Chapter 26
Rococo to Neoclassicism: The 18th Century in Europe and America
A Century of Revolutions & Rococo Interiors

- Social, political, economic, and technological change, as well as transformation in the arts.
- In 1700 Louis XIV still ruled as Sun King at Versailles. His palace inspired construction of many grandiose homes in the early 18th century.
- By 1800 revolutions had overthrown monarchy in France and achieved independence in America from Britain.
- Industrial Revolution transformed economies.
- Death of Louis XIV in 1715 – elite abandoned court of Versailles and resided in hotels (townhouses) of Paris, decorated in lighthearted, softer Rococo style.
- Aristocrats reestablished predominance as art patrons.
The Rococo style was replaced by the Neoclassical, which was perceived as more democratic. Enlightenment brought about a rejection of royal and aristocratic authority.

Neoclassicism was inspired by the unearthing of the ruins at Pompeii.

Even if works of art depict current events or contemporary portraits, there are frequently classical allusions.

The late eighteenth century was the age of the Industrial Revolution: new technologies such as cast iron were introduced into architecture, and for the first time it became more economical to carve from bronze than marble.
- *Rocaille* (pebble) – small stones and shells that decorated grotto interiors (natural or man-made caves). Shell forms – principal motifs in Rococo ornamentation.
- Women dominated cultural sphere and held influential positions in Europe.
- Rococo salons – center of Parisian society
- Wealthy, ambitious, clever society hostesses, referred to as *femmes savants* (learned women) competed to attract most famous and accomplished people to their salons.
- More intimate and decentralized culture based in private homes.

Rococo interiors were total works of art with elaborate furnishings – ceramics, silver, small paintings and tapestries.

Germany’s adoption of Parisian style

Circular hall – stucco relief, silvered bronze mirrors, and crystal

Silvery light reflected by mirrors

Shapes and contours weave rhythmically around upper walls and ceiling coves.

Everything seems organic, growing, and in motion.

26-3: FRANÇOIS DE CUVILLIÉS, Hall of Mirrors, the Amalienburg, Nymphenburg Palace park, Munich, Germany, early 18th century.
Pilgrimage church of 14 saints
Dynamic energy of Italian Baroque, but not its drama
Light from large windows – lightness and delicacy
More complex than Borromini’s churches
Banished all straight lines
Undulating space in continuous motion
Fluid line, floating surfaces, interwoven spaces, dematerialized masses – counterpart to intricacy of voices in Bach fugue
Dissolves boundaries among the arts
- Rococo is lighter in both color and tone than Baroque.
- *Fete galante* (amorous festival) – amusements of French high society
- Entry for admission to French Royal Academy – created a new category.
- 2 competing doctrines at French Academy: *Poussinistes* (form) and *Rubenistes* (color).
- Flemish Watteau was influenced by Rubens’ colors and open brushwork.
- Some art historians think lovers are returning from Cythera (island of eternal youth and love, sacred to Aphrodite).
- Love represented as a dance – elegant, sweet poses; poised, refined attitude, suave gentility appealed to wealthy patrons.

**26-7: ANTOINE WATTEAU, *Return from Cythera*, 1717.**

*Oil on canvas, 4’ 3” x 6’ 4”*
• Boucher replaced Watteau as premier French painter after he died at 36 from tuberculosis.
• Baroque devices – crossing diagonals, curvilinear forms; dissipated Baroque drama into sensual playfulness.
• Fragonard – best student of Boucher
• Young gentleman (work’s patron) convinced old bishop to swing sweetheart, cupid holds finger to lips – to dog?
• Resembles a stage scene for comic opera – colors and foliage reflect sensuality.

FRANÇOIS BOUCHER, Cupid a Captive, 1754. Oil on canvas, 5’ 6” x 2’ 10”.

26-9: JEAN-HONORÉ FRAGONARD, The Swing, 1766. Oil on canvas, approx. 2’ 9” x 2’ 2”.

Cue Card
Tiepolo, a Venetian, worked for patrons in Austria, Germany, Spain, as well as Italy.

- Baroque tradition of ceiling decoration, but used bright, cheerful colors and relaxed compositions of Rococo.
- Weightless figures create dark accents as they flutter through vast sunlit skies and fleecy clouds.
- Pisani family members elevated to rank of gods.
- Retains 17th century illusionism with a softer style and pictorial scheme of great elegance and grace.

**26-10: GIAMBATTISTA TIEPOLO, Apotheosis of the Pisani Family, ceiling fresco in the Villa Pisani, Stra, Italy, 1761-1762. Fresco, 77’ 1” X 44’ 3”**
The Enlightenment – Science & Technology

- Roots in 17th century Descartes and Pascal.
- While England and France were principal centers, intellectuals throughout Europe as well as Ben Franklin and Jefferson embraced principals.
- PHILOSOPHES, French intellectuals – by accumulating and spreading knowledge, humanity can advance to a happier state – “doctrine of progress” and its corollary “perfectibility of humankind.” Previous society perceived the future as inevitable – religious beliefs determined fate. Systematic and planned improvement of society continues to influence 21st century thought.
Enlightenment thinkers fostered the development of the “scientific method” and technological innovation which gave birth to the Industrial Revolution (1740s).

Wright studied painting in Birmingham, the center of the Industrial Revolution. Technological advances were recorded in his paintings of modern scientific instruments and experiments, epitomizing the notion of progress. Mechanical model of the solar system – an orrey, each planet represented by a metal orb, revolves around the sun (a lamp) at the correct relative speed. Composition is circular, echoing the orrey’s orbital design.
1st use of iron in bridge design
Darby ran his family’s cast-iron business
Fabrication of cast-iron rails and bridge elements inspired Darby to work with architect Pritchard to design the bridge.
100’ across, springing from stone piers
Center arc echoes arches of Roman aqueducts.

Prefigured the skeletal use of iron and steel in 19th century – Crystal Palace in England and Eiffel Tower in France
Cast iron is brittle, but the design has made the bridge stand effectively

France
“Natural” portraiture, painter looks directly at viewers.
Lighthearted mood is and costume echoes Rococo serpentine curve, but not frivolous.
Self-confident stance of woman whose art won her an independent role in society.
Extraordinary personal and economic independence from painting portraits of the highborn.
Married Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Le Brun, painter and art dealer. Husband's great-great-uncle – Charles Le Brun, 1st Director of French Academy under Louis XIV.
Admission of Vigée Le Brun to the Royal Academy was first opposed – husband was an art dealer, but overruled by Louis XVI – Marie Antoinette put considerable pressure on him on behalf of her portraitist.
Color and style while serving as the portrait painter to Marie Antoinette, is purely Rococo.

Vigée Le Brun would paint more than thirty portraits of the queen and her family, leading to her being commonly viewed as the official portraitist of Marie Antoinette.

After Revolution, membership to Royal Academy was rescinded because they no longer accepted women.

Continued success due to talent, wit, and ability to forge connections with those in power during the post-revolutionary period.

ÉLISABETH-LOUISE VIGÉE-LEBRUN, Marie Antoinette and Her Children, 1787. Oil on canvas, 9’ X 7’
England
Great age of English satirical writing – Hogarth translated into visual arts.

Traditionally Britain imported painters from the Continent – Holbein, Rubens, and VanDyck.

Series of 6 narrative paintings – like chapters in books/scenes in plays, later made into engravings; satirizing marital immoralities of moneyed classes.

Viscount is married to merchant class woman because of her wealth.

Woman’s lacy cap in pocket, steward with unpaid bills, curtained canvas, knickknacks on mantle

Democratization of knowledge and culture Enlightenment fostered – printing technologies – more affordable, widely disseminated visual culture.

26-17: WILLIAM HOGARTH, Breakfast Scene, Marriage à la Mode, 1745. Oil on canvas, 2’ 4” x 3’.
The English Grand Manner Portrait

- Blend of “naturalistic” representation and Rococo setting similar to Watteau’s *Pilgrimage to Cythera* – soft-hued light and feathery brushwork.
- Match natural, unspoiled beauty of landscape with sitter.
- Clear “English complexion” and genuine sweetness contrast to lively sophistication of Rococo subjects.
- Planned to add sheep, but did not live long enough.
- Began career as landscape artist, preferred scenes of nature to portraits.

26-18: THOMAS GAINSBOROUGH, Mrs. Richard Brinsley Sheridan, 1787.
Oil on canvas, 7’ 3” x 5’ 1”.

Cue Card
Jonathan Buttall – son of successful hardware merchant, a close friend of the artist.

Executed during Gainsborough's extended stay in Bath before he finally settled in London in 1774.

Costume dates from ca. 140 years earlier. Familiar through the portraits of the great Flemish painter, Anthony van Dyck (1559-1641), a resident in England during the early 17th century, who painted *Charles I in the Hunting Field*. Gainsborough greatly admired Van Dyck and seems to have conceived *The Blue Boy* as an act of homage to that master.

**Thomas Gainsborough**

*Jonathan Buttall: The Blue Boy* (c 1770) oil on canvas, 5’ 11” x 4’ 1” inches
More heroic – modern military hero, yet “natural” emotion and realism.
- Enlightenment concept of “nobility,” according to Rousseau, referred to character, not aristocratic birth.
- Pre-revolutionary virtues of courage and resolution, patriotism and self-sacrifice.
- *Grand Manner portraiture* – key participants in great events, later 18th century. Elevated sitters – grace and class with standard conventions: large scale of figure, controlled pose, landscape setting, low horizon line.
- Officer, commandant of fortress at Gibraltar – defended against Spanish & French. Key to fortress – victory symbol
- Dramatic pose and setting convey heroic themes of battle, courage, and patriotism.

26-19: SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS, *Lord Heathfield*, 1787. Oil on canvas, 4’ 8” x 3’ 9”.
Not a resident but a pavilion
Boyle: amateur architect
Kent: interior and garden designer
Appeal of Neoclassicism and popularity of Greek and Roman culture – morality, rationality, integrity and connection to political systems ranging from Athenian democracy to Roman imperial rule.
Clarity and simplicity stark contrast to opulence of Baroque art and architecture associated with flamboyant rule of absolute monarchy.
Chiswick House variation of Palladio’s Villa Rotonda within informal gardens – charming irregularity of layout and uncropped foliage mitigate severity and rationality of architecture.
Interiors more closely related to Rococo decoration of brilliant color
Baroque tradition lingers in the double staircase that changes view as it ascends.

“Naturalness” was also sought in landscape painting.

Growing travel opportunities and expanding colonialism; Grand Tour (a “pilgrimage” of aristocrats) of major sites of Europe—especially Italy, was part of every well-bred person’s education.

English artists Joseph Wright of Derby and J.M. W. Turner undertook Grand Tours.

Enlightenment made knowledge of ancient Rome and Greece imperative—revived interest in classicism and popularity of Neoclassical art drove the fascination.

Return with souvenirs to remember experience and impress those at home.

English avid collectors of travel pictures—vedute (scenic views), often by Canaletto who made drawings on location with a camera obscura (as did Vermeer).
Basin of San Marco from San Giorgio Maggiore

Grand Tour

Antonio Canaletto
Excavations in 1738 and 1728, respectively – eruption of Mount Vesuvius in August 79 CE buried both cities; able to reconstruct Roman art and life.

Roman finds quickly came available to a wide public and “Pompeian” style became the range in England.

New Neoclassical style almost entirely displaced Rococo in wealthy homes after midcentury.

Wedgwood pottery, cameos, and medallions reflected Neoclassical taste, vases based on what were then thought to be Etruscan vases (actually were Greek vases deposited in Etruscan tombs).

Enlightenment’s emphasis on classical art, architecture, and culture because of its rationality, harmony, model of enlightened political organization: traditions of liberty, civic virtue, morality, and sacrifice – provided ideal models during period of political upheaval of French and American Revolutions.
Cue Card

ANGELICA KAUFFMANN,
Cornelia Presenting Her Children as Her Treasures, or Mother of the Gracchi, ca. 1785.
Oil on canvas, 3’ 4” x 4’ 2”.

- Angelica Kauffman, born in Switzerland, trained in Italy, productive years in England – founding member of British Royal Academy.
- Story and setting is Roman, with figures before an Italianate background.

Models in Roman garb, statuesque poses in Roman interiors – simplicity and firmness of low-relief carving.
Visitor shows off jewelry and insisted Cornelia show hers; instead Cornelia brought her sons forward - A truly noble woman places her children above material possessions.
- Enlightenment belief – art should have a moral
- Story from pre-Republican Rome – Pierre Corneille (1606 – 1684) had retold in a play performed in Paris several years earlier.
- Leaders of warring Rome and Alba to resolve conflicts using representatives from each side – Romans chose Horatius brothers who had to face Curatius sons from Alba.
- Intermarriage between families source of anguish and sorrow for women.
- **Exemplum Virtutis**: a painting that tells a moral tale for the viewer.

- Swear on their swords to win or die for Rome – (Enlightenment virtues of courage, patriotism, and loyalty to a cause), oblivious of women’s emotions.
- Stage setting, figures close to foreground as ancient classical relief.
- Painted under royal patronage, not intended as revolutionary statement.
- Forms are vigorous, powerful, animated, emphatic
Neoclassical style – semiofficial voice of French Revolution.

David sided with Jacobins – radical and militant revolutionary faction.

Practicing minister of propaganda – political pageants, ceremonies with floats, costumes, and sculptural props.

Now portrayed scenes from actual Revolution to inspire & encourage forces.

Assassination of Marat – influential writer and friend of David

Charlotte Corday, member or rival political faction, stabbed him in tub (skin disease required medicinal baths)

Narrative details in foreground heighten pain and outrage – knife, wound, letter (with which Corday gained entrance).

Figure modeled on Michelangelo’s Pieta in Saint Peter’s – reference to martyrdom – new “altarpiece” for civic “religion.”

Caravaggio-like lighting

**JACQUES-LOUIS DAVID, The Death of Marat, 1793. Oil on canvas, 5’ 5” x 4’ 2”**
United States
• Hero’s death in as martyrdom with religious connotations.
• Influenced history painting well into the 19th century.

• Wolfe died nearly alone, but in the painting he is surrounded by friends and admirers
• Compositional arrangement in thirds reflects triptych and triangular units reflect Renaissance paintings
• Wolfe bathed in the pool of light; he is in the pose of Christ being taken down from the cross
• West shows the entire battle in the background of the painting; English boats unlading their cannon, cannon put in place in center, and Quebec cathedral breaking through the smoke.
Successful portrait painter in Massachusetts Bay Colony – promoted the son of a needy tobacconist into the local aristocracy.

Later emigrated to England with the urging of West.

Painted Paul Revere before he left Boston and before Revere became a hero of the revolution – silversmith by profession.

Directness and faithfulness to visual fact, taste for honesty and plainness noted by many late 18th and 19th century visitors to America.

Informality and sense of the moment similar to English and Continental portraits,

Spare style and emphasis on sitter’s down-to-earth character–American work.

**JOHN SINGLETON COPLEY, Portrait of Paul Revere, ca. 1768–1770. Oil on canvas, 2’ 11” x 2’ 4”**
New American republic adopted Neoclassicism as national architectural style.

Jefferson admired Palladio immensely and read his books.

Later when he was minister to France, studied 18th century French classical architecture and city planning, visited an ancient Roman temple at Nimes.

After his visit to Europe, completely remodeled Monticello – reminiscent of Palladio’s Villa Rotonda and Chiswick House, but used local materials – wood and brick found in Virginia.

Appears to be a one-story building with a dome, but the balustrade hides the second floor, Octagonal dome

Jefferson obsessed with saving space in his home: very narrow spiral staircases, beds in alcoves or in walls between rooms.
- Neoclassicism also preferred style for public sculpture in new American republic.
- Leading French Neoclassical sculptor was Houdon who already carved a bust of Ben Franklin when he was America’s ambassador to France.
- Sculptural equivalent of Grand Manner portrait.
- Wears contemporary garments, but references Roman Republic – “column” is a bundle of rods with ax attached, ancient Roman *fasces* – an emblem of authority (later used for Mussolini’s Fascist government)
- 13 rods symbolize original states.
- Plow behind represents Cincinnatus, early Roman Republic patrician, elected dictator during war, who resigned after victory to return to his farm.
- Society of Cincinnatus badge, founded in 1783, (under waistcoat) for officers in revolutionary army who resumed peacetime roles.
- Washington no longer holds his sword.

**JEAN-ANTOINE HOUDON,**  
**George Washington, 1788-1792. Marble, 6’ 2” high.**