

Church Architectural Styles: Neoclassicism

Neoclassicism was a widespread and influential movement in the visual arts that began in the 1760s, reached its height in the 1780s and '90s, and lasted until the 1840s and '50s.



The neoclassical style Baltimore Cathedral (completed 1821), by Benjamin Latrobe. *Left:* By Smallbones (Own work) [CC0], via Wikimedia Commons. *Right:* [photo source](#)

The Protestant Reformation had challenged the authority of the Catholic Church (and all human authority, for that matter). To Protestants, the Bible alone was authoritative and only one's subjective reading and interpretation of the Bible was required to leading a good life. Biblical literalism aside, the Protestant challenge certainly had a positive effect on history in that it stimulated individual and personal commitment to faith and it led, much more generally, to a healthy challenging of authority and assumed truths of any kind, releasing an inquisitive and adventurist view of life among the growing middle class.

Religious beliefs or moral reasoning based on faith increasingly relinquished control over economics and politics as a questioning attitude spread. The secular realm gradually freed itself from religious faith and the Church, both Catholic and Protestant.¹ Spiritual goals in life gradually became restricted to personal life, replaced in the wider world by secular and material goals.

In the 18th century the Churches were almost completely pushed aside. It was the century of the *philosophes* and *encyclopedists*: Montesquieu (1689-1755); Voltaire (1694-1778); Rousseau (1712-78) and many others. It was the *Age of the Enlightenment* (1700-1789), a time of forward looking thinkers, kings, emperors and empresses, and enlightened despots who believed, for the first time, in the possibility of material and intellectual progress. Earthly life, it was held, could progress and get better.



"The greatest single accomplishment in the effort to disseminate the ideas of the Enlightenment came with the publication of the Encyclopédie edited in France by Denis Diderot (1713-1784). The skeptical, rationalist Diderot used the Encyclopédie as a powerful propaganda weapon against Ecclesiastical authority and the superstition, conservatism, and semi-feudal social forms of the time." [quote source](#)

"Far-reaching also was the faith of the age in natural faculties of the human mind. Pure skepticism, the negation of reason, was overcome. Modern people not only ceased to fear the devil; they ceased also to fear God. They thought of God less as a Father than as a first cause of the physical universe. There was less a sense of a personal God or of man's need for saving grace. God was less the God of love; he was the inconceivably intelligent being."²

The Christian view of things was replaced with scientific theories of good and evil and secular theories of society. Christian *love* became secularized *humanitarian goodwill*³ and the good life was measured not in spiritual terms but by the progress toward a more comfortable and decent existence on earth.

The churchmen of the established Churches during the Age of Enlightenment were of a similar mind-set as the modernists: educated and sophisticated gentlemen, suspicious of religious zeal. The hierarchy of the Catholic Church had always been enthusiastic followers of scientific developments and discoveries. Of the Catholic religious orders, the Jesuits, especially, produced numerous important scientists and were responsible for many important scientific advances during the 17th through 20th centuries and, now, into the 21st century.⁴ The hierarchy of the Church had a history of separating biblical truth from scientific truth and so had no qualms about investigative thinking. Like today, much of the criticism, then, of the Church was based on a popular idea of what the Church taught rather than on the actual doctrines of the Church. The criticism leveled by some of the *philosophes* was really a reaction to the social position and influence traditionally held by the Church. It was associated with established social structures. Many churchmen came to grudgingly accept the Church's new position on the sidelines regarding economic and political matters.



Left: Baroque. Right: Neoclassical. photo: By Camille Gévaudan (Own work) [CC BY-SA 3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Not surprisingly, the emotional and dramatic late Baroque style of architecture -- associated mostly with the authoritative Catholic Church and with kings who claimed to rule by *divine right*-- fell out of favor with Enlightenment thinkers. A more restrained architectural style emerged that reflected the progressive spirit of the Enlightenment. Ironically, it was the *ancient* style of classical Greece and Rome that became the face of *modern* thinking. The historical period of ancient Greece is often called the *Age of Reason* for it was the age of the first philosophers and the birth of *reasonable* thinking. And, just as the *philosophes* believed Reason should guide individuals and society, it was thought by the neoclassicists that Reason should also direct artistic creation.

And, so, neoclassical architects retired the dramatic, unique, and emotional of the Baroque in favor of a style that expressed logical, rational organization. It did not seem to celebrate the established institutions like the Church or the monarchy, as the Baroque had done, but rather seemed to celebrate a *way of thinking* that promoted usefulness and reasoned progress.



Saint Isaac Cathedral, Saint Petersburg, Russia. photo: By Alex Florstein [CC BY-SA 3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>) or GFDL (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Neoclassical churches (and secular buildings), therefore, often look exactly like ancient Greek temples, faithful in general appearance as well as details. The Greek porch -- consisting of steps, columns, classical entablatures and triangular pediments-- predominates. While ancient models were certainly very much involved, the style could

also be regarded as a revival of the Renaissance ⁶ style and so Renaissance style domes were also popular. The *ancients'* concern for proportion is expressed in the neoclassical style. The sculptural curves and dramatic lighting of Baroque architecture was rejected in favor of a return to a basic geometric style. The neoclassical style emphasizes the flat wall as opposed to the sculptural Baroque style of undulating surfaces. Curves gave way to verticals and horizontals. Neoclassical is minimalist in contrast to the late Baroque style.



St. Anna church (1786), Warsaw, Poland. photo: By Alina Zienowicz Ala z (Own work) [CC BY-SA 3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons.

But the neoclassical style also appealed to the more traditional thinkers who prized order, and social control; those who prized an orderly, stable society –the traditional ordering of social classes and governance.

“Neoclassical thinkers (of a more *established order* bent) could use the past as a guide for the present because they assumed that human nature was constant--essentially the same regardless of time and place. Art, they believed, should express this essential nature... If human nature has remained constant over the centuries, it is unlikely that any startling new discoveries will be made. Hence neoclassical artists did not strive to be original so much as to express old truths in a newly effective way... “⁷

Clearly the popularity of the neoclassical style among both progressives and traditionalists is an indication of the divergent and inconsistent thinking prevalent in the 18th and 19th centuries.

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¹ Most Protestant Churches actually became far more authoritarian than the Catholic Church had ever been.

² Palmer, R. R., *A History of the Modern World*, second edition, (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), p 290

³ Palmer 299

⁴ From [wikipedia](#) " The Jesuits have made numerous significant contributions to the development of science. For example, the Jesuits have dedicated significant study to earthquakes, and [seismology](#) has been described as "the Jesuit science".^[75] The Jesuits have been described as "the single most important contributor to experimental physics in the seventeenth century".^[76] According to [Jonathan Wright](#) in his book *God's Soldiers*, by the eighteenth century the Jesuits had "contributed to the development of pendulum clocks, pantographs, barometers, reflecting telescopes and microscopes, to scientific fields as various as magnetism, optics and electricity. They observed, in some cases before anyone else, the colored bands on [Jupiter](#)'s surface, the Andromeda nebula and Saturn's rings. They theorized about the circulation of the blood (independently of [Harvey](#)), the theoretical possibility of flight, the way the moon affected the tides, and the wave-like nature of light."^[77] The [Jesuit China missions](#) of the 16th and 17th centuries introduced Western science and astronomy, then undergoing its own revolution, to China. One modern historian writes that in late Ming courts, the Jesuits were "regarded as impressive especially for their knowledge of astronomy, calendar-making, mathematics, hydraulics, and geography".^[78] The Society of Jesus introduced, according to [Thomas Woods](#), "a substantial body of scientific knowledge and a vast array of mental tools for understanding the physical universe, including the Euclidean geometry that made planetary motion comprehensible".^[79] Another expert quoted by Woods said the scientific revolution brought by the Jesuits coincided with a time when science was at a very low level in China.

⁵ Late Baroque was called *Rococo*; a more jocular, florid, and graceful approach to the Baroque. The style was ornate consisting of asymmetrical designs, curves, and gold. The Rococo was considered by neoclassicists as melodramatic and flamboyant and frivolously decorative –not serious. Unlike the political Baroque, the Rococo often had playful and witty themes.



photo: Bernie

⁶ Renaissance: “rebirth” of classical learning

⁷ <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/neocl.html>