 'so that the arrangement should be as far as possible a visible history of art. Such a large, public collection intended for instruction more than for fleeting pleasure, is like a rich library in which those eager to learn are glad to find works of all kinds and all periods.' The same idea underlay the establishment of the Louvre as a public museum in 1792 and the opening in 1793 of Alexandre Lenoir's museum of medieval works of art removed from churches. Finally, in 1798, a memorandum which Aloys Hirt, historian of ancient architecture, sent to the King of Prussia, established the basic conception of the museum as an instrument of education in the

widest possible sense. Believing that it was 'beneath the dignity of an ancient monument to be displayed as an ornament', he declared that works of art should be kept not in palaces but in public museums. 'They are a heritage for the whole of mankind. . . . Only by making them public and uniting them in display can they become the object of true study; and every result obtained from this is a new gain for the common good of mankind.' This is not the least of the legacies that the modern world has inherited from Neo-classicism.

3. ARTISTS AND PATRONS

Though written into the policy of official patronage in late eighteenth-century France, the idea of art as education was not imposed on an unwilling public by a despotic administration – rather the reverse. It certainly seems to have been readily accepted by the intellectuals of the middle class with their demands for greater seriousness and purer morality in the arts as in life. It is their voice that we hear in the pleas of Rousseau and Diderot.

The cautious historian may hesitate to mention a body as ill-defined as the middle classes. Yet there can be little doubt that they played a part of some importance in the formation of late eighteenth-century taste in literature and the arts. The most important art form brought to maturity in this period, the novel, found its main public among and expressed the sentiments of those who belonged neither to the nobility nor to the proletariat. Horace Walpole saw the works of Richardson as 'pictures of high life as conceived by a bookseller, and romances as they would be spiritualized by a Methodist preacher' – and that possibly accounts for much of their success. Grimm and Diderot thought they were 'sublime'. Goethe's *Werther* and *Wilhelm Meister*, whose heroes are snubbed by the *Hochgebornen*, were similarly addressed to middle-class readers. For, by this time, they had become the core of the reading public – a serious-minded body which expected to be edified and improved rather than entertained. Impatient of empty frivolity, it welcomed the serious novel. Equally impatient of pedantry (the frivolity of the erudite), it rejected the mindless disquisitions of the *Académie des Inscriptions* and took Winckelmann and Gibbon to its heart. It produced not only the readers but also most of the writers.

In the visual arts the direct patronage of the middle classes could not be very lavish. Few merchants and professional men

had either the money to buy or the space to house large-scale history paintings and heroic statues. But they did visit exhibitions. And in Paris, London and various Italian cities, public exhibitions grew more numerous and popular as the century drew to its close. The Paris Salons sometimes attracted as many as 700 visitors a day among whom were many bourgeois, intellectuals and even some of the grander lackeys. Indeed, the *grands seigneurs* complained in the 1770s that they were jostled by '*des habits gris galonnés*' and arranged to make their visits on days when the Salon was not open to the general public. It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of the part these exhibitions played in extending the artist's public from a small circle of men of taste to the larger intellectual world in which delicacy of touch counted far less than seriousness of content.

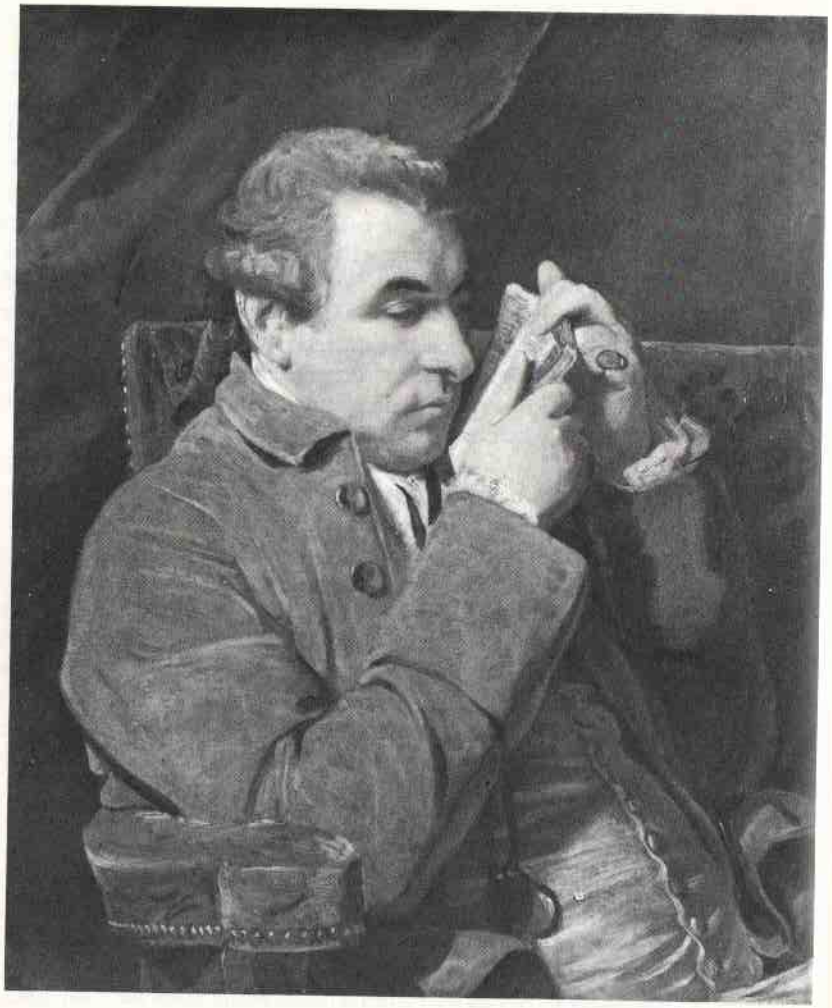
Even more significant than the increase in public exhibitions was the enormous rise in popularity of the print – to some extent the visual counterpart of the novel and like it indicative of the vast new public that was then emerging. The Homeric paintings of Gavin Hamilton were diffused throughout Europe by engravings. Greuze owed most of his fortune to the engraved reproductions of his moralizing pictures which illustrate the eminently middle-class virtues of domesticity, industry, thrift, abstinence and personal responsibility. Later, Flaxman's illustrations to Homer were to enjoy a still larger circulation. But the most popular prints seem to have been those of contemporary events. Chodowiecki's *Adieux de Calas* enjoyed a huge success, appealing as much to the philosopher as to the man of feeling with its biting attack on religious intolerance. It was more effective and, in Catholic countries, more likely to escape the censor than any pamphlet. In England, for rather different reasons, prints after West's *Death of Wolfe* and Copley's *Death of Chatham* were no less widely diffused and did much to encourage the development of modern history pictures (which were, indeed, often commissioned mainly with an eye to the print market).

This widening of the public interest inevitably affected the standing of the artist and his own conception of his role in society. The artist who, unless very successful indeed, had previously been regarded as a superior type of craftsman producing luxury goods for a few wealthy patrons, now saw himself as a public figure and a professional man. And the change in the artist's status – reflected in the establishment of official

academies – led to a greater sense of independence and a corresponding change in his relationship with patrons. Here he had the full support of the theorists.

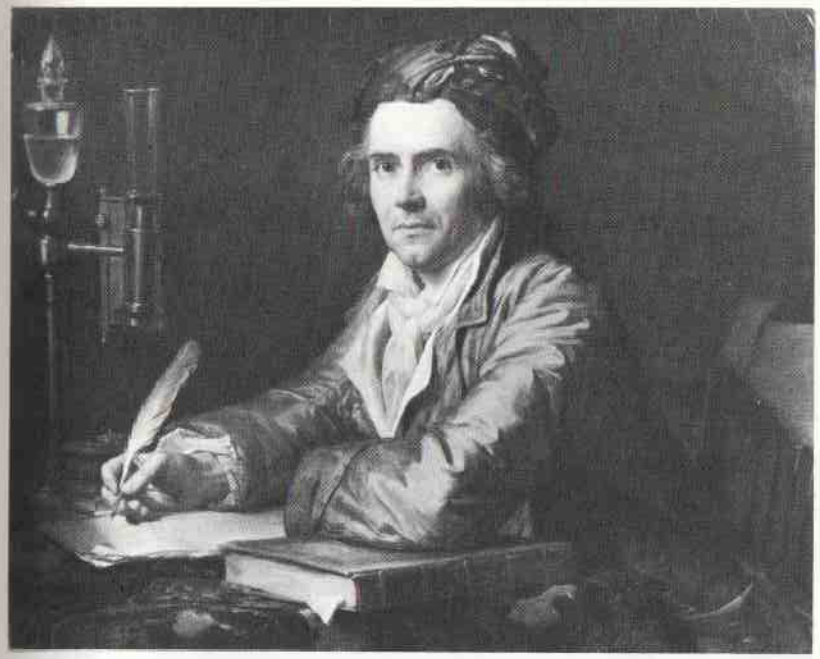
Looking back to Greece, Winckelmann had observed nostalgically, 'the homes of the citizens were marked by moderation and simplicity; the artist was not obliged to descend to little things to fill the gaps in a house, nor lower his genius to the shabby taste of an opulent patron'. Similarly, the Cavaliere d'Azara attributed the decline of the arts in ancient Rome 'not so much to the artists as to the amateurs and rich men who patronized them, ignorantly and barbarously making them renounce their high ideals'. Contemporary patrons were seen in the same harsh light. Diderot in 1767 deplored the way in which artists were still expected to consider the whims of individuals instead of the interests of the nation as a whole, compromising their talents with a preoccupation with prettiness because people would not tolerate serious subjects. It is important to remember that his remarks were addressed not to the public at large, nor to the *beau monde* of Paris but to the very limited circle of subscribers to Grimm's *Correspondance littéraire* – Catherine the Great, the King of Poland, the Queen of Sweden and a few German princes – that is to say those by or through whom official patronage was dispensed. For it was to the world of official patronage that these reformist ideas were initially directed.

So far as original works of art were concerned, the direct patronage of the middle classes was limited mainly to the portrait which underwent a transformation as a result. Hitherto, painters had generally shown middle-class sitters aping the manners of the aristocracy. When aristocratic manners unbent in the Rococo period, they were pictured in the more obliging attitudes of *noblesse*. It was not until the later eighteenth century that the middle-class sitter could be represented as he really was. Reynolds shows us Baretti engrossed in the book he is myopically reading [36]. David reveals the obstetrician, Alphonse Leroy, at work among his scientific apparatus and manuals [37]. It is hardly surprising to find that these, and indeed most of the best of such works, represent personal friends of the artists. These solidly composed portraits are downright statements of fact, as devoid of flattery as of grace and affectation. The products of a frank, rather than ruthless vision, they convey the intimacy of human contact. No posturings, no rhetorical



36. (Opposite) *Giuseppe Baretti*, 1774. Sir Joshua Reynolds

37. *Dr Leroy*, 1782–3. J.-L. David



gestures are allowed to disturb the atmosphere of candid familiarity or to create a barrier between subject and spectator. A similar candour breaks through even in the more restrictive medium of the portrait bust. Houdon's *Diderot* [38], wearing his own hair, is rendered as he must have appeared to Sophie Volland, looking at us with the same humorously perceptive gaze that he turned on his *confrères*.

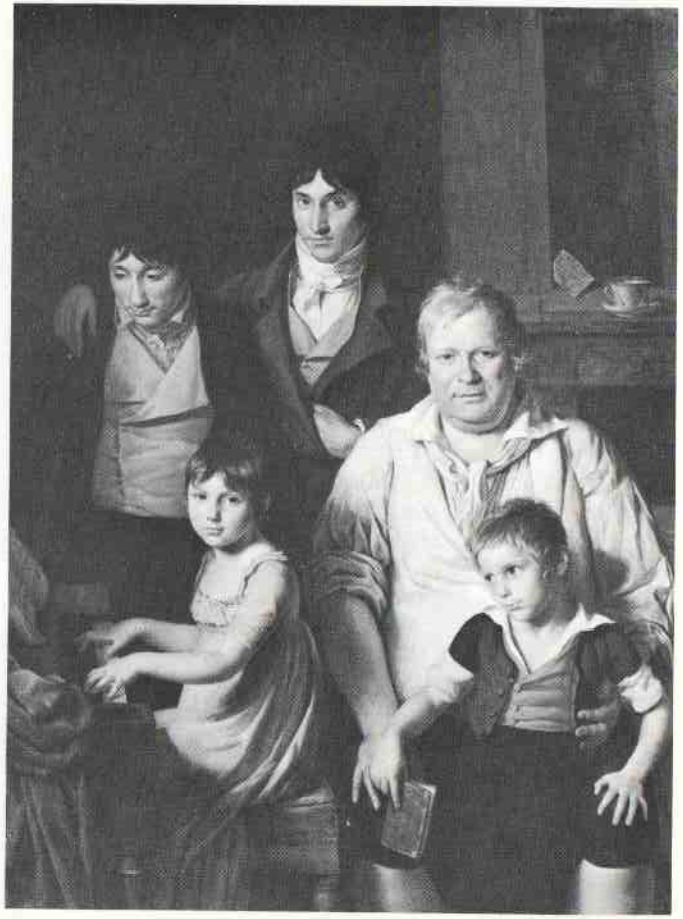
This style of portraiture was not, of course, reserved for professional men. Many members of the upper classes soon wished to be represented in the same way. Before long it could

38. *Diderot*, 1771. J.-A. Houdon

also be applied to the lower classes, as in the extraordinarily vivid group of a father and his children at Le Mans [39]. Here no trace remains of the old type of proletarian portrait executed to divert or comfort the rich. The rags, the bare feet, the horny hands, the wrinkles and the ingratiating smiles have gone and we are left with an unforgettable record of solid, forthright, independent individuality. Everything is simple and unaffected: its dignity derives from human warmth and candour.

Although the portrait belonged to a low category in the academic hierarchy of genres, it was in a sense elevated by this

39. *A father and his children*, *c.* 1794–1800. Anonymous

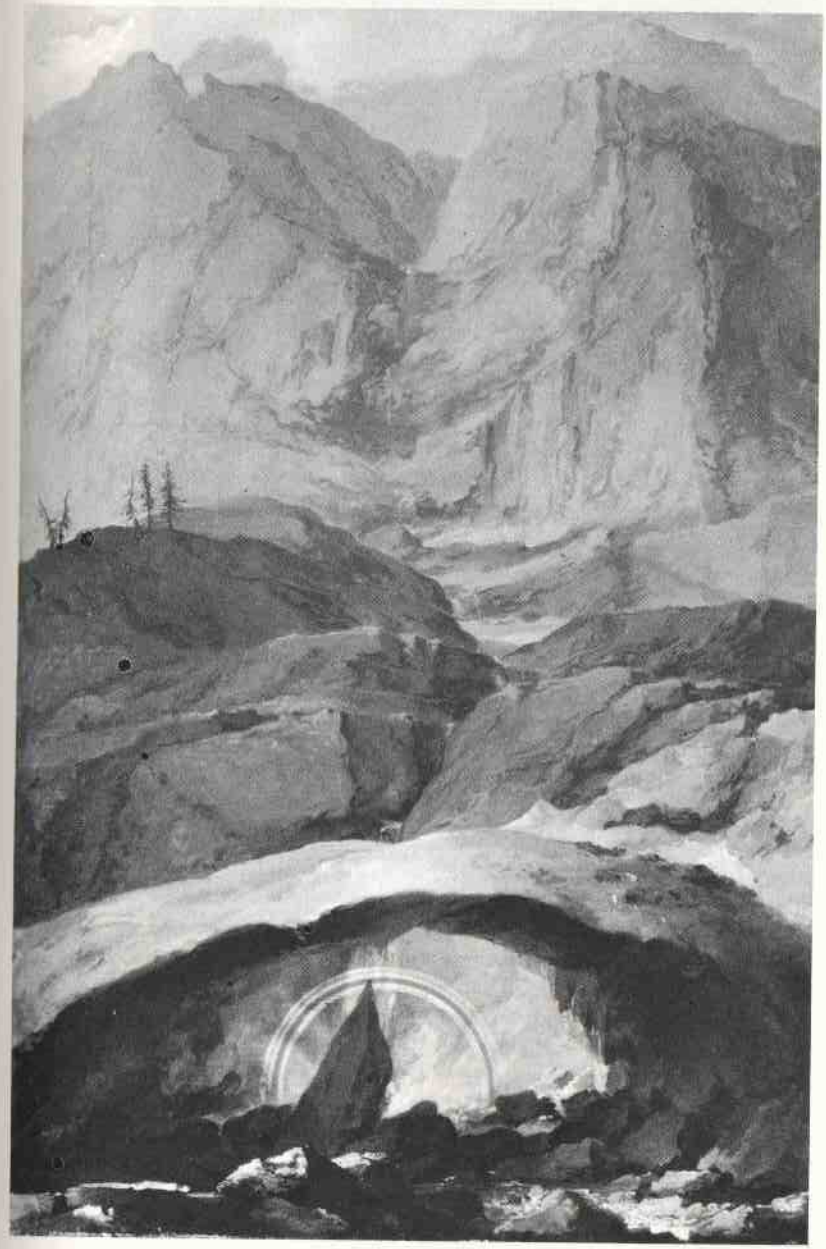


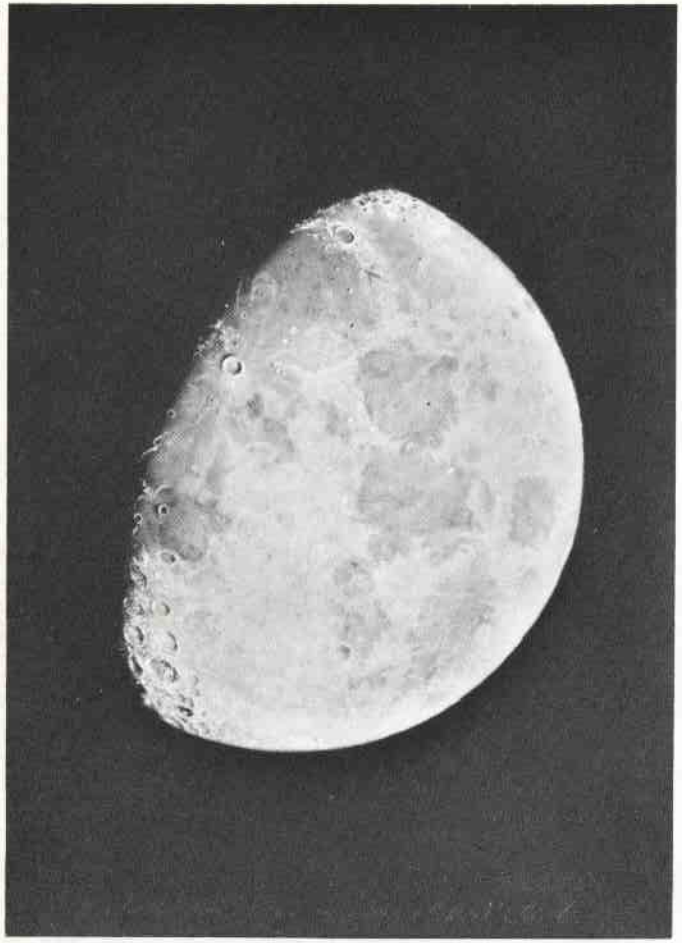
typically Neo-classical concentration on essential truths rather than superficial appearances. And it was at this period that Lavater claimed in his *Essays on Physiognomy* (1775–8): 'Each perfect portrait is an important painting since it displays the human mind with the peculiarities of personal character. In such we contemplate a being whose understanding, inclinations, sensations, passions, good and bad qualities of mind and heart are mingled in a manner peculiar to itself.' His study was, of course, an attempt to impose order on an aspect of nature and, as such, a characteristic expression of the Enlightenment.

Lavater's was but one of numerous scientific and pseudo-scientific publications which appeared in the later eighteenth century and enjoyed great popularity, ranging from vulgarizations like Algarotti's *Newtonisme pour les dames* to original contributions to knowledge like Réaumur's work on insects and Buffon's *Histoire naturelle*. Never before had scientific studies been so widespread. They found expression not only in books but in the creation of museums of natural history (the Prado in Madrid was built for this purpose in 1787 and only later converted into an art gallery). They also created a demand for what may be called scientific pictures – scientifically exact representations of animals, plants, geological formations – like Wolf's extraordinary landscape with a glacial rainbow [40]; the heavens – notably John Russell's *Face of the Moon* 'painted from nature' [41]; such natural phenomena as volcanic eruptions, views of distant lands and their inhabitants [94], and also of mines and factories and forges.

The new intellectual middle-class world for which such pictures were painted can be seen in microcosm in the Birmingham Lunar Society of the 1770s and 1780s – an informal association of friends who met periodically (on nights when the moon was full, so that they could ride home safely) to conduct scientific experiments and exchange ideas on philosophy, literature, politics and the arts. Its members included Josiah Wedgwood, Matthew Boulton and James Watt, the poet-naturalist Erasmus Darwin and the chemist-philosopher Joseph Priestley. In politics they were advanced, in religion unorthodox or sceptical. They were humanitarians and among the first to demand the abolition of slavery (Wedgwood appealed to both reason and sentiment in a jasper-ware medallion of a kneeling slave inscribed: 'Am not I a man and a brother?'). In artistic matters they favoured the rationalizing, simplifying Neo-classical style

40. *Alpine landscape*, 1778. Caspar Wolf





41. *The Moon*, *c.* 1795. John Russell

42. Sauce tureen, 1776. Boulton and Fothergill

and were quick to realize its suitability for industrialized production. Boulton's factory made gilt bronze and silver objects designed by or in the manner of Robert Adam [42]. Wedgwood led Europe in the production of flawless pottery of a simple, sober dignity that perfectly fitted the Neo-classical interior [51]. Appreciating that work in the new style depended on a uniform texture and almost mechanical precision of form which suppressed the individual sensibility and freedom of hand of the craftsman, he took pains to find able designers and to school artisans who could reproduce their models exactly. And it was he who first discovered the genius of the young John Flaxman.

The artist most closely associated with the Lunar Society was, however, Joseph Wright of Derby who portrayed several of its members and expressed in paint their wide-ranging interests in natural phenomena, science, industrial progress and the arts. He was particularly fascinated by and drawn to subjects which enabled him to investigate the problem of light – the fire of a forge, the eruption of a volcano, the scintillation of fireworks over Rome, a candle illuminating an antique statue, torches in a subterranean cavern, moonlight streaming through a ruin [91], the curious effect of light reflected from water in a cave on the Neapolitan coast. In these works he not only revealed his intellectual interests but made his own contribution to the science of representation. And he was also, just as characteristically, a man of feeling. Even when painting a scientific experiment, he introduced the figure of a girl weeping at the fate of a bird in an air-pump [43]. For him, as for his friends and patrons in the Lunar society, man was still the most interesting, still the most important product of nature.

43. *Experiment with the Air Pump*, 1768. Joseph Wright

43a. Detail of 43