4
The Ideal

1. NATURE AND THE IDEAL

Canova's terracotta sketches provide at first sight a very striking contrast with his exquisitely chiselled marbles [44 and 45]. They have a boldness, an immediacy and spontaneity, an almost palpitating vitality which might seem to anticipate Rodin. To modern eyes they are more appealing than the finished works, so cool, so tenderly and fastidiously calculated, so tranquil: those more hostile might say so vapid, affected and inert. And, indeed, they have been cited as evidence of a schizophrenic split in Canova's personality. Yet his was not an isolated case. Sergel, Flaxman, Chinard, Dannecker and others executed clay models just as free and finished works in marble just as thoughtfully restrained as Canova's. A pair of lovers sketched by Sergel [46] – executor of highly polished marbles – are not only freely drawn but embrace with an ecstatically passionate abandon which might seem to flaunt every classic rule. He would appear to have taken to heart Winckelmann's advice to 'sketch with fire and execute with phlegm'.

In another passage Winckelmann remarked, 'just as the first pressing of the grapes gives the most exquisite wine, so the soft medium of the modeller and the sketch on paper of the draughtsman affords us the true spirit of the artist; to such an extent that in the finished painting or statue, the talent of the artist is to some extent hidden by the finish which he sought to give his work'. A few years later Diderot took up the same idea and developed it at greater length. Wrenched from their context, such remarks might be quoted as evidence of a precociously romantic preference for the sketch rather than the finished work. And in fact Canova's *bozzetti* and Sergel's drawings have been included in an exhibition of Romantic art, as examples, presumably, of a romantic spirit struggling to emerge from the strait-jacket of Neo-classicism. Nothing could be more misleading. For a belief in the Ideal – a very un-Romantic conception – underlies the Neo-classical attitude to the sketch no less than to the finished work of art.

44. *Cupid and Psyche*, 1787. Antonio Canova

A *bozzetto* by Canova represents his first attempt to realize an ideal form. That for the *Cupid and Psyche* [44] shows him struggling to solve the basic problem of the composition – the relationship between two embracing recumbent figures. It is a first, *a priori* statement on which the logic of the final solution will depend. In fact, so abstract and generalized is it that it might equally well be a sketch for his group of *Venus crowning Adonis* on which he was working at about the same time. Yet the problems with which Canova wrestled in these *bozzetti* were not limited to the abstract and formal – to attaining a perfect balance and unity without any loss of verisimilitude and variety. For the *Cupid and Psyche*, like all great works of art, perfectly unites form and idea and moreover was conceived on more than one level of meaning: as a three-dimensional composition of interlocking forms and contrapuntal harmony, revolving through a series of mellifluous and apparently effortless transitions; as an idyllic representation of young love – of slim adolescence and limbs as tender as eyelids – with all its dewy innocence and purity; and, on a deeper, more symbolic level as a 'love-death' image of that moment of perfect reciprocity in the transport of physical passion when a state of almost mystical union is experienced 'at the still point of the turning world'.

Canova's practice was to execute a number of such *bozzetti* and then proceed by way of further exploratory sketches and

45. *Cupid and Psyche*, 1787–93. Antonio Canova

46. *Lovers*, 1780. J. T. Sergel

experiments, each slightly more elaborately defined and articulated than the last, until a final full-sized *modello* was reached. The method corresponds very closely with that advocated by Goethe in 1789. The artist should begin by studying the differences between individuals, Goethe wrote, then by a leap of the imagination, subsume each individual in one act of vision or intuitive synthesis and thus, rising from abstraction to abstraction, finally represent the type or universal seen in its indivisible harmony and purity *sub specie aeternitatis*. The artist in search of such ideal forms sought to fathom eternally valid truths underlying the superficial diversities and accidents of nature: and neither his sketches nor his finished works can be appreciated

on their own terms without some understanding of the Neoclassical attitude to Nature and the Ideal.

'The sacred word "nature" is probably the most equivocal in the vocabulary of the European peoples,' wrote A. O. Lovejoy who isolated more than sixty distinct meanings of it. Practically every eighteenth-century belief, whether religious, moral, philosophical, economic or artistic, was supported by an appeal to the law of nature. The bewildering width of interpretation ultimately reached may be judged by comparing Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's famous story of *Paul et Virginie*, brought up according to natural laws, with de Sade's justification for his perversions – 'Nature granted these urges to me and to resist them would be to outrage it'. But its primary connotation was 'uniformity' and 'universality' and it was this meaning that made 'nature' a sacred word for the Enlightenment. Since the reason is, it was assumed, identical in all men, anything of which the verifiability or intelligibility is limited to particular periods or conditions must necessarily be without truth or value, at any rate to the man of reason. Similarly, all differences in opinion or taste are mere deviations and imply error. That which is 'according to nature' therefore meant, first of all, that which corresponded to this assumption of uniformity and universality of appeal.

To determine the special meaning placed on 'nature' by artists, antonyms are of greater help than definitions. Nature was opposed to deformity, to any departure from the norm, to affectation ('nothing could she talk of but Dear Nature and nothing abuse but Odious Affectation', wrote Fanny Burney) and hence to a mannered artistic style. We thus find Fuseli writing: 'By *nature* I understand the general and permanent principles of visible objects, not disfigured by accident, or distempered by disease, not modified by fashion or local habits. Nature is a collective idea, and, though its essence exists in each individual of the species, can never in its perfection inhabit a single object.'

'By the ideal,' wrote Mengs, 'I mean that which one sees only with the imagination, and not with the eyes; thus an ideal in painting depends upon selection of the most beautiful things in nature purified of every imperfection.' The artist must rise above the accidental and transient, and to achieve this Mengs recommended a close study not only of nature but also of those works of art in which a selection from nature had already been made. Reynolds was similarly explicit in his advice:

It is from a reiterated experience and a close comparison of the objects of nature, that an artist becomes possessed of the idea of that central form, if I may so express it, from which every deviation is deformity. But the investigation of this form, I grant, is painful, and I know of but one method of shortening the road: this is, by a careful study of the ancient sculptors; who, being indefatigable in the school of nature, have left models of that perfect form behind them, which an artist would prefer as supremely beautiful, who has spent his whole life in that single contemplation.

Thus the apparent dichotomy between Nature and the Ideal was resolved by a naturalistic interpretation of classical art.

In essence, this notion of the idealization of nature in art, by a rational process of selection and combination of its most perfect parts, goes back to antiquity itself – to Socrates (in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*), to Pliny and to Cicero's famous account of how Zeuxis painted Helen by combining the best features of five different models. A somewhat naïve 'Identikit' version of the process was endlessly repeated, and the idealist conception of art recurs in all classical theory from Alberti onwards, most notably in the seventeenth century with Bellori ('The idea, originating in nature, supercedes its origin and becomes the origin of art' [1664]) and in the mid eighteenth century with Batteux and *la belle nature*. But it was given a new and more subtle formulation by Goethe in reply, significantly enough, to the Romantic realists who professed scorn for the antique.

'Classical art is part of nature and, indeed, when it moves us, of natural nature,' wrote Goethe. 'Are we expected not to study this noble nature but only the common?' As Professor Panofsky has pointed out in a penetrating discussion of this passage, Goethe here substitutes for the notion of idealism normally applied to classical art a new concept of naturalism – of a 'noble nature' which differs from 'common nature' not in essence but only by a higher degree of purity and, as it were, of intelligibility. Thus classical art, so far from repudiating nature, becomes itself the highest and 'truest' form of naturalism: for it reveals nature's true intentions by extracting from common nature what *natura naturans* had intended but *natura naturata* had failed to perform. In all this Goethe was, presumably, following Kant's well-known definition of nature as 'the existence of things in so far as it is determined by general laws'.

Goethe's statement is more than just a subtle re-formulation of the classical doctrine of the *beau idéal*. It makes an important

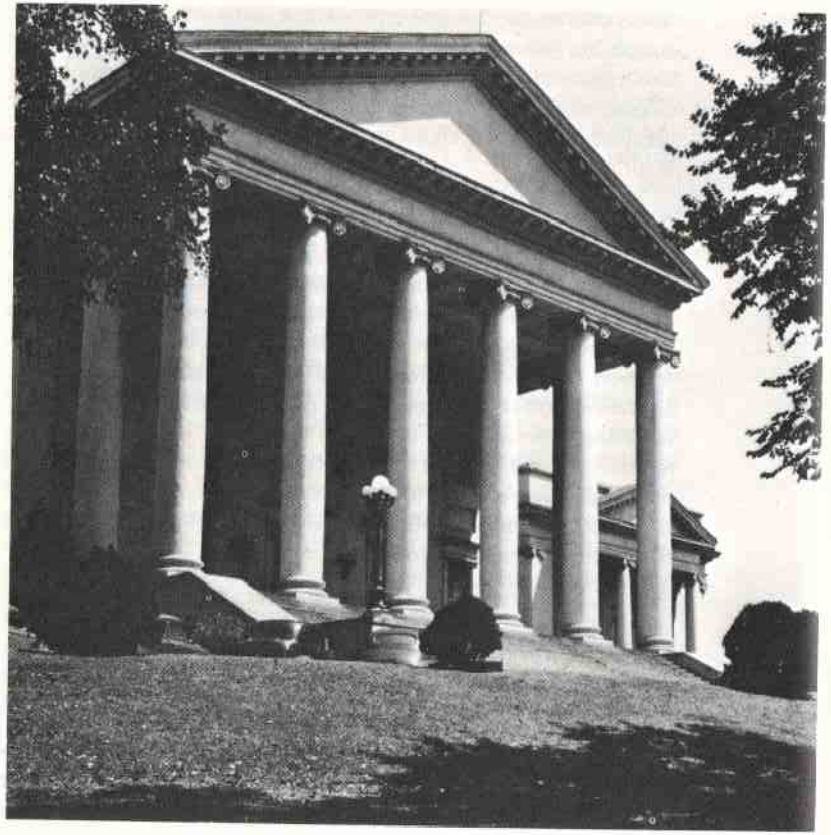
qualification to the concept of the classical style. For, by ennobling 'common nature' classical art attempted to do justice to nature as such and might therefore, Goethe implies, be characterized as 'naturalistic idealism' in contrast to other idealizing styles which make no attempt to do justice to nature at all.

The sharp distinction drawn by Neo-classical artists between the 'copy' and the 'imitation' followed from their idealistic conception of classical art. To copy nature led inevitably to such base products as Dutch *genre* and still-life painting, while to copy the antique resulted in a 'marble style' typical of artists who, according to Fuseli, were content to be the lame transcribers of the dead letter instead of the spirit of the ancients. Imitation, on the other hand, involved the artist's higher faculties, especially his inventive powers. So far from having anything of the 'servility' of the copy, the practice of imitation was, according to Reynolds, 'a perpetual exercise of the mind, a continual invention'. Mengs also was careful to emphasize the distinction between copying and imitating:

But he who effectively studies and observes the productions of great men with the true desire to imitate them, makes himself capable of producing works which resemble them, because he considers the reasons with which they are done . . . and this makes him an imitator without being a plagiarist.

Hence the contempt with which Canova and other Neo-classical sculptors regarded the practice of copying even the greatest of antique statues. It was work beneath the dignity of a creative artist – though many had been compelled by poverty to fabricate them during the eighteenth century to satisfy the demands of wealthy connoisseurs who wished to have, literally to hand, the touchstones of artistic excellence. For similar reasons architects had occasionally erected copies of antique buildings – the replicas of the Choragic monument of Lysicrates, the Arch of Hadrian and Temple of the Winds built by James Stuart at Shugborough in the 1760s or the copy of the Hephaesteum built by Ehrensvärd at Mälby in 1795 – almost invariably in landscaped parks and as illustrations of the history of architecture. But such reproductive buildings were to be distinguished from imitations.

The State Capitol at Richmond, Virginia [47], for example, was inspired by the little Maison Carré at Nimes; but it was far from being a copy (even the order was changed from Corinthian



47. The State Capitol, Richmond, Virginia, 1785–96. Thomas Jefferson

48. The Bourse, Leningrad, 1804–16. Thomas de Thomon

to the more chaste Ionic). As Jefferson's assistant Clérisseau had remarked in 1778: 'Let us learn from the ancients how to submit the rules to genius. Let us wipe out that mark of servitude and mimicry which disfigures our works.' Similarly, de Thomon's Bourse in Leningrad is a free essay in temple architecture, not a piece of historical revivalism [48]. The Neo-classical architect wished to design in the spirit of the ancients and was ready to invent new orders for new types of building – as Latrobe designed his tobacco-leaf and corn-cob capitals for the Capitol in Washington [49]. And in the more extreme and absolute forms of Neo-classical architecture, especially the pure spheres, cubes, cylinders and pyramids of Ledoux [67], all traces of servitude to the ancients are erased and the supposed

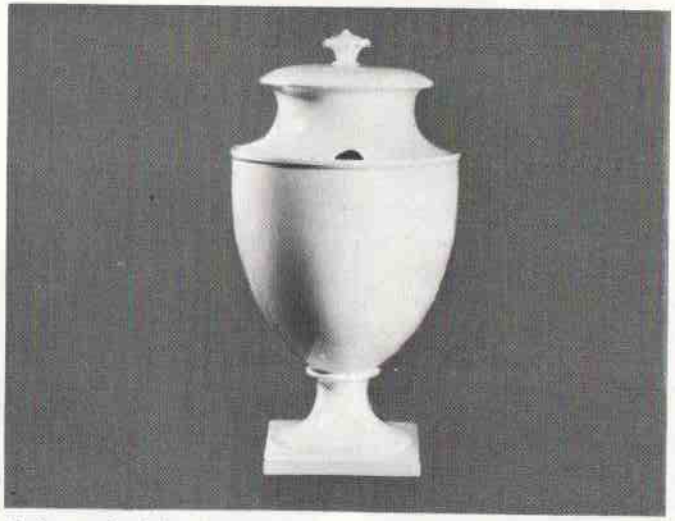
49. Corn-cob capital in the Capitol, Washington, 1809. B. Latrobe

origin of architecture in nature becomes quite explicit. For these Platonic ideals of architectural form were thought to partake of natural laws. Ledoux repeatedly emphasized his belief in nature as the source of architectural law and his inspiration in the geometric purity of natural phenomena (*'Toutes les formes sont dans la nature . . .'* and *'La forme est pure comme celle qui décrit le soleil dans sa course'*). He would surely have agreed that 'Euclid alone has looked on beauty bare'.

These lofty ideals may seem far above the everyday world of the decorative arts but here too we find a distinction drawn between the imitation and the copy. Designers and craftsmen who abandoned wayward Rococo motifs and responded to demands for greater simplicity, sobriety and solidity by seeking inspiration in Greek and Roman objects, seem to have taken an almost perverse pleasure in transferring motifs from one medium to another. Silversmiths were more ready to take ideas from ancient pottery and marble urns than from Roman silver – a tureen by Boulton [42], for example, combines the forms of the Greek kantharos and kylix with Roman sculptural decoration. Wedgwood derived the form of a soup tureen from an antique marble urn which provided a shape of beautiful simplicity [51]. Cabinet-makers resorted to the architecture rather than the furniture of antiquity [50], and only very rarely were

50. Writing-table, *c.* 1780–90. David Roentgen

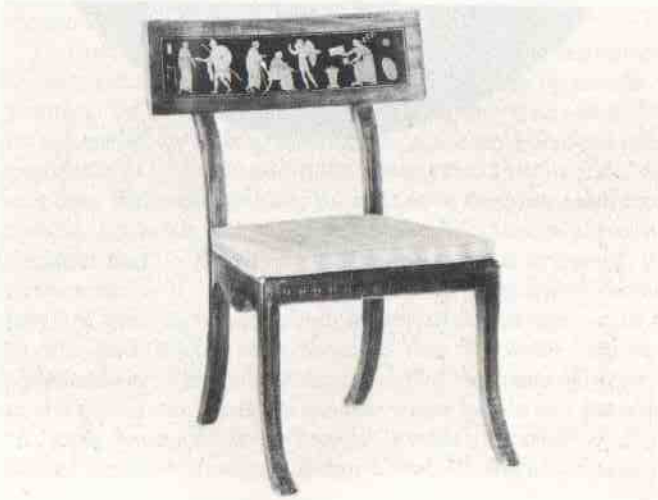
51. Wedgwood pottery soup tureen, *c.* 1780



chairs and tables copied after antique prototypes before the last years of the century [52].

For Neo-classical artists the imitation of the antique was not an end in itself but a means of creating ideal works of universal and eternal validity. Wishing to become as inimitable as the

52. Chair designed by N. A. Abildgaard, *c.* 1790

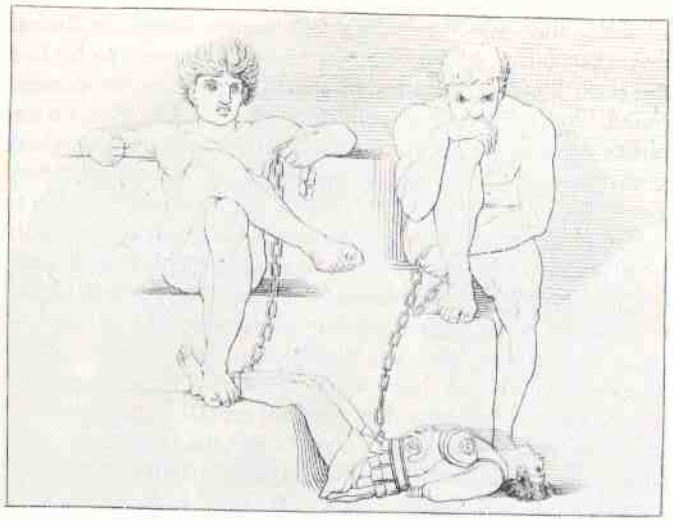


53. *The Origin of Painting*, 1775. David Allan

ancients, they saw themselves not as mere Greek or Roman revivalists but as restorers of the true style. In order to lay bare the truth that lay beneath the surface of nature, they concentrated, like earlier idealists, on form rather than texture, on line rather than colour. Their approach to the Ideal was cerebral, with none of the mystical overtones of Renaissance neo-Platonists, and derived from a belief that art should appeal to the mind as well as the sense perceptions and that artistic problems could be solved by a rational process. Thus, they rejected the notion of 'a grace beyond the reach of art' and artistic criteria based on an individually perceived *je ne sais quoi*, in favour of an ideal that was amenable to intellectual analysis. They seem to have been wary of colouristic and textural effects not only because they were superficial but also because they could be apprehended only through the senses and therefore appeared differently to different people. Illusionistic tricks and atmospheric subtleties were alike to be deplored.

In antique statues Neo-classical artists saw not only 'noble simplicity and calm grandeur' but, to quote Winckelmann again, 'precision of Contour, that characteristic distinction of the ancients'. They were even more strongly attracted to the crisp, unambiguously clear, rudimentary linear paintings on Greek black- and red-figure vases. And they also responded to the linear purity of the Italian primitives (Goethe commented on Flaxman's 'gift of immersing himself in the innocent mood of the earlier Italian schools'). In all such works they found a preference for the conceptual to the merely visual similar to their own.

Outline drawing was thought to have been the earliest means of pictorial representation – and pictures of the invention of painting by a Corinthian potter's daughter who drew her lover's profile by tracing his shadow on the wall, enjoyed great popularity [53]. But in addition to being the 'antique style' *par excellence*, the linear style was thought to be the purest and most natural. Reynolds, echoing Pliny and other classical theorists, declared that 'a firm and determined outline is one of the characteristics of the great style in painting', displaying 'knowledge of the exact form which every part of nature ought to have'. And Blake, who thought that Reynolds had not sufficiently emphasized the superiority of the linear Florentine to the colouristic Venetian school, wrote beside this passage: 'A Noble Sentence! Here is a sentence which overthrows all his Book.' Against another passage in which Reynolds said of



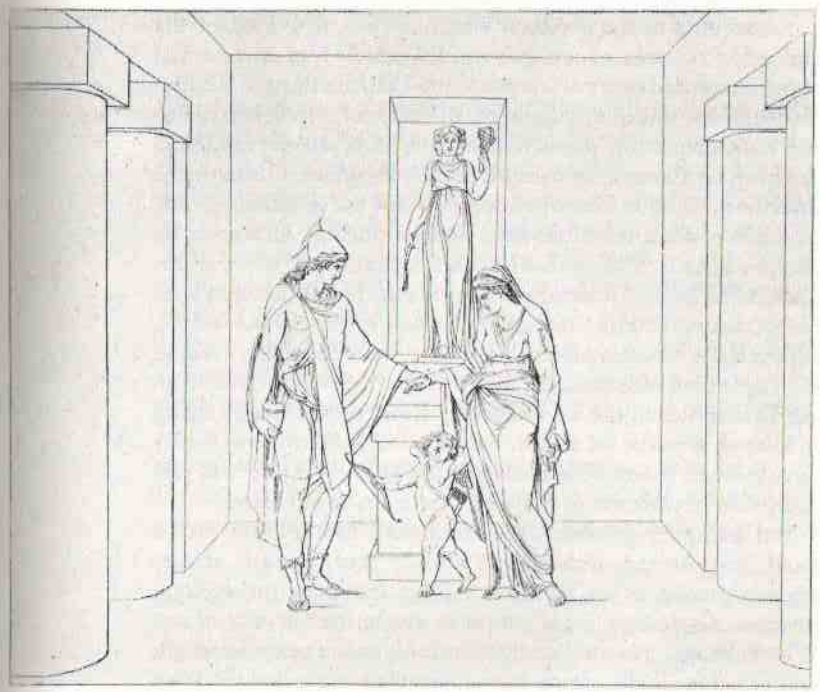
earlier artists 'their simplicity was the offspring not of choice, but of necessity', Blake angrily wrote: 'A Lie.' For him as for Flaxman [54] and Carstens [55], simplicity was not just 'the noblest ornament of truth' but an essential attribute of truth. The moral basis underlying this aesthetic preference was often made quite explicit, as by Schiller in his reported comments on the paintings in the Dresden gallery: 'All very well; if only the cartoons were not filled with colour . . . I cannot get rid of the idea that those colours do not tell me the truth . . . the pure outline would give me a much more faithful image.' And in this Spartan attitude the Neo-classical artist had the support of Kant who stated (*Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 1790) that drawing alone, even unshaded outline, sufficed for the true representation of an object: colour was superfluous. Indeed, colour came to be thought deceptive. It masked the purity of essential forms, just as clothes disguised and disfigured the human body.

2. THE NEO-CLASSICAL NUDE

'The gymnasia and places where completely naked youths wrestled and played other games were schools of beauty', wrote Winckelmann of ancient Greece. 'It was there that artists contemplated the perfect development of physique: the daily sight of the nude warmed their imagination and taught them how to represent the beauty of forms.' The late eighteenth-century

54. (Opposite) Illustration to the *Iliad*, 1793. John Flaxman

55. Illustration to *Les Argonautes*, 1799. A. J. Carstens



artist must have looked back even more nostalgically to the Greek palaestra, for in his time nude models were rare and often most unsatisfactory. The model employed by the Academy in Paris had the rank of a minor civil servant, an apartment in the Louvre and a salary that passed to his widow at his death. Unfortunately there was no retiring age. He may have begun as a lithe young Mercury but, after more than forty years yeoman service, he was good for nothing but Jupiter or Charon. Artists who sought out private models were sometimes faced with unexpected obstacles. The eminently respectable Bouchardon, seeking a model for his *Cupid*, went to watch boys bathing in the Seine and approached the most suitable with an offer – only to have his intentions misconstrued and be summoned by the police. There were no female models in the academies. Prostitutes were, of course, available. But they naturally had little appeal for those who admired the human form only in so far as it revealed the quality of the soul. Thus the Neo-classical artist with his high moral purpose found himself in difficulties – difficulties that artists like Fragonard or Clodion or such frank pornographers as Schall did not encounter.

An adjunct to the life-class was, however, provided by the collection of casts of antique statues which was an essential appurtenance of every academy of art. The functions of the life-class and the antique class were, in fact, complementary. For models were usually posed in the attitudes of antique statues (a drawing by Canova, apparently of the Borghese Gladiator, is inscribed: 'This is Giacomo de Rossi not the gladiator'). The postures of antique statues were thus so indelibly impressed on the young artist's mind that he came to think, as it were, in this classical language. It became a second nature – sometimes with embarrassing results. In Zoffany's *Death of Captain Cook* [56], for example, Cook is placed in the attitude of the dying Gaul in the Capitoline Museum, the figure on the right is derived from the Discobolos in the Townley collection, others from a dying gladiator, a statue of a faun and so on. Zoffany can hardly have wished to ennoble these particular savages: he was just incapable of conceiving nude figures in any other terms.

But antiquity provided the artist with much more than a stock of postures. As we have already seen, antique statues were regarded as an almost infallible guide to the difficult process of selecting from nature to create ideal works of art. Winckelmann, a connoisseur of the nude in life as well as in art, was not alone in observing how ancient sculptors had modified

56. *The Death of Captain Cook* (detail), *c.* 1789-97. J. Zoffany

the proportions of the human body, flattening and diminishing the stomach, for instance, simplifying the muscles and ignoring the veins. He also pointed out how successful they had been in finding the perfect form for every part of the anatomy. Nothing, he said, was more difficult to find in nature than young men with beautiful knees. They were still rarer in modern art (though he would make an exception in favour of the Apollo of Mengs's *Parnassus* [6]). Only in antique statues could one be sure to find perfect knees 'with the joint and articulation lightly indicated in such a way that the knee forms, between the thigh and the shin, a gentle swelling which links the two parts and which is not broken by any cavity or convexity'. One is reminded of such remarks by the annotations which a young English sculptor, John Deare, made on his drawings of antique statues in Rome in the 1780s. On one he wrote:

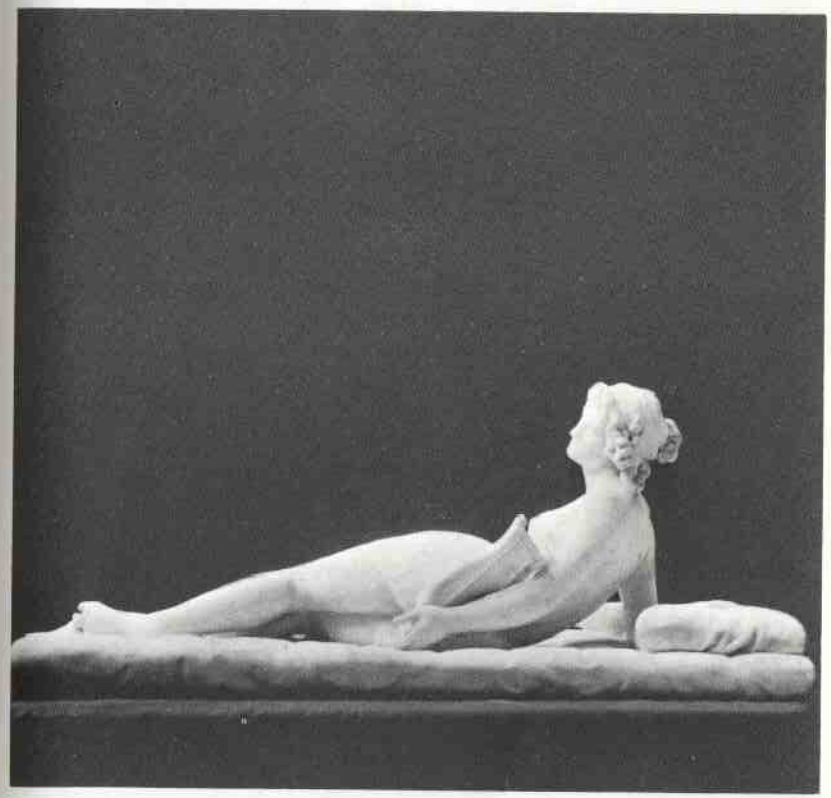
> the muscles swell very much but they run quick or sharp against each other with great attention to contrast such as small nipples and navel, the sides full of small muscles opposed to the large masses of the breast, small knees, long threads of drapery opposed to the mass of the body or limbs.

In rendering the nude, the Neo-classical artist's aim was to be natural, not naturalistic. He wished to cleanse it of the erotic overtones which had made even the unpriggish Diderot complain: 'I have seen enough of bosoms and bottoms . . . these seductive objects contradict the emotions of the soul by exciting the senses.' He stressed the innocence, the unadorned simplicity, the essential purity of the nude. Even so, his purpose was often misrepresented. David shocked many in Directoire Paris by his *Intervention of the Sabine Women* [30] for which he was dubbed the '*Raphael des sans-culottes*'. And a few years later the Jury of the Institut made a revealing comment when refusing to award it a prize: 'Is that which is permissible in sculpture also permissible in painting, where the objects which can wound decency, presented with the forms and in the colours of nature, provide an intolerable degree of truth?' The nude was accepted only at its farthest remove from the naked human body.

No such intolerable degree of truth marks the Neo-classical nude statue. A flatterer once told Canova that he had been deceived into thinking one of his statues was alive. The sculptor acidly replied that he was sorry. He had not, he said, intended to produce wax-works. Disturbingly life-like *trompe l'œil* effects were avoided in sculpture as in painting. The nymph which Pierre Julien carved for the Laiterie at Rambouillet provides an instance of this approach [89]. Whereas a Rococo sculptor would certainly have decorated the grotto with a highly realistic figure, seeking to surprise the visitor by his virtuosity, Julien provided what was unmistakably a marble statue. Similarly, Dannecker's beautifully carved *Sappho* [57], Canova's *Hercules and Lichas* [32] or his *Cupid and Psyche* [45] could not be mistaken for live figures. Representing an ideal vision derived from a study of nature and the antique, these bodies, marred by no accidental blemishes of common nature, are neither naturalistic nor unnatural.

An element of idealism entered into the Neo-classical conception of the nude. As Lessing remarked in the *Laocoön*, 'necessity invented clothing, and what has art to do with necessity? I grant you that there is also a beauty of drapery; but what is it compared with the beauty of the human form?' It was not merely that contemporary clothes were thought to be both ridiculous and unnatural – flesh more beautiful than fabric. In rendering figures nude, Diderot declared, '*on éloigne la scène, on rappelle un âge plus innocent et plus simple, des mœurs plus sauvages, plus analogues aux arts d'imitation*'. The nude represented man

57. *Sappho*, 1797–1802. J. H. Dannecker

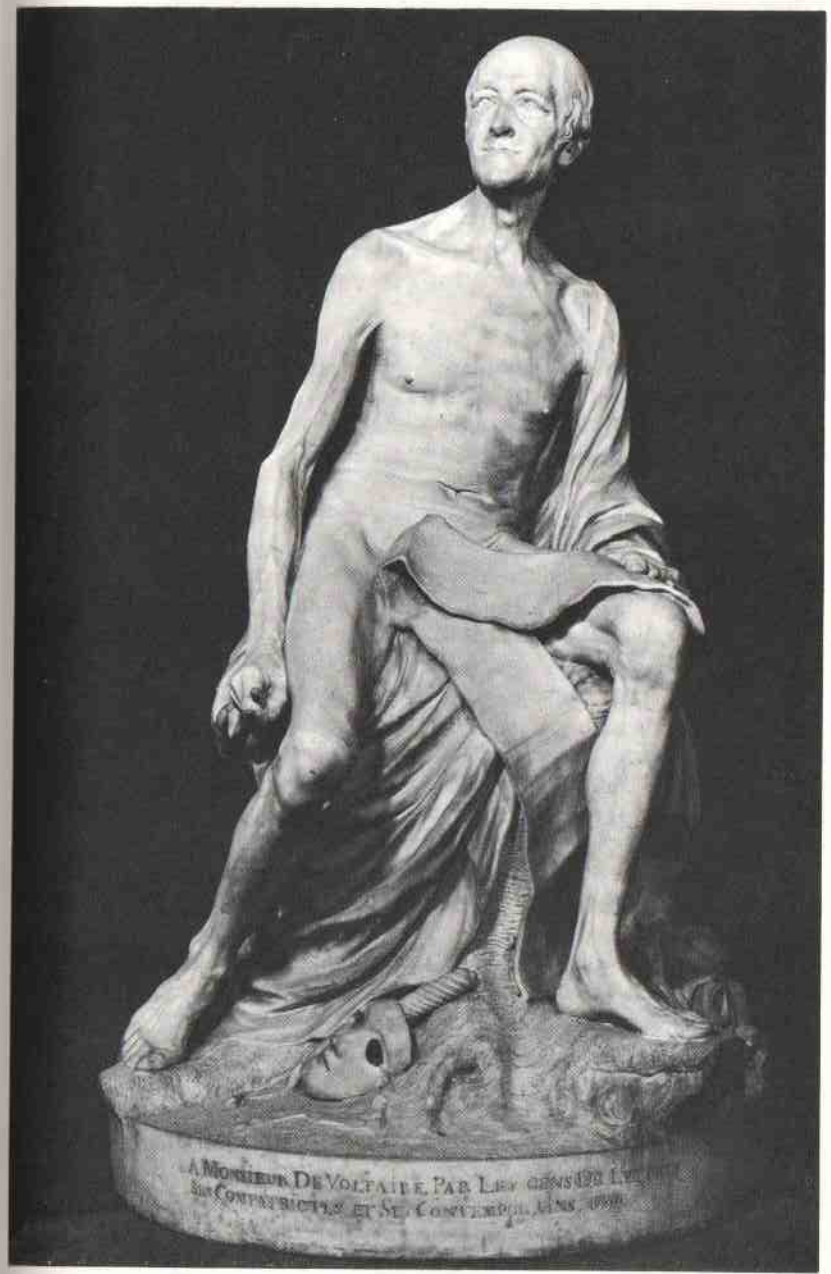


stripped of all deceptive externals, as nature made him; freed from the trammels of time, as if against a background of eternity.

These ideas clearly influenced Diderot and the other members of an illustrious group of men of letters – including Grimm, Marmontel, d'Alembert, Helvétius, Raynal and Morellet – who commissioned Pigalle to carve a statue of the seventy-six-year-old Voltaire in 1770 [58]. For he was to be shown naked save for a wisp of drapery across the loins. If there were no modern precedents for such a rendering, plenty could be found in antiquity. Pliny, in his account of sculpture, had remarked: 'In the old days they used to set up statues of people just wearing a toga. They also liked to set up nude figures holding spears, figures which are modelled on the statues of ephebes in Greek gymnasia and which are called "Achilles". The Greek custom is to cover nothing, whereas the Roman custom is to add a military breast-plate.' This passage which enshrines the tag '*Graeca res nihil velare*', would have been familiar to Diderot and his friends. So also would an antique statue of an elderly nude man in the Villa Borghese, Rome, then thought to represent the dying Seneca – a highly naturalistic work which Jonathan Richardson had eulogized as 'Prodigious Expression of a Weak Old Man!' Pigalle therefore rendered Voltaire, not only nude but with the withered shanks and scrawny torso of a septuagenarian (only the head being modelled from Voltaire himself). To modern eyes this powerful image seems to represent the triumph of the spirit over the frailty of the body and to provide a truer portrait of the writer than any of those that depict his wizened features – the sunken eyes and grotesque toothless mouth – above a body swathed in a toga or neatly dressed with jacket and lace jabot. But by contemporaries it was sometimes misunderstood. Reynolds (in 1776) cited it as an example of a sculptor's 'not having that respect for the prejudices of mankind which he ought to have had'.

Pigalle's *Voltaire* was, however, only the first of a long series of nude portrait statues, and the 'contemporary nude' became one of the most characteristic forms invented, or rather reinvented, by Neo-classical artists. It was discussed at length in various essays by Quatremère de Quincy who had been a student in Pigalle's studio when the *Voltaire* was being carved. Surprisingly, he condemned it for being too naturalistic. He would have preferred the body to have been more 'heroic' and recommended the Roman practice of grafting portrait

58. *Voltaire*, 1770–76. J.-B. Pigalle



heads on to the idealized bodies of recognizable types of heroes and divinities – Achilles, Ceres, Ariadne, etc. – '*pour assimiler les hommes célèbres aux personnages divins*'. Such heroic or metaphorical nudity would lift the person portrayed to a higher order of being. As David remarked in the 1790s, the painters, sculptors and poets of antiquity had represented in the nude not only the gods but 'those heroes and other men whom they wished to make illustrious'. And a few years later Canova carved his nude Napoleon – heroic in its scale as well as in its nudity – endowing the Emperor with the flawless body of a Greek god just as the Romans had represented the deified Augustus.

But like so many Neo-classical forms the 'contemporary nude' portrait eventually declined into an academic cliché with such late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century absurdities as Max Klinger's *Beethoven* and Eugenio Baroni's *Garibaldi*, though still inspiring occasional masterpieces such as Rodin's *Balzac* and *Victor Hugo*.

3. IF REASON BE THE ARCHITECT

The Neo-classical preoccupation with universally valid truths, discoverable by the pure light of nature and reason, tended necessarily to push all artistic ideals farther and farther backwards historically in the search for ever purer and more primary forms. But it was only in architecture, the most abstract of the visual arts, that this tendency reached its logical conclusion in a thoroughgoing primitivism of the most extreme and uncompromising kind. Ledoux's ideal architecture of absolute forms – pyramidal, cubical and spherical – was consciously inspired by the geometrical purity of natural phenomena. It was felt to partake of natural laws. And, moreover, it also accorded well with those functionalist theories of beauty widely current in the mid eighteenth century. 'Architecture,' wrote Burke in 1756, 'affects by the laws of nature, and the laws of reason; from which latter result the rules of proportion, which make a work to be praised or censured, in the whole or in some part, when the end for which it was designed is or is not answered.'

Such appeals for a rational architecture, combined with the startling geometric austerity and structural clarity of its more extreme results might seem prophetic of the Bauhaus School, the International Modern style of the 1920s and the dogma that 'form follows function'. Significantly enough it was in the

heyday of Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus that Ledoux and Boullée were rediscovered. Yet to construe their work in twentieth-century terms is to misunderstand it.

The mid eighteenth-century attitude to the architecture of reason was neatly put in *Some thoughts on building and planting* addressed by the Rev. John Dalton to Sir James Lowther of Lowther Hall:

> When stately structures Lowther grace,
> Worthy the owner and the place,
> Fashion will not the works direct,
> But reason be the architect.

Dalton goes on to describe, with footnote acknowledgements to Vitruvius, each of the 'beauteous orders' which stand ready to execute what reason commands and, at the same time, 'fancy's wanton freaks controul'. He then proceeds to a brief eulogy of the informally landscaped park, with woods so 'sweetly wild' that 'Nature mistakes them for her own' and concludes with the apophthegm:

> Who builds or plants, this rule should know
> From truth and use all beauties flow.

To cleanse architecture of the artificialities and wanton freaks of fancy introduced by the Rococo was one of the aims of the first generation of Neo-classical architects. They therefore returned with draughtsmen and measuring rods to the ancient buildings of Rome and to other, sometimes unexplored sites such as Spalato, Palmyra, Baalbeck, Paestum and Agrigentum. The results were published in folios of engravings from which architects could gain fresh evidence on how to correct and purify their style. At first, however, they were used less as a chastening and invigorating source of new architectural forms – noble, lucid, sober and severe – than as a vocabulary for modish decorations *all'antica*, quite as fanciful as any Rococo caprices and even more effete in their self-indulgent nostalgia for a lost and glorious past. But already some architects, such as Soufflot in Paris and Robert Adam in England, where evocative interpretations of Graeco-Roman architecture resulted mainly in hybrid styles of classical allusion grafted on to traditional forms, were beginning to hint at the new and lucid geometric architecture that was to come.

In Sainte Geneviève, Soufflot put into practice Laugier's theory of the natural virtues of post and lintel construction –

59. Panthéon (Sainte Geneviève), Paris, 1757. J.-G. Soufflot

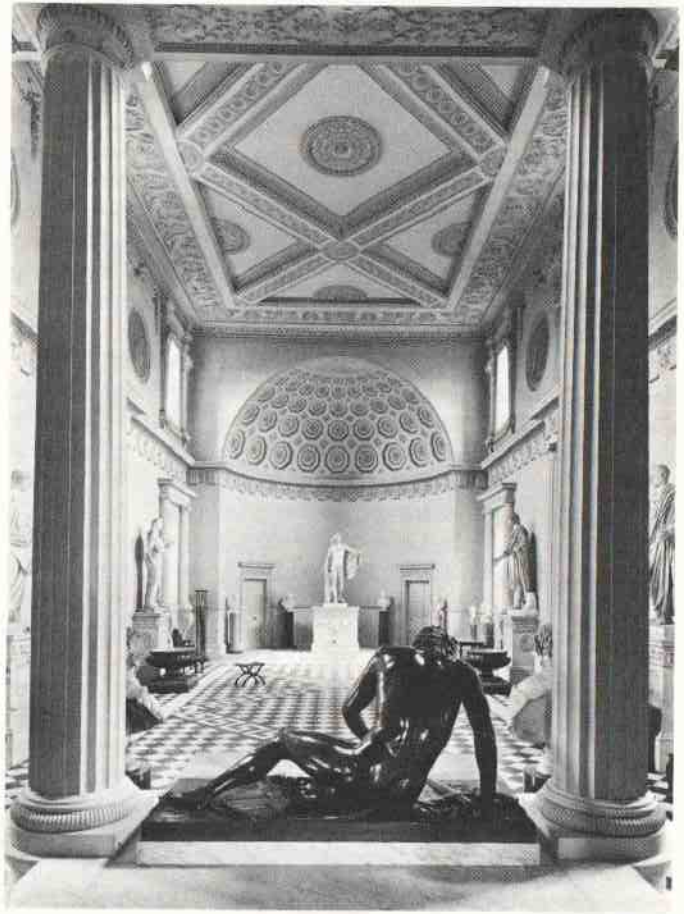
natural because of its origin in the primitive wooden hut – and supported everything except the central dome on columns carrying straight entablatures [59]. The vaulting above was constructed on Gothic principles for Gothic too could be associated (though not by Laugier) with natural building origins in its resemblance to trees and branches. Thus strict classical regularity and monumental Roman detail were combined, in Soufflot's words, with the 'lightness which one admires in some Gothic buildings'.

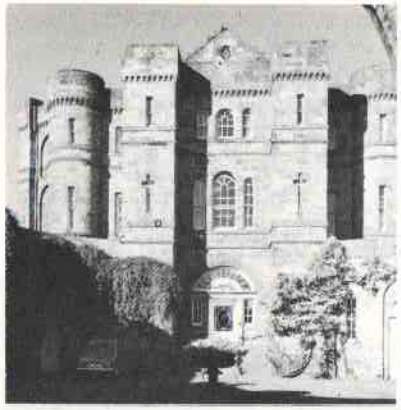
No such close dependence on current aesthetic theory is to be found in Adam's work, yet he could be even more austerely and uncompromisingly Roman [60], especially in some of his late

and much misunderstood Scottish castles [61]. In these brutal buildings a new response to the classical past can be sensed, as if he had resolved to eradicate, once and for all, the diminutive elegancies and pretty artificialities of his earlier manner and had gone back to the stark abstemious simplicity and blocky four-square clarity of Roman military architecture, in much the same spirit as did David for the background of his *Intervention of the Sabine Women* [30].

Rome was, however, no more than a half-way house for those who wished to return to the fountain-head of architectural

60. Entrance Hall, Syon House, 1761. Robert Adam





61. Seton Castle, 1789–91. Robert Adam

purity – Greece. Archaeological activity of the mid century made available the first accurate drawings of Doric temples. To many who had paid lip-service to Greek architectural supremacy, they came as a rude surprise. When James Adam visited Paestum in 1761 he found the temples 'of an early, an inelegant and unenriched Doric, that afford no details'. And it is revealing that the first Doric building to be erected in northern Europe was no more than a garden folly – a little temple which joined a Neo-Gothic ruin (recently decked out with 'the true rust of the Barons' wars') in the park at Hagley. William Chambers said that Doric columns looked 'gouty' and 'excited no desire for more'. But he was appalled to note in 1793 that 'the *gusto greco* has again ventured to peep forth, and once more threaten invasion'. The reasons for this are not far to seek.

The Doric order had come to be seen as the product of an uncorrupted people living close to nature, and thus the purest expression of an architectural ideal – the equivalent of Homeric poetry and Greek vase painting. Primitive, masculine, unencumbered by superfluous ornament, and of a crystalline integrity, it could be admired for the very qualities that James Adam had found so uncouth and distasteful. And it is significant that Brongniart and other Parisian architects of the 1780s turned for inspiration not so much to the Parthenon as to the burly, big-boned temples of Paestum whose almost primeval virility was emphasized by the weathering that had stripped them of all enrichments. For the more fundamentally inclined, even this was not savage enough. Ledoux and Weinbrenner [68]

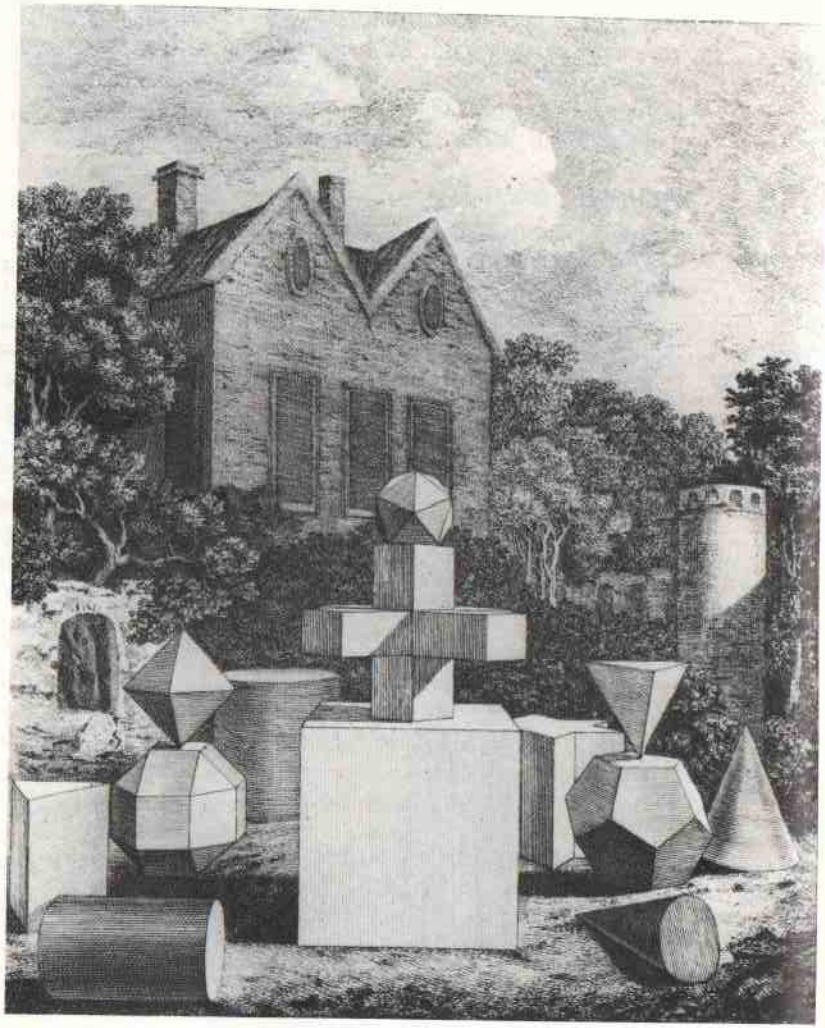
simplified the order still further by removing the fluting. And in Sweden, Karl August Ehrensvärd, in search of the ultimate in primitive architectural masculinity – what he called the 'natural' and 'original' order that had preceded the Doric – invented one of Aeschylean intensity and dramatic power for the entrance to the naval dockyard at Karlskrona [62].

Another approach to the architectural ideal was made through geometry. The essential beauty of the cube, pyramid, cylinder, sphere and cone had led to the quest for architectural principles in pure geometry long before Du Fourny, in 1793, issued the catch-phrase: '*L'architecture doit se régénerer par la géometrie.*' Sir Christopher Wren, mathematician as well as architect, had remarked that 'geometrical figures are naturally more beautiful than any other irregular; in this all consent, as to

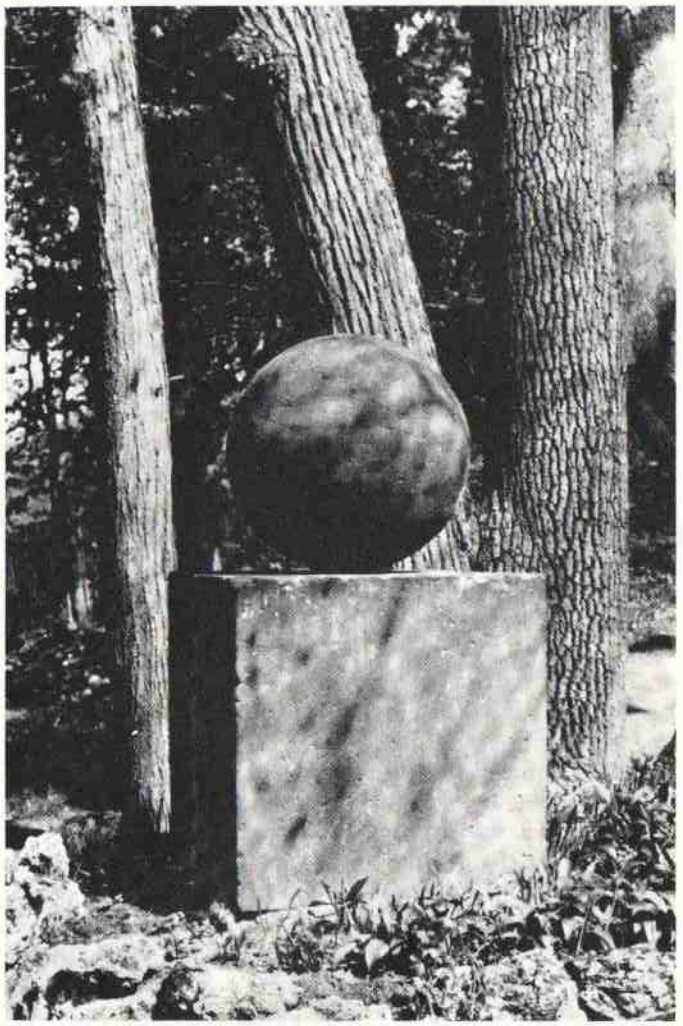
62. Model for dockyard gateway, Karlskrona, *c.* 1785. C. A. Ehrensvärd

63. Geometrical solids, 1754. Joshua Kirby

64. (Opposite) Altar of Good Fortune, Weimar, 1777. Designed by Goethe



a law of Nature'. And in the 1730s the English architect and theorist Robert Morris became obsessed with simple cubic forms as a basis for building. But for such men geometry was a means rather than an end in itself. A curious plate in Joshua Kirby's manual of perspective of 1754 shows a number of geometrical solids arranged like ornaments in a garden [63] – not in anticipation of Battersea Park but to suggest how the

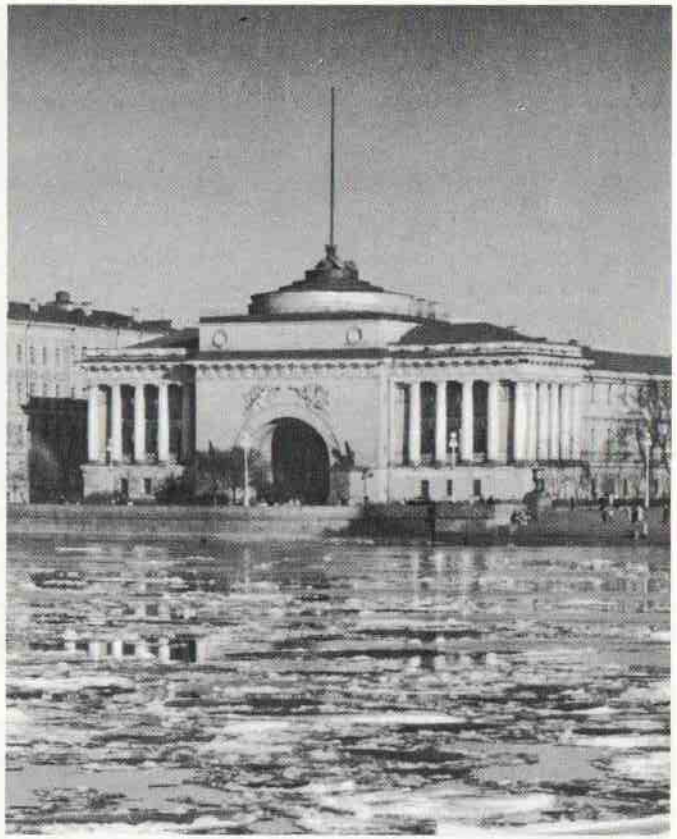


draughtsman who had mastered the representation of such pure forms might advance to irregular and more complicated ones. There is a world of difference between this and the Altar of Good Fortune [64] which may at first sight look like a Brancusi but was in fact designed by Goethe in 1777 for his garden at Weimar. Here two visual symbols – the ever-moving sphere of restless desires immobile on the cubic block of virtue – have been stripped of their Renaissance and Baroque allegorical accretions and rendered starkly as pure forms, as Platonic essences placed very suitably in an idealized natural landscape. Goethe, who held all great art and poetry to be an unfathomable symbol – *ein unergründliches Symbol* – represented a complex idea in the simplest possible terms of timeless geometry.

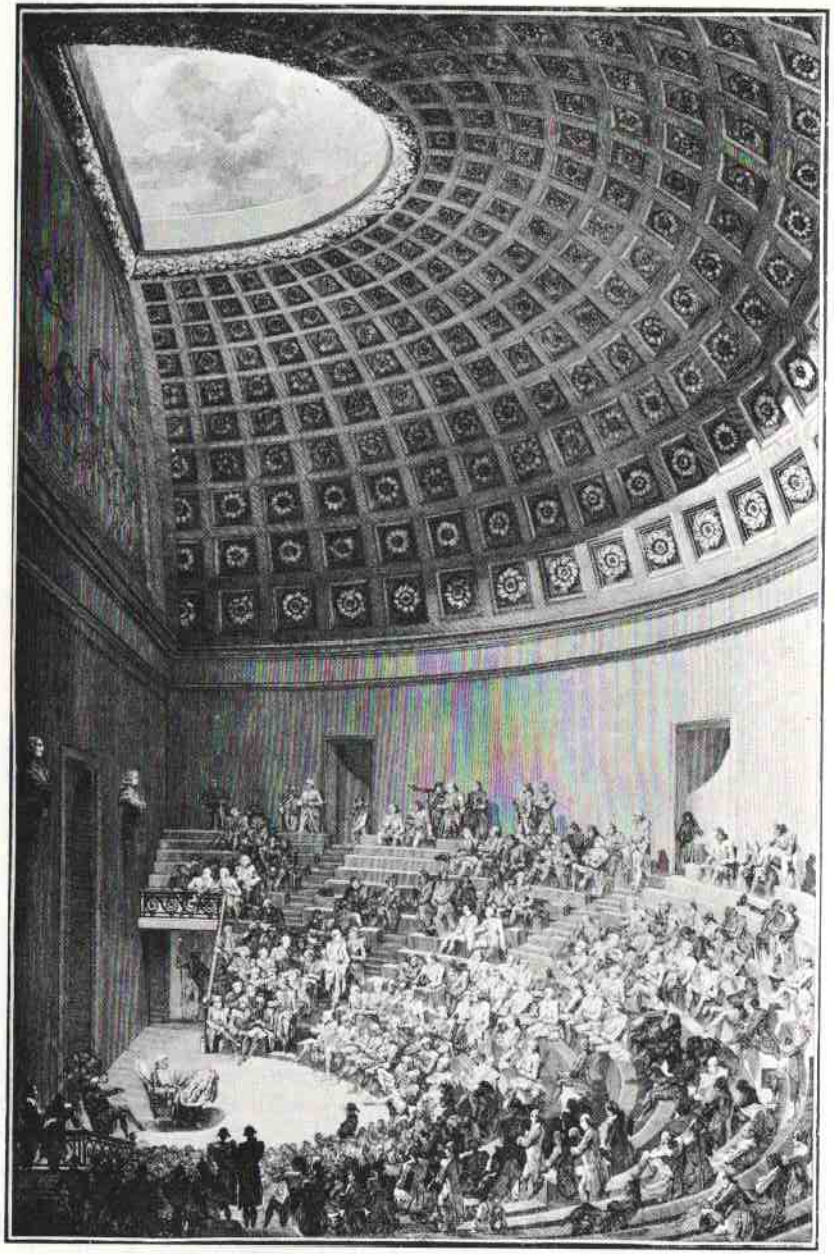
Architects were never to reach such absolute simplicity and purity even on paper, though a few came surprisingly near it. The end blocks of Zakharov's Admiralty in Leningrad, for instance, are almost essays in solid geometry: a fraction of a sphere upon a cylinder, resting on a massive cube broken only by a semicircular arch [65]. Gondouin's anatomy theatre in the École de Médecine in Paris is a half cylinder and quarter sphere, that is to say a half Pantheon [66]. And several other semicircular, half-domed rooms built around the turn of the century as debating chambers were similarly conceived: the Chambre des Deputés in Paris and Latrobe's original Senate Chamber in the Capitol in Washington. But it was, of course, Ledoux who pushed these tendencies to their farthest extreme, extracting from antiquity and nature a new kind of architecture of pure spheres, cubes, cylinders and pyramids which he set in an ideal landscape almost as if they were demonstrations in inorganic chemistry by some divine crystallographer [67].

Architects who were much less fundamentalist than Ledoux were also obsessed by the inorganic nature of geometrical forms and the complete autonomy of their art. It should need, they thought, no help from the painter or sculptor. They seem to have delighted in stressing the contrast between the pure form of the building and the organic roughness of the surrounding landscape as between the clean planar simplicity of the Laiterie at Rambouillet – a combination of sphere and cylinder of almost machine-tooled precision – and the rugged grotto attached to it [88]. A similar effect is achieved in Caspar Wolf's view of a perfect glacial rainbow in an Alpine landscape [40].

The Baroque conception of architectural composition as a

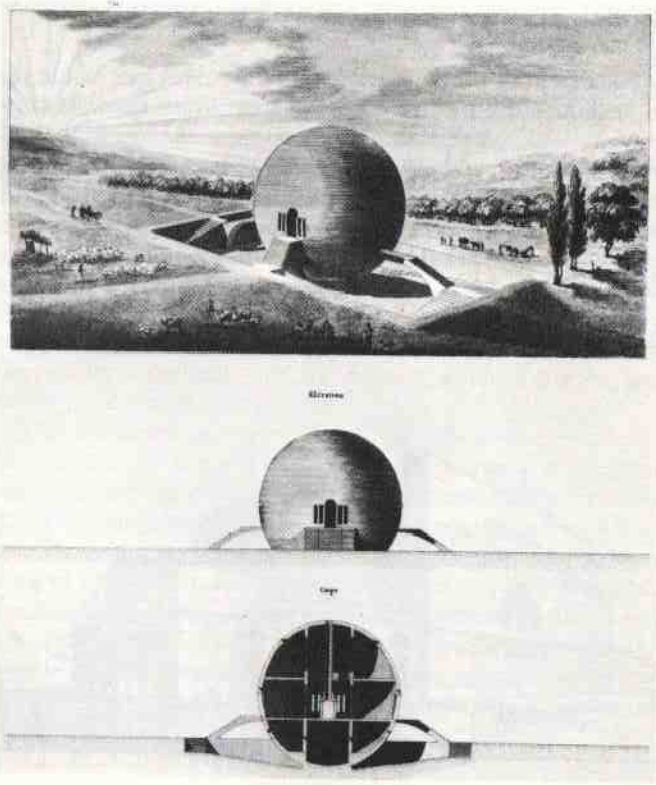


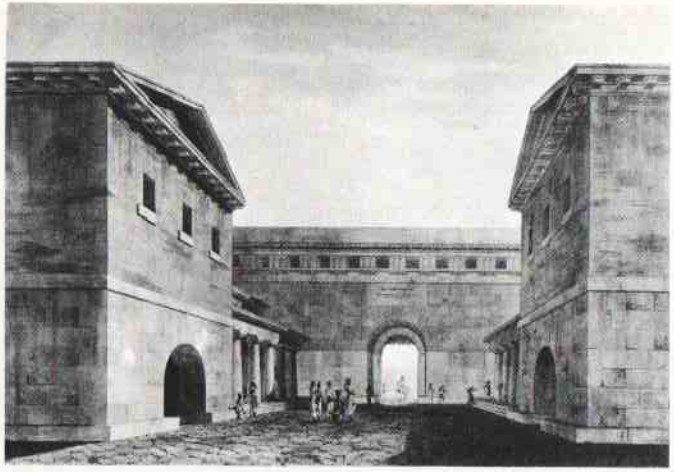
65. The Admiralty, Leningrad, 1806–15. A. D. Zakharov



66. (Opposite) Anatomy theatre, Paris, 1780. J. Gondouin

67. Design for a house, *c.* 1790. C.-N. Ledoux

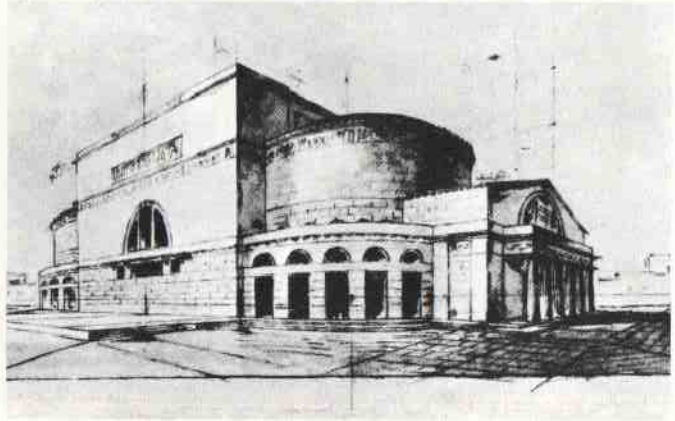




68. Design for a city gateway, 1794. J. J. F. Weinbrenner

process of fusing and interlocking parts so that one would run almost imperceptibly into those adjacent to it – the wings into the *corps de logis*, the main storey into those above and below – was rejected together with the mesh of decoration which had made such an organic unification possible. Neo-classical architects emphasized the stark contrasts between the various masses of a building or group of buildings, as in Weinbrenner's design for a city gate with its frontal opposition and detachment of

69. Design for a theatre in Berlin, 1798. F. Gilly



70. Stables, Chelsea Hospital, London, 1814. John Soane

identical forms [68], or in Friedrich Gilly's design for a theatre with its juxtaposition of cube and half cylinders [69]. Contours are unbroken, lines are clear cut, angles are sharp, openings are punched into the walls with no surrounds to soften the impact, and the interior volumes are clearly expressed on the exterior. For openings the simplest shapes, based on the square and the circle, were naturally preferred, and often they are the only elements used to articulate a façade. The east front of Soane's stables at Chelsea, an extreme example, is broken only by round-headed arches, subtly receding in a manner that stresses the solidity of the wall – and, incidentally, reminds one that this austerity was more than utilitarian [70].

The insistence on purity, simplicity and volumetric clarity in architecture corresponds with the painter's preoccupation with outline drawing. Paintings of architecture similarly stress the contrasts between juxtaposed masses, as in Abildgaard's vision of ancient Athens [71] or, indeed, Koch's distant view of a little town in a pastoral landscape [93]. The two ideas are clearly combined in an engraving by Carstens [55] showing a room of crystalline purity in which the columns are reduced to simple cylinders capped with rectangular blocks, subtly but distinctly divided from the wall surface by the recession of the drum and projection of the capital.

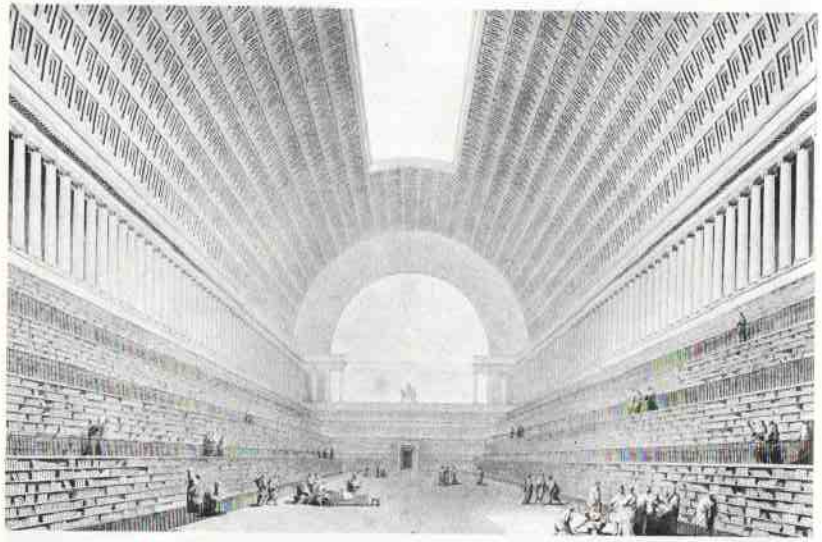
The ideas underlying this new conception of architecture had been propounded in Venice in the 1740s and 1750s by the

Abbate Carlo Lodoli whom his admirers called the 'Socrates of architecture' from his urge to question all *idées reçues*. A disciple of Vico and an acquaintance of Montesquieu, he is among the more notable figures of the Enlightenment in Italy. It is interesting to find that he was also among the first collectors of Italian primitives. But as he published no statement of his theories it is more than a little difficult to discover exactly what they were. The account of them diffused by Count Algarotti in 1756 was attacked by a more devoted disciple of Lodoli, Andrea Memmo, thirty years later. It appears that Lodoli wished to exclude from architecture all those parts that were meaningless, unsuitable or implied a structure different from that actually used. 'Ornament is not essential but accessory to proper function and form,' is one of the few comments he committed to paper. 'Proportion, convenience and ornament can take shape only through the application of mathematics and physics guided by rational norms.' But Algarotti, who seems to have been too muddle-headed to grasp the concept of pure architectural form, represented him as little more than an opponent of ornament *per se*. Yet even in Algarotti's presentation, Lodoli's ideas must have come as something of a challenge. It was not, however, until the last years of the century that, through the writings of Memmo and Milizia, they could be widely understood and gain general currency.

When Lodoli began to criticize a design for a church on logical grounds its architect replied: 'If I were to submit some totally new conception, however reasonable, I could be quite sure that the plans of some other architect, imitating for example a façade by Palladio or Vignola, would be chosen instead of mine. And then who would support my family?' The same dilemma was to face fundamentalist architects of a later age. Even in the rational atmosphere of the late eighteenth century purist architectural ideals met with a somewhat chilly reception from private patrons: they might appeal to pure reason but hardly to common sense. It is not so very surprising that the most notable manifestations of Neo-classical architecture are to be found in public buildings which could be given an austerely monumental character – city gateways, hospitals, theatres, stock-exchanges, barracks, prisons and, of course, sepulchral and commemorative monuments. But in a period that was not economically propitious for vast architectural schemes such public commissions were rare. And many of the most interesting projects never got off the drawing board.

71. *Scene from Terence*, 1802. N. A. Abildgaard

72. Design for a library, *c.* 1780–90. É.-L. Boullée



As the possibilities for building decreased, so the architect's imagination expanded, encouraged by the numerous new academies which required students to produce enormous and elaborate prize drawings. The projects which won awards at the French academy in the 1770s and 1780s provide a fascinating record of the Utopian ideals of the time and also a revealing contrast with earlier imaginative schemes in which the architect's fancy had run riot in marble courts and endless colonnades, bevies of statues and thick incrustations of reliefs, sweeping staircases leading to painted and tapestried halls. In Neoclassical designs both decoration and function are dominated by purely architectural form, however impractical from the point of view of the builder and user (the pure sphere beloved of Ledoux is, indeed, an atectonic form which few would wish to inhabit).

Function was suggested by form rather than decoration – but not in any twentieth-century functionalist's sense. A brothel (or, more reconditely, a temple) might be given a phallic-shaped plan, the house of the Surveyors of the River the form of a bridge over a waterfall. A hoop-shaped house was devised for some unfortunate cooper. It was to projects of this type – an increasingly expressive or *parlante* architecture as he called it – that Ledoux returned when deprived by the Revolution of both public and private commissions. Boullée who had always been more active as a teacher of theory than as a practising architect, engaged himself in designs still more fantastic and megalomaniac – a spherical cenotaph to Newton [34], a vast library conceived as a monument to learning rather than a repository for books [72], and a monument to nothing in particular in the form of a truncated cone some 700 feet high. This is the architecture of reason only in the sense implied by Wordsworth's definition of:

> Imagination, which in truth,
> Is but another name for absolute power
> And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,
> And reason in her most exalted mood.

5
Sensibility and the Sublime

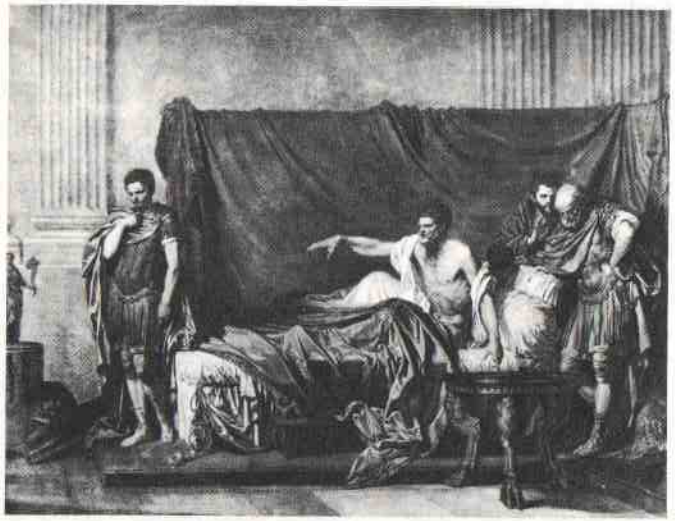
1. SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

David, describing the Republican army going out to fight, told the Convention: 'I have seen you shed tears, magnanimous people! Don't stop: they do honour to your courage. Achilles wept also. The Romans wept. . . .' But no one had ever wept quite as persistently or profusely as the late eighteenth-century man of feeling. A readiness to weep was the mark of true sensibility. An ability to call forth the 'sympathetic tear' indicated high artistic merit. Boswell's only criticism of Johnson's writing was a suggestion that *Irene* did not make the reader cry. And if few works of literature or art were deliberately submitted to a trial by tears, there can be no doubt that sentiment played an unprecedented and increasingly large part in eighteenth-century criticism. Nearly all the 'best sellers' of the period paid tribute to the cult – *A Sentimental Journey*, *The Man of Feeling*, *Clarissa*, the poems of Ossian, Gessner's Idylls, *The Sufferings of Young Werther*, *Paul et Virginie*, even *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. And not only fiction. It was with an appeal to sentiment that Rousseau began his *Contrat Social*. Sentiment proved a more effective weapon than reason to attack slavery and social injustice or, in the hands of Burke, the principles of the French Revolution.

The cult of sensibility might seem incompatible with the rational ideals of Neo-classicism. But this is not so. The power of a work of art to touch the heart as well as to instruct and be morally improving was easily accepted by those who agreed with Lessing that 'the most compassionate man is the best man . . . and he who makes us compassionate makes us better and more virtuous'. (While David was painting his *Death of Socrates* he would break off every now and again to read a few pages of Richardson's *Clarissa*, the greatest eighteenth-century work of moral sensibility.) And as it was also supposed that the 'language of the heart' was at all times and in all countries the same, the work of art that appealed to sensibility naturally acquired universal validity. Speaking of the painter's choice of

subject, Reynolds declared that none 'can be proper that is not generally interesting. It ought to be either some instance of heroick action or heroick suffering. There must be something either in the action, or in the object, in which men are universally concerned and which powerfully strikes upon the publick sympathy.'

Such themes were not, of course, to be found in the bizarre loves and metamorphoses of Greek and Roman gods. As Grimm remarked in 1755, pagan mythology was of service to the painter in furnishing voluptuous subjects – 'but what a tiny advantage compared with that of depicting the pathetic!' Sceptic though he was, he thought Christian history might be a better source, though it was from Homer alone that Diderot derived his list of suitable subjects for painters which was appended to Grimm's essay. Homer had not only paid more attention to men than to gods but also described human emotions in their most primitive, that is to say, purest and simplest form. Ancient history as interpreted by Livy and Plutarch provided further, and still more explicitly moralizing subjects for the pencil of sensibility; nor were the poems of Ossian, the plays of Shakespeare and even medieval and later history neglected whenever they could provide appropriate subjects illustrating, especially, the uncorrupted manners and emotions of those living close to nature.

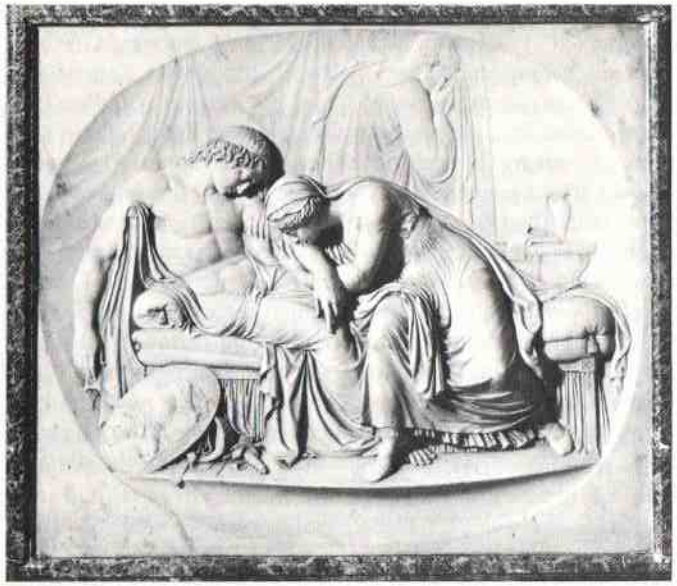


73. *Septimus Severus reproaching Caracalla*, 1769. J.-B. Greuze

From whatever period in history the subject was derived it was treated stylistically in much the same manner. Greuze's *Septimus Severus* on his death-bed accusing his son Caracalla of wishing to assassinate him [73] and his *Mauvais Fils Puni* [74] are rendered in a strikingly similar way and differ only in costume and setting. In both works he sought to appeal to morality by way of sentiment. And in both the general theme is of more importance than the particular subject. Sometimes, indeed, the tendency to generalize and universalize makes it difficult for us now to identify the historical subject depicted. John Deare's relief of a woman sucking a poisoned wound in a man's arm [75] might at first sight be supposed to illustrate some antique exemplar of conjugal selflessness, but in fact represents King Edward I and Queen Eleanor at the Siege of Acre. An anecdote from medieval history has here been given general significance as the illustration of a story both touching and morally improving.

In this moral and sentimental mood artists revised their attitude to subjects which had often been painted before. As we have already seen, David converted the legend of the aged Belisarius into a theme of profounder and wider meaning. Greuze, in his *Drunkard's Return* [33] rendered a subject (hitherto the province of the comic genre painter) with a combined appeal to morals and sentiment – 'a comedy to those who

74. *The Wicked Son Punished*, 1778. J.-B. Greuze



75. *Edward I and Eleanor of Castille*, 1789–95. John Deare

think, a tragedy to those who feel' – that seems to anticipate the Band of Hope preacher. But perhaps the most remarkable transformation is that of the Roman Charity. This subject had been treated by innumerable Baroque and Rococo painters, sometimes as an allegory of youth and age, often with lascivious overtones, generally as an exercise in painterly ability. But Gottlieb Schick painted it simply and starkly as an example of filial piety [76].

These works share that moral tone and sentimental appeal which had found expression in Diderot's *drame bourgeois*. They attempt to inject a dose of *vérité commune* into the inflated rhetoric of history painting in the same way that Diderot, in M. Seznec's phrase, tried to 'stuff the empty nobility of classical tragedy with the substantial simplicity of everyday life'. And it was, indeed, Diderot who demanded of painters in 1765: 'Move me, astonish me, break my heart, let me tremble, weep, stare, be enraged – you will delight my eyes afterwards, if you can.' David similarly insisted that a painting ought to 'make the soul of the spectator vibrate', characteristically identifying the soul with the reason. In 1793 he wrote:

It is not only in charming the eyes that great works of art have attained their aim, it is in penetrating the soul, it is in making on the spirit a profound impression akin to reality. The artist must therefore have studied all the springs of the human heart. He must in a word be a philosopher. Socrates, able sculptor, Jean-Jacques, a good musician, the immortal Poussin tracing on the canvas the sublime lessons of philosophy, are witnesses who prove that the genius of the arts can have no guide other than the torch of reason.

This concern with the affective qualities of works of art – as notable in Winckelmann's descriptions of ancient statues as in Diderot's of paintings by Greuze – underlies the numerous discussions of the most confused and confusing aesthetic notion of the time: the sublime. For sublimity was found less in objects themselves than in the emotions they induced. It was a subjective quality, unlike beauty which was absolute. The word 'sublime', itself, which had originally been used to describe an oratorical style, was applied by 'Longinus' to other types of literature (notably Homer), revived by the arch-classicist Boileau in the late seventeenth century and transferred to the visual arts and natural phenomena in the eighteenth. It generally signified an emotion of awe, bordering on terror, inspired by natural phenomena. But it was also applied to works of art expressive of a super-human grandeur which could not be accounted for by the normal critical criteria – though with emphasis, it must

76. *Roman Charity*, *c.* 1800. G. Schick

be noted, on the noble and lofty rather than the turbulent and supernatural. The vast literature on the subject sprang from a typically Neo-classical desire to derive rules from what was above the rules – to define the indefinable.

The concept of the sublime was also closely linked with that of genius. The *Encyclopédie* article on '*génie*', written largely by Diderot, states:

> For something to be beautiful according to the rules of taste, it must be elegant, finished, studied without showing it: to be of genius it must sometimes be careless and have an irregular, rugged, savage air. Sublimity and genius flash in Shakespeare like streaks of lightning in a long night, and Racine is always beautiful; Homer is full of genius and Virgil of elegance . . .

Admiration for sublimity and genius did not, however, imply – as was to be the case in the Romantic period – hostility to the rules of art. For it was commonly understood that the rules formed a solid foundation above which genius might soar, but beneath which incompetence could only flounder. And it is significant that the debate on sublimity ceased in the early nineteenth century with C. D. Friedrich's pronouncement that 'the artist's will is law'. Similarly the cult of sensibility was balanced by a stoical respect for the virtue of self-control. In the highly civilized atmosphere of late eighteenth-century Europe, tippling might be permitted as a pleasure but emotional alcoholism was prohibited.

2. THE NEO-CLASSICAL WAY OF DEATH

In death, every man meets the sublime, however urbane or sequestered the tenor of his way may hitherto have been. A death-bed scene could hardly fail to draw the word 'sublime' from a favourable critic in the late eighteenth century – Diderot found Greuze's *Malédiction paternelle* '*beau, très beau, sublime*', and Grimm thought David's *Andromache mourning Hector* '*la scène le plus attachant, le plus sublime, le plus pathétique*'. Seldom had death proved such a popular literary subject. One thinks of the deaths of Clarissa Harlowe, Julie, Werther, la Présidente de Tourvel, Virginie – not to mention Young's *Night Thoughts* (1742–5), Blair's *The Grave* (1743) and Hervey's *Meditations among the Tombs* (1746). In painting there are deaths of Hector, Socrates, Miltiades, the sister of the Horatii, the sons of Brutus, Virginia, Septimus Severus, the Chevalier Bayard, General Wolfe, Lord Chatham, Marat and many others. Death is an

image which finds a mirror in every mind: the death scene abounds in 'sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo'. And the artist in search of a universal theme, either heroic or elegiac, could find it in the nobility and tranquillity of the expiring hero.

Many earlier artists had, of course, been 'much possessed by death', ever aware of the 'skull beneath the skin'. But the Neo-classical artist's treatment of the death scene differed in several respects from that of his predecessors. First, and most obviously, the sexual overtones are removed. The *Rape of Lucretia* so popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, gives way to the *Death of Lucretia* with Brutus and Collatinus vowing vengeance [77]. But that is not all. The figure of the dead man or woman is represented peacefully at rest without any of those hints of orgasmic exhaustion which Baroque painters had so deftly introduced. (Conversely the Neo-classical love scene often suggests the love-death synthesis, as in Canova's rendering of Psyche swooning in the arms of a Cupid who is barely distinguishable from the Genius of Death [45].)

'Death, my son, is a blessing for all men,' says the narrator in *Paul et Virginie*. 'It is the night of this unquiet day called life. In the sleep of death the sicknesses, the sorrows, the chagrin, the

77. *Brutus swearing to avenge Lucretia's death*, *c.* 1763. Gavin Hamilton

beliefs which never cease to disturb unhappy living men, repose for ever.' Many years earlier Winckelmann had described an antique gravestone carved with figures of Death and his brother Sleep as two beautiful youths with reversed torches. Before long this appealing image had begun to drive the rattling skeletons and rotting cadavers from tombs and churches. 'I do not see what should prevent our artists from abandoning the hideous skeleton and again availing themselves of a better image,' wrote Lessing. 'Scripture itself speaks of an angel of death: and what artist ought not rather to aim at portraying an angel than a skeleton?' And Goethe recorded how he was

'delighted by the beauty of the thought that the Ancients acknowledged death as the brother of sleep and formed both of them alike to the point of confusing them, as is proper with twin brothers. In this theme we could now really celebrate the triumph of beauty in lofty terms.'

Similarly Schiller, in *The Gods of Greece,* recorded that in antiquity,

> . . . no ugly skeleton came
> To the bed of the dying. A kiss
> Drew the last breath of life from his lips;
> A Genius lowered his torch . . .

78. (Opposite) *Genius of Death*, 1787–92. Antonio Canova

79. *Endymion*, 1793. A.-L. Girodet

Though on another occasion he was bound to confess that,

> *Lieblich sieht er zwar aus mit seiner erloschenen Fackel;*
> *Aber, ihr Herren, der Tod ist so ästhetisch doch nicht.*
>
> (He looks charming with his extinguished torch;
> but, gentlemen, death is not really so aesthetic).

The idea appealed to Christians as much as to scepties. The Protestant Herder welcomed the notion that 'our last friend is no horrifying spectre, but an ender of life, the lovely youth who puts out the torch and imposes calm on the billowing sea'. Roman Catholics were equally susceptible and the most notable representation of this figure is to be found in the very centre of the Catholic world – on Canova's monument to Clement XIII in St Peter's [78]. This languorous youth with drowsy limbs and caressing gaze, an image of transient adolescent beauty that must itself perish, and of the tranquillity of sleep and death, is one of the most perfect realizations of Winckelmann's artistic ideal. Contrasting strangely with the turbulent shrouded skeletons of Bernini's and other Baroque monuments, Canova's Genius expresses a longing for the perfect peace of eternity and the ultimate certainties and for an everlastingly valid artistic form. For the synthesis of beauty and death lies at the heart of the classical tradition which has found so many of its finest expressions in the elegiac mood. One is reminded of the legend of Endymion, most beautiful of mortal youths, sent into an eternal sleep on Mount Ida by the moon goddess, Selene. And it is perhaps more than a coincidence that Girodet's painting of Endymion [79] seems to owe so much to Canova's Genius of Death.

But painters generally contrasted the calm of death with the restlessness of life. In the several renderings of the *Death of Socrates*, a popular death-bed scene of the time, the calm fortitude of the philosopher drinking poison is emphasized by the agonized grief and despair of his disciples. Similarly, in David's *Andromache mourning Hector* [80] the perfect tranquillity of the dead hero is stressed and made more poignant by the grief of his wife and the bewildered anxiety of the child. The same effect could be obtained more strikingly in battle scenes which show the hero attaining immortal rest while the ignorant armies clash round him.

In his *Death of Wolfe* of 1770 [81], Benjamin West depicted the hero of Quebec expiring at the moment of his triumph and

80. *Andromache mourning Hector*, 1783. J.-L. David

thus attaining immortality in a double sense. Such a death provided a 'classic' theme of universal validity. Somewhat to the surprise of conservative critics, West rendered it not as an allegory but with the same attention to truth in details of landscape and costume as he would have given – and was, indeed, soon to give – to the deaths of Epaminondas or Bayard. As much, and no more – for he placed the scene in the open air, not in a tent, and included a Red Indian and other figures who were not in fact present at Wolfe's death. But all the figures were

81. *The Death of Wolfe*, 1770. Benjamin West

ennobled with eloquent postures, Wolfe himself being derived from a Deposition of Christ. The picture is at once a secular commemorative icon and a moral exemplar.

The *Death of Wolfe* also illustrates the a-Christian rather than anti-Christian element in the new attitude to immortality. It makes no more explicit reference to Christian doctrine than other Neo-classical death scenes or, indeed, Gray's *Elegy*, that most enduring monument to eighteenth-century attitudes to death, which Wolfe is said to have recited on the eve of his last battle. In Gray's poem the dogmas of the Church appear only as the 'pious texts' which 'teach the rustic moralist to die'.

> For who to dumb Forgetfulness a Prey,
> This pleasing anxious Being e'er resigned,
> Left the warm Precints of the chearful Day,
> Nor cast one longing ling'ring Look behind?
>
> On some fond Breast the parting Soul relies,
> Some pious Drops the closing Eye requires;
> Ev'n from the tomb the Voice of Nature cries,
> Ev'n in our Ashes live their wonted Fires.

Even the orthodox Dr Johnson found these deistic lines the most notable in the whole poem. Under the impact of the Enlightenment the concept of eternal life in another world was giving way to one of immortality on earth: the Christian day of

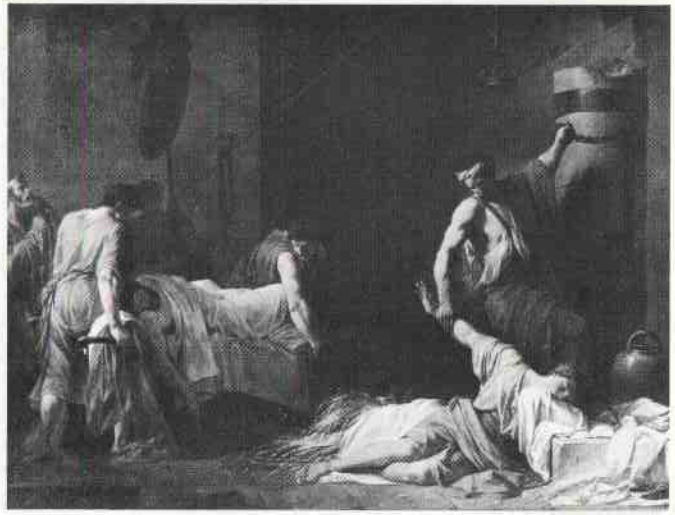
doom was beginning to seem less real than what Macaulay was later to call judgement at the 'bar of history'. This process of secularization is complete in Diderot's prayer:

> O posterity, holy and sacred! Stay of the unhappy and the oppressed, thou who art just, thou who art incorruptible, who avengest the good man, who unmasketh the tyrant, may thy sure faith, thy consoling faith, never, never abandon me! Posterity is for the philosopher what the other world is for the devout.

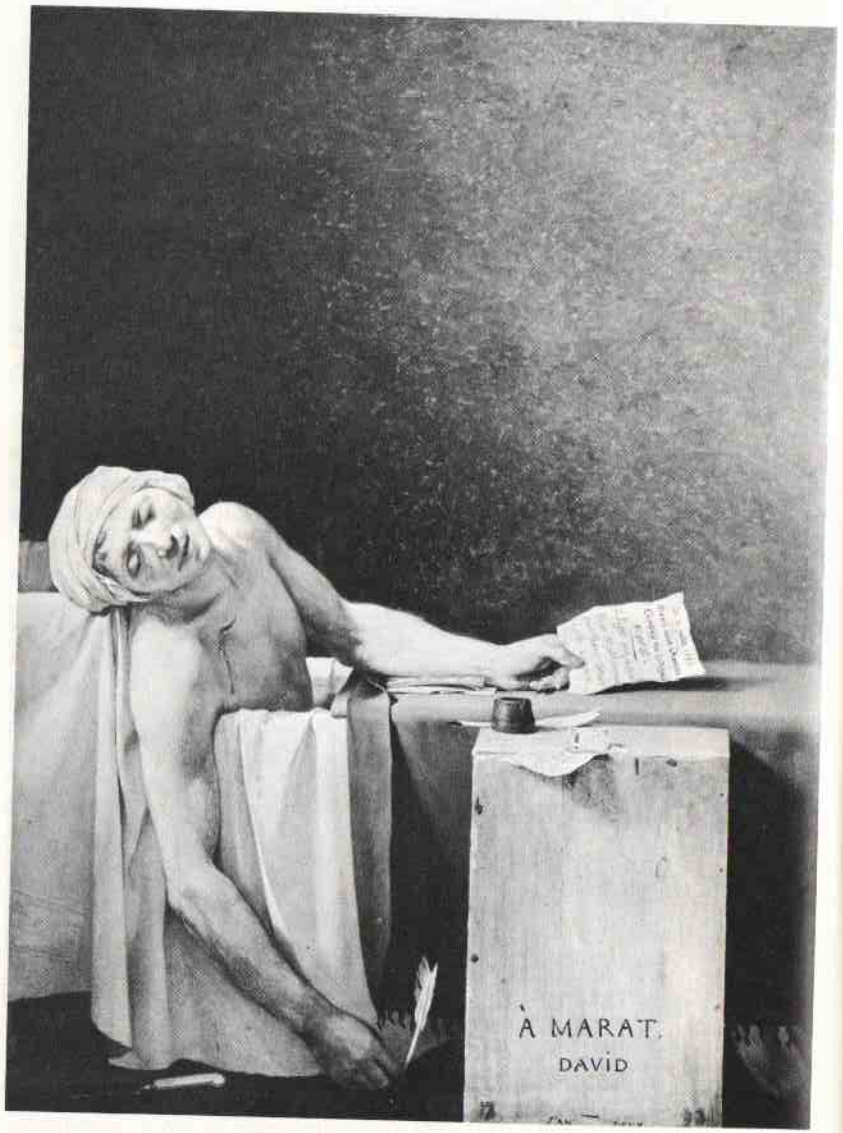
Thus we find in Neo-classical death scenes and sepulchral monuments, the emphasis being shifted from the problematical joys of the blessed in paradise to the more tangible love, admiration and grief of the survivors on earth. The hero takes the place of the saint in the iconography of death. One might almost suggest that in the *Death of Wolfe* the messenger crying 'They run, I protest they run' has the function of an angel bearing a crown of martyrdom to a Baroque saint. The other figures are representatives of those in whose memory Wolfe will continue to live. And through them the story of Wolfe's heroic death will be transmitted to posterity.

The figures surrounding the dead or dying have a double function. Sometimes they occupy the central place. In Peyron's *Kimon* [82], the emphasis is not on the dead Miltiades but on the son who has surrendered himself to prison so that his father's

82. *Kimon, son of Miltiades*, 1782. J.-F.-P. Peyron



83. *The Dead Marat*, 1793. J.-L. David



body may be given proper burial. It is his noble fortitude and filial piety that is extolled – as an example for the living. In David's *Brutus* [27] the emotional drama is concentrated exclusively on the reactions of the father, mother and sisters: only one of the dead youths appears in the picture. David made his intentions plain in a letter of 1789: 'I am painting a picture wholly by my invention. It is Brutus, man and father, who is deprived of his children, sitting in the hall whence his two sons are being brought for burial. He is at the feet of the statue of Rome, distracted from his grief by the cries of his wife, the fear and fainting of his eldest daughter.' The conflict of emotions and stoic strength of will – echoing his earlier conflict between paternal affection and patriotic duty – is expressed in every muscle of Brutus's body from the agonized face to the tensely twisted feet.

It was with different motives in mind that David painted his greatest picture, the *Dead Marat* [83]. Here there are no subsidiary figures to set the scene or point the moral. The bare fact of death dominates the work. As the bold inscription on the tombstone-like packing case reveals – *À Marat David l'an deux* – this is a tribute to the man whom David regarded as a revolutionary martyr. It is not, like earlier death scenes, an exhortation to face death bravely but an image to provoke meditations – a secular *Pietà*. And the reverential silence it compels is already suggested by the blank upper section of the canvas. But, of course, no allusion to Christ was intended – another Jacobin said that to compare Marat with Christ was to slander Marat! The nudity of the figure recalls, rather, the statues of classical heroes and dying philosophers, especially Socrates and Seneca (who had committed suicide in his bath). 'Plato, Aristotle, Socrates,' David exclaimed, 'I have never lived with you, but I have known Marat and admired him as I do you.'

David included the minimum of detail necessary to re-create the historical moment: Charlotte Corday's self-condemnatory letter, the knife that was the instrument of Marat's martyrdom and, as emblems of his vocation, the inkwells and quills – '*sa plume*', as David declaimed in a speech of 24 Brumaire, '*la terreur des traitres, sa plume échappe de ses mains! O désespoir! Notre infatigable ami est mort*'. By the use of such details, with the packing case and patched sheets, he not only provided the essential information about the simplicity of Marat's life and the cruelty of his death but also rendered him as a saint of the new religion of rationalism. Depicting the absolute solitude and stark finality

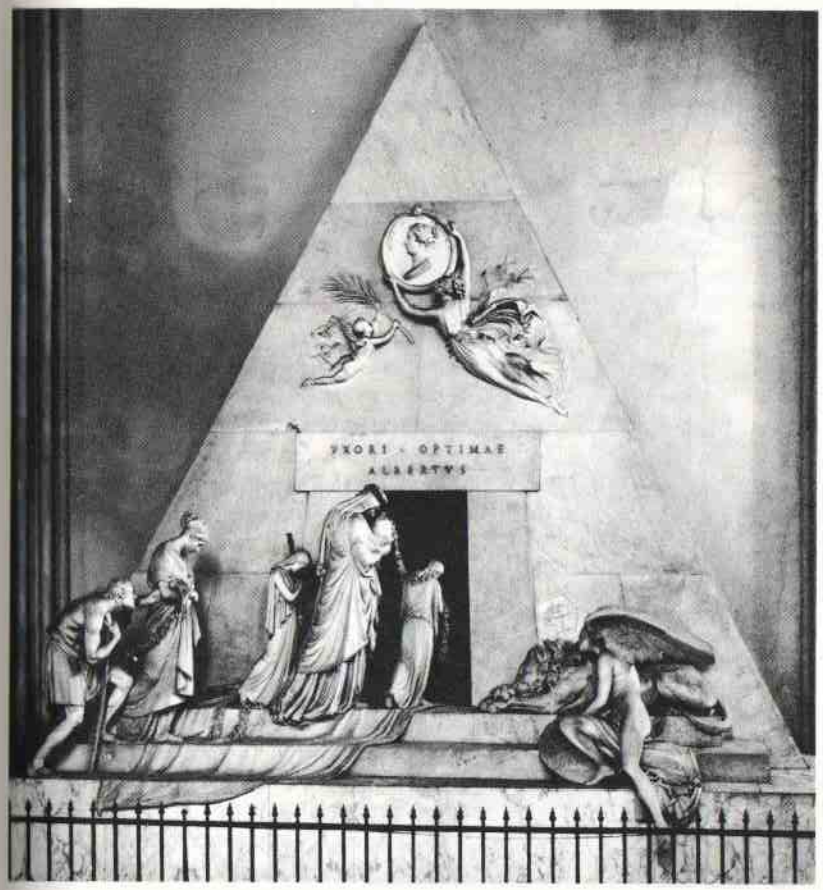
of death, he hints at no possibility of immortality in another world. The rigid horizontality of the composition, broken by the downward accent of the right arm, removes any suggestion of apotheosis in the heavens. This overpoweringly grave and noble image has, as David intended, immortalized Marat. It is familiar to thousands who know little about him apart from his murder. The painting is thus both an example of the Enlightenment's view of immortality and a demonstration of its truth.

These paintings are all secular. But sepulchral monuments erected in churches in the late eighteenth century also reflect new attitudes to death and immortality. Christian symbols were given little prominence and often omitted altogether. The complicated allegories beloved of Baroque sculptors were eschewed. Milizia, who believed that 'the life of the dead is in the memory of the living', said that a monument should 'demonstrate in its simplicity the character of the person commemorated and bear no symbols that are not immediately intelligible'. And, as we have seen, he was among the most enthusiastic admirers of Canova's first Papal monument [10].

Canova's ideal of the monument was not, however, fully realized until he executed that to Maria Christina, Duchess of Saxe-Teschen, erected in the Augustiner-Kirche, Vienna, in 1805 [84]. The design is as simple and the symbols are as readily intelligible as Milizia could have wished. A group of clearly articulated figures are ranged in front of a pyramid and, by a master-stroke of technical virtuosity, given the appearance of moving through its door. The horizontal arrangement of these figures emphasizes the gravity-bound nature, rather than the upward thrust, of the pyramid – itself the most ancient form of sepulchral monument. Above the door of the pyramid a figure of Happiness holds a portrait of Maria Christina framed by a snake eating its tail – an archaic emblem of immortality. To the right a Genius of Mourning, similar to a Genius of Death, rests against the lion of Fortitude. On the other side Piety is shown carrying the urn of ashes into the tomb chamber, followed by a group of figures representing Beneficence.

Yet, like all images that are the result of profound searching, this monument has multiple layers of meaning and implication. It might alternatively be read as the representation of an ancient funeral ceremony with the mourners following the ashes of the dead to the tomb – an illustration of the great Roman virtue Pietas. And the figures on the left are subtly distinguished from the Genius of Mourning who seems to belong to another

84. Maria Christina monument, 1799–1805. Antonio Canova



element. But there is a third and deeper level of meaning. The group on the far left, consisting of a child, a young woman and an old man, represents the three ages of man, all paying homage to the dead and all slowly moving towards the tomb, towards the open door which poses the eternal and unresolved question of what may lie beyond.

Unlike most memorials, this great monument is composed neither as an obituary nor as an epitaph, but as an elegy. Like *Lycidas* or *Adonais* it begins as a threnody for a particular death; by classical allusion this is given a timeless quality and elevated into an emotionally touching yet stoical lament for the mortality of all humanity.

Where the Maria Christina monument reminds one of an elegy, Canova's smaller monuments recall the tersely poignant epigrams on death in the Greek Anthology. They are, indeed, inspired by the *stele* which lined the roads leading out of Greek cities. Significantly, he chose this type for the memorials he

85. Giovanni Volpato monument, 1807–8. Antonio Canova

raised at his own expense to two close personal friends [85]. A low relief shows a mourning woman seated by the garlanded bust of the dead man, with his name and a brief inscription on the plinth. That is all. The importance of the subject is to be inferred from the fact of the monument itself, the nobility of his character from his portrait and not from any allegorical device or 'lapidary scrawl'. Emotional emphasis is placed solely on the grief of the survivor, the most eloquent of all tributes to the dead. In the presence of such works one recalls Ugo Foscolo's greatest poem, *Dei Sepolcri* (1807) with its central message in the lines:

> *Ahi! su gli estinti*
> *non sorge fiore, ove non sia d'umane*
> *lodi onorato e d'amoroso pianto . . .*
>
> 'Alas, no flowers grow by the dead
> save where they are honoured
> by human praise and loving tears.'

3. THE NEO-CLASSICAL LANDSCAPE

A commemorative portrait of Mme Lucien Bonaparte, painted by A.-J. Gros shortly after her early death in 1800 [86], shows her in the full flower of her youth and beauty, standing by a cascade with her eyes fixed wistfully on a rose which is being carried away on the rushing water as if by the inexorable stream of life. Though rank and overgrown, the shady dell in which she stands seems to be not a piece of wild country but part of a late eighteenth-century landscape garden where nature has been improved and idealized by art. It reminds one of the 'melancholy walk' in the *jardin anglais* at Beloeil, laid out by the Prince de Ligne so that 'those with sad thoughts will be able to give themselves up to the little miseries which often afford pleasure, and to which one must yield without a struggle'. In such a corner of a late eighteenth-century park one would expect to find, just where Mme Lucien stands, a column or perhaps an urn inscribed to the memory of some sentimental friendship. For the landscape park represented a vision not only of purified nature but also of the elegiac classical scene. It might well be called the garden of sensibility.

It is often said that the landscape gardens laid out in England in the eighteenth century were attempts to realize with trees and lawns and lakes the ideal landscapes of Claude and Poussin. But this is a misleading over-simplification. They are, rather,