CLASSICAL PRESENCES

General Editors

JORNA HARDWICK, JAMES I. PORTER
CLASSICAL PRESENSES

Attempts to receive the texts, images, and material culture of ancient Greece and Rome inevitably run the risk of appropriating the past in order to authenticate the present. Exploring the ways in which the classical past has been mapped over the centuries allows us to trace the avowal and disavowal of values and identities, old and new. Classical Presences brings the latest scholarship to bear on the contexts, theory, and practice of such use, and abuse, of the classical past.
The Living Death of Antiquity

Neoclassical Aesthetics

WILLIAM FITZGERALD
To Paul Boghossian
The subject of this book, outside my usual research area, took me by surprise and would not let go. A Major Research Fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust made it possible for me to write the book, and I am profoundly grateful. The fellowship enabled me to spend two years (2016–18) researching an area that was relatively new to me and writing a book that required an extended period of sustained immersion. Very few funding bodies would have supported a project in a field where I had little track record and which must have looked quite risky.

The writings of James Porter, one of the editors of Classical Presences, have been a constant inspiration and provocation, as the reader will readily see. I was lucky to meet Cora Gilroy-Ware just as I was coming to the end of the writing process and had the benefit of discussing it with her, and of reading an advance text of her splendid book The Classical Body in Romantic Britain. Catharine Edwards, Michael Silk, and Roger Parker all read parts of this book and gave valuable advice. Audiences at King’s College London, Heidelberg, Athens, Budapest, Exeter, Oxford, and Cambridge heard and commented on earlier versions of parts of this book, and the anonymous readers for OUP gave me important pointers for my final revisions. My special thanks to the team at OUP: Charlotte Loveridge, who took the project under her wing from its earliest stages; Henry Clarke, the project editor, who dealt with the tricky business of illustrations; Hilary Walford, the eagle-eyed and indefatigable copy editor, and Vaishnavi Subramanyam, who patiently oversaw the production of the book.

Page duBois, Fred Dolan, Tony Curzon Price, and Selina and Jane O’Grady were, as always, friends who took a generous interest in my work. My wife, Kathy O’Shaughnessy, engaged on a demanding project herself, was supportive and encouraging throughout, and helped me to explain why I think that neoclassicism is interesting. Finally, Paul Boghossian, the dedicatee, has been an inspiring and treasured friend for forty years. His philosophical acumen and insight on aesthetic matters have stimulated my thinking on all of the many subjects we have discussed over the years.
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1
Why Neoclassicism?

Surrounded by ancient statues . . . the observers themselves become alive and purely human.

(Goethe)

Vague white things . . . all alike

(Vernon Lee)

Mixed Feelings

One of the more important household products of my youth (1960s) was the detergent Ajax. Cans of Ajax featured in most bathrooms and under sinks, its white powder a familiar sight wherever dirt was stubborn. Ajax, introduced by Colgate Palmolive in 1947, was in its heyday in the Sixties. The name was a canny choice, combining a high-cultural reference with the -x ending that signified novelty, technology, and modernity (aertex, x-rated films, x-rays, and so on). Ajax was advertised as ‘tougher than dirt’, assimilating the heroic strength of a Greek warrior to its scouring efficiency. Any reader of Homer’s Iliad would remember that Ajax was not the most glamorous of Greek heroes, but stubborn, persistent, reliable; in fact, everything you would want from a household detergent. But most users of Ajax had probably not read Homer, and the name functioned as a vague aura of antiquity dignifying the banal domestic task; Latin and Greek had become traditional for the names of commercial products. Though, as a schoolboy, I was learning about the ancient world and its languages, the classical reference remained subliminal, not really noticed because part of the texture of everyday life. It took some time for me to replace the generic reference to antiquity with a more precise and knowing connection between the household product and the particular qualities of this Greek hero, a connection that was probably aimed over the heads of the intended clientele.¹ The name ‘Ajax’ hovered between an arcane, elitist

¹ Clearly the Homeric reference was not expected to conjure up anything too specific, as the can also featured the image of a knight on a white horse. Later the slogan ‘Stronger than grease [Greece!]’ was added to the packaging of Ajax.
joke and a vague aura of distinction, the specific and the generalized. If the very sound of Ajax bleach evoked scrubbing and scouring, these images are not incompatible with the equally banal and everyday presence of classicism in our environment.

I begin with Ajax as an example of the way classicism permeates our physical and mental environments as a kind of mood music, or musack, present but not really noticed. As a way in to the phenomenon of neoclassicism in the sense that I will be using that word, it reminds us incidentally that what is usually referred to in art history as the neoclassical period (approximately 1750–1830) saw classical art and motifs beginning to be mass produced in semi-precious objects for a broad consumership, through which antiquity was brought into the home. A cleansing product is also not inappropriate to an artistic style so concerned with purity and whiteness.

If childhood memories of Ajax bleach are part of the deep background to this book, it was more directly inspired by curiosity about my reaction to certain classicizing works of art. I had seen John Flaxman’s outline illustrations of Homer from his 1805 Iliad (see Fig. 2.4) in musty books and was both repelled and fascinated by the world they created. It took some time for me to realize that these drawings were the work of a particular artist, rather than a communal shorthand signifying the remoteness and classicalness of the classical world, just boring enough to command respect. Flaxman, it seemed to me, did not try to imagine these Homeric scenes, to bring them to visual life in the way that Victorians such as Frederic Leighton or Lawrence Alma-Tadema might have done. His outline drawings give us bodiless, bloodless figures set in an indeterminate space and say ‘You know the rest’. They point to an idea of the classical as what survives across the millennia by virtue of the exclusion of anything incidental, characterizing, or interesting. It is an idea that we are assumed to share but that offers us little beyond the satisfaction of that sharing. So, at any rate, it seemed to me. But there was something else in these illustrations that drew me in rather than repelling me. If Flaxman was not making these scenes come forward as events, dramas, or even scenes, there was a point at which the removal of any setting or environment tipped over into the imagining of an other space, corresponding to words such as ‘aether’ and ‘empyrean’, words that I had always found empty, resonant because hollow. But Flaxman seemed to offer the challenge of entering that emptiness. It was frightening in the same way that thoughts of being lost in space can be frightening, but also thrilling.

Canova’s sculptures inspired similarly mixed feelings, though of a different kind, best summed up in Mario Praz’s brilliant characterization of Canova’s
‘erotic frigidaire’.² The allusion to a modern household appliance captures the way that Canova’s classical figures seem artificially preserved, kept fresh and glistening. Even the Frenchifying suffix supplies a nice parallel to the veneer of antiquity that caresses Canova’s figures. But it is the conjunction of the erotic and the frigid, prompting an ambiguous shiver, that seems to hit the nail on the head. One thinks of Horace’s Glycera, ‘splendentem marmore purius’ (‘shining more brightly than marble’, c.1.19.6), whom Horace describes as ‘lubricus aspici’ (‘slippery to look at’). Canova’s lubricated marble seems to reverse the usual cliché that a sculptor turns marble into flesh. Like Horace’s Glycera, Canova’s Three Graces (see Figs 3.1 and 3.2) are flesh made marble, as though seeking to persuade us that marble is the state to which flesh aspires. Marble itself seems to bestow distinction on these figures, a perfect analogue, in its superficial trust in referentiality, to the craven deference that disturbs many of neoclassicism’s detractors. Like Flaxman, Canova invites us into a strange in-between world, and his funerary monuments seem to have found the right setting for his classicizing sculpture. Is the stately procession of white figures into a dark portal cut into a huge, white pyramid a comforting promise of rest or a terrifying confrontation with nothingness?³

These mortuary thoughts about the neoclassical aesthetic were reawakened when, having begun to research the subject, I came across David Watkin’s book Thomas Hope and the Neoclassical Idea. In an epilogue Watkin wonders where today (1968) one can find decorative ensembles comparable to Thomas Hope’s neoclassical romanticism and comes up with a surprising answer. He quotes a brochure description of the Forest Lawn Cemetery in Los Angeles. Watkin’s comparison is not without irony: he was writing shortly after Evelyn Waugh’s ruthless satire on Forest Lawn (The Loved One) was filmed in 1965. And yet I do not think that his comparison is entirely satirical. My own visit to Forest Lawn inspired much the same combination of attraction and repulsion that I experienced with Flaxman and Canova. The immaculate sloping lawns, the white gravestones set flat into the ground, and the ubiquitous white, classicizing statuary, all bathed in the liquid light of southern California, while the modern city shimmers in the distance, make this an uncanny place. Forest Lawn is dedicated to giving the impression that the loved one

² Praz (1957). According to Praz himself, it was the editor of Art News, Thomas Hess, who gave the title ‘Canova, or the Erotic Frigidaire’ to his article, without the author’s permission (Praz 1969). Hess may have been alluding to Cesare Brandi’s description of neoclassical sculpture groups such as Canova’s Hercules and Lichas as ‘meat in a frigidaire’ (quoted by Praz in Council of Europe et al. 1972: p. xcii).

³ I am thinking of the tomb of Canova in the Frari church in Venice, erected by Canova’s students, after his own plans for a monument to Titian.
has been subsumed into a timeless, unchanging zone where the living and dead together breathe a rarefied air emanating from white statues and green lawns. It both attracts and repels by virtue of its ability to put us under another sky, a place where the inessential drops away in its squeaky-clean emptiness, epitomizing all the problems of making the afterlife, even in its 'heavenly' form, an attractive rather than a scary prospect. The feeling of emptiness in the preternaturally tidy expanses where the living commune with the dead might be an image of the living death of antiquity that is, so I thought, the neoclassical. In this environment one’s thoughts are supposed to be elevated by the presence of great works of art and the unbroken tranquillity of the environment, but elevated to what? If nothing comes to mind, whose fault is that? The question no doubt contributes to making neoclassical art so disturbing.

I do not know whether David Watkin had visited Forest Lawn; if he had, his reactions might have been more like Evelyn Waugh’s than my own. Perhaps his primary focus for the comparison with Thomas Hope was the picturesque eclecticism displayed in the brochure’s description of the abundance of ‘classy’ monuments and the architectures of different periods, assumed to be compatible, rather like steak and lobster, by virtue of their common classiness. But his connection between neoclassicism and a Californian cemetery echoes a common topos of neoclassicism’s denigrators and enthusiasts alike, its deathly aura.⁴ In this common reaction, the classicizer’s aspiration to find the ancient world eternally alive has been inverted to produce a realm of the living dead. The neoclassical, for its detractors, is the antiquity that will not die, but will not come alive either. And there is a certain attraction to the chilly region that it requires us to inhabit, to the feeling that we may be stranded between an artwork that does not let us in and the world to which it refers but does not conjure up.

Flaxman and Canova are each the focus of a chapter of this book. But my reflection on neoclassicism will focus not only on works produced during the period of art history often referred to as ‘neoclassical’, but also more broadly on works inspired by a particular idea of the classical, which reaches its apogee

⁴ We will encounter many examples of this topos, but a representative sample might be: '[Winckelmann’s] “still grandeur” could be something else—the stillness of an imperturbable calm that might be inanimate or inhuman, perhaps the stillness of death’ (Potts 1994: 2). “The word classical has a chilling quality for us…” “Classical art” appears to us as the eternally dead, the eternally ancient, the fruit of academies, a product of doctrine, not of life’ (Heinrich Wölflin, in the introduction to his Classic Art, quoted by Porter 2006a: 16). “That high indifference to the outward, that impassivity, has already a touch of the corpse in it” (Walter Pater on Winckelmann, in Pater 1980: 166). ‘Neo-classicism is a deadly style: it has a lethal quality, and nearly all of its productions bear, somewhere on their surface, the marks of death’ (Bryson 2009: 30). Finally, Kandinsky’s remark that a neoclassical work resembles ‘a stillborn child’ (quoted by Irwin 1966: 29, without details).
in that period. The ‘white’ classicism of that idea is not confined to the period of neoclassicism, and I will stretch the term to include later, and earlier, works informed by that aesthetic. I came across the Horatian Études latines of the French Parnassian poet Charles Leconte de Lisle (1818–94), the focus of Chapter 3, in a roundabout way, as the text of Reynaldo Hahn’s vocal settings (1901). My first reaction to Leconte de Lisle’s poems (not to Hahn’s beautiful settings) was to be appalled by what he had done to Horace’s odes: with uncanny precision, he had leached out everything that made Horace interesting, not to say great. The vocabulary and clichés of the ancient drinking-loving complex, filled out with a liberal sprinkling of ancient names, of Lydias and Falernians, were paraded, it seemed, for the sake of the parade. Where was the irony, the variegated sparkle of Horace’s verbal surface? No wonder nobody reads the French Parnassian poets any longer; they seem to have stranded themselves on Mount Parnassus. What did Leconte de Lisle think he was doing, in 1852, by rehearsing these clichés without making anything new of them? The very deadpan of his delivery began to fascinate me. What is the aesthetic of these poems, so resolutely anachronistic? How can we read them today?

The latter is a question that many would find uninteresting or pointless. After all, what is at stake in asking it? These are interesting historical specimens at most; as poetry, they are dead letters. One reason why they might become interesting to us, I suggest, is that their aesthetic speaks to us now as the mode of classical antiquity’s survival as a dead letter. It is an aesthetic unique to that circumstance. Not that antiquity survives for us only as a dead letter. The extraordinary life of Greek tragedy in contemporary theatre, film, opera, and fiction is testimony to antiquity’s continuing vitality, energy, and relevance. Reception studies, now the dominant line of research in the field of Classics, has plenty of material from the modern and postmodern worlds to demonstrate the vigorous survival of ancient culture as prototype and inspiration, or at the very least as alibi.⁵ Scholarship has reoriented our interest in the ancient world about values that are more relevant to contemporary concerns than those appreciated by Winckelmann. But the values and qualities that neoclassicists saw in the products of (mainly Greek) antiquity live on alongside our new antiquity as its abject—rejected and disavowed, but not quite evacuated. And the neoclassical lives on also as a physical presence that

⁵ To take but one example, the exhibition The Classical Now held at King’s College London in 2018 was testimony to the continuing vitality of ancient art for modern artists. See Squire, Cahill, and Allen (2018).
whats the meaning of the word 'classical chic'? I think the meaning is that when people expose their bodies they show they are goddess. 

I have resisted this neoclassical version of antiquity, and not only as a classicist. How can these figures speak to my humanity? The 'nobility' of the (neo)classical ideal has become an embarrassment from which the profession of Classics has been keen to distance itself, rejecting the word 'classical' as the name of an attitude, a claim that whatever is denoted by this adjective is exemplary, definitive, and worthy of unquestioning reverence. It is not surprising that classical scholars are keen to disavow this implication of their subject, but, as James Porter points out, 'simply by promoting their studies and confirming their reach, classicists are unwitting classicizers.' Why pore over these texts and material remains yet again? Why preserve, reannotate, re-edit, or reinterpret them? One answer to this question continues to be that we seek to take them out of the hands of the classicizers, to dissolve the authority of a rigidified 'classical' culture. At times it can seem as though the neoclassical version of antiquity is being kept on life support so that scholarship can, repeatedly, pull the plug on it.
But this book would not have been written if my distaste for neoclassicism had not given way to fascination, and fascination to something like love, or rather if all three reactions had not been compounded into something that I hope is rich and is certainly strange. Nor would it have been written without the knowledge that I am not alone in this compound of feelings, and the suspicion that it tells us something important about the mode of antiquity’s survival in our (sub)consciousness. If neoclassical art demands that its audience invest belief and emotion in a particular idea of the Classical in order to see what it has to offer, what is left, and what emerges, when we can no longer do that?

My question is relevant not only to neoclassicism and its ancient inspiration. John Wood has this to say about the figurative work of Gerhard Richter:

This [Richter’s statement that his figurative work had something of the status of a wish] seems to allude to both the inaccessibility and the ever-presentness of the classical genres to us. We can never inhabit the world which produced the convincing memento mori, the vanitas. But the works themselves, both in themselves and in reproduction, do live on into our world, almost as reminders of what it is that we have lost. Their particular sense of the combination of the material and the spiritual must forever remain outside of us, but that such a sense existed can be ours. When he paints a candle or a skull, Richter neither offers a convincing representation of the fear of death nor simply abrogates modernism’s evacuation of the genres. By a process resembling subtraction, he represents our culture’s silence, its lack of resources for certain types of representation. It is the present that is being painted, but it is a historic present, shadowed by a past it cannot feel, but which yet remains the only measure of our limitations.¹⁰

A similar observation is made by Michael Silk et al., a propos Tennyson’s poems on classical themes: “The past is painfully lost—but a harmonious version of its idiom prevails?”¹¹ The question mark is telling.

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⁹ To anticipate the question ‘Who is this “us”?’, which will arise here or later in some readers’ minds, I use the word in both a referential and a proleptic, or persuasive, sense. Referentially, it includes all for whom my characterization of and response to neoclassicism has some resonance, and proleptically it invites you to explore with me that part of your relation to the ancient world that so resonates (‘Let’s see!’). Where I use it simply to refer to ‘our’ modernity, it will be clear.


¹¹ Silk, Gildenhard, and Barrow (2014: 425–6).
What is (N/n)eoclassicism?

My subject is neoclassicism, understood both in a broad and in a narrower sense (with a capital N and without, as it were, though I will use a lower-case n throughout). While two of my chapters deal with important figures in the period known to art historians, with more or less reluctance, as neoclassical, the other two lie outside its range, which is roughly 1750–1830. The term neoclassicism is elastic, denoting not only the period of the dominance of a particular aesthetic style in one medium or other, but also, more broadly, forms of anachronism that refer to the ancient world as to a timeless standard that can or should still hold for the present. This book will be concerned with a subset of the range of phenomena that have, at one time or another, been known as neoclassical.¹² More particularly, ‘neoclassical’ in the sense I will use it refers to the valuing of certain qualities attributed to classical culture, qualities summed up in Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s canonical formula ‘noble simplicity and tranquil grandeur’ (‘edle Einfalt und stille Grösse’, discussed later in this chapter). In its vaguer, common usage the term neoclassicism often has a negative charge. I include this negative charge because it puts at issue, and indeed expresses, the feeling that the ancient world is no longer exemplary for us.

In the lapse of time, the products of the neoclassical period’s enthusiastic idealization of the ancient world have come to elicit yawns at what often seems their dutiful referencing of the ancient world as an object of respect. Simon Goldhill remarks on the fading reputation of Gluck’s neoclassical operas, once revolutionary and powerfully affecting, in the face of the very different associations that Greek tragedy had come to have by the early twentieth century. When Gluck’s Orfeo ed Euridice (premiere 1762) shared the London stage with Richard Strauss’s then new Elektra (premiere 1909), the changed expectations of ancient Greek tragedy were plain: ‘Gluck was seen, in Britain at least, as epitomizing a rather boring, idealized view of the ancient world: white

¹² The term ‘neoclassicism’ is also used to refer to the period of Pope and Dryden in English literature, and in this usage it denotes a classicism invested in rules and norms supposedly derived from ancient sources, particularly Aristotle and Horace, via French ‘classical’ criticism, as epitomized by Nicolas Boileau’s L’Art poétique (1674). See Wellek (1965: 105–11) for the history of this use of the term, and Hopkins and Martindale (2012: 12–17) for a brief, critical account of ‘Neoclassical’ and ‘Augustan’ as periodizing terms for literature of the period 1660–1740. ‘Neoclassicism’ is a term also used of tendencies in the arts, and particularly music, in the aftermath of the First World War. I will address aspects of ‘Augustan’ neoclassicism in Chapter 2, which discusses Pope’s translation of the Iliad, and of early twentieth-century neoclassicism in Chapter 5, on Satie’s Socrate. Beyer (2011: 7) notes the usefulness of the distinction, made in English and Italian but not in French and German, between classicism as a recurring stylistic attitude and neoclassicism as a particular Stilepoch.
sheets and columns rather than blood and incest.¹³ That shift in taste can still be felt, and the products of neoclassicism hang around, in Theodor Adorno’s words, as bric-a-brac:

Winckelmann’s ‘noble simplicity and tranquil grandeur’ received its just deserts. It was not installed as a norm, but appeared as if in a dream, not as a whole genre, but in the form of plaster busts on wardrobes in the houses of the older generation, individual pieces of bric-a-brac andremaindered goods. In this process of individualizing a whole style into a set of monstrosities the style was destroyed. It was damaged and rendered impotent by dreams hastily cobbled together and arranged.¹⁴

The ‘remaindered goods’ of neoclassicism raise the question most acutely of what happens when we can no longer make the emotional investment that they demand of us in the idealization that prompted them. Is there a viable aesthetic residue in this outmoded vision? Since the seventies neoclassicism has been receiving a more sympathetic attention, from art historians particularly; the remaindered goods have been making their way to the auction houses, so to speak.¹⁵ While their vision of antiquity has been studied by classicists mainly (though not exclusively) to discredit or critique its ideology, a more appreciative eye has been turned on its artistic products by art historians. Both tendencies have resulted in valuable and important work from which I have benefited, as will be apparent.

The story of classical antiquity in Western culture, as Salvatore Settis has argued in The Future of the ‘Classical’, can be told in the form of a succession of rebirths. These rebirths imply, first, that something has died and, secondly, that there is a need for a renewal, or reawakening, that will come from a correct understanding of the right models from the past. The core period of neoclassicism that is my starting point is one of these rebirths. This neoclassicism is epitomized and precipitated by Winckelmann’s enthusiastic

¹³ Goldhill (2011: 90), who notes the irony that Gluck, ‘a revolutionary icon at the center of a polemical storm’, has become ‘a dull, or at best curious embodiment of a recognized but uninspiring classicism of a bygone age’.

¹⁴ Adorno (1992: 155–6); for more on Adorno’s rejection of neoclassicism, see Stierle (1984: 75–6).

¹⁵ See, e.g., Robert Rosenblum’s review of books on neoclassicism by Hugh Honour and Mario Praz in the New York Review of Books, 9 April 1970. Rosenblum welcomed the fact that, while a distaste for neoclassicism still persists, a more affirmative attitude has been growing in recent decades among art historians (his review is titled ‘Neo-Neoclassicism’). More recently, James Fenton, in a volume on Canova’s ‘ideal heads’, notes that the reaction against ‘the neo-classical aesthetic’ in the nineteenth century, persisting in the ‘allergic reaction among our parents or our teachers’, has given way to more recent reassessments of neoclassicism as a precursor to modern abstractionists such as Brancusi and Arp (Fenton 1997: 40–1).
writings on Greek art, and particularly his identification of the qualities of ‘noble simplicity and tranquil grandeur’, distilled from his reappraisal of Greek art. Winckelmann pitted these qualities against the extravagant or frivolous styles associated with the Ancien Régime, the Baroque and the Rococo. Walter Pater included a final chapter on Winckelmann in his book The Renaissance (1873) because, as he claimed, Winckelmann ‘reproduces for us the earlier sentiment of the Renaissance. On a sudden the imagination feels itself free.’¹⁶ As he had intended, Winckelmann made a decisive contribution to a revolution in taste, which was to be a moral as well as an aesthetic renewal. The missionary zeal of the writings of Winckelmann and other neoclassicists, palpable in their overheated prose, sits oddly with the cold lifelessness often attributed in later periods to neoclassical art. What was rebirth for them persists as survival for us, and neoclassicism, both as name and as phenomenon, offers a prime vantage point for studying the tension between these two modes of being so characteristic of classical antiquity’s presence.

As a periodizing term for the style that dominated the cultural scene from 1750 to 1830, neoclassicism, like most periodizing terms, has been challenged as no longer useful or accurate. Either the diversity of the art of the ‘neoclassical’ period is too great to be usefully corralled under one heading, or the term is thought to identify traits that are best understood in other contexts: Enlightenment, the rise of the discourse of aesthetics, industrialization, the expansion of the middle class, the growth of a market economy, and so on. Neoclassicism both emerged in these contexts and contributed to their development. Certainly it is simplistic to speak of an ‘Age of Neoclassicism’¹⁷ when the period concerned saw so many different cultural cross-currents, as Robert Rosenblum pointed out.¹⁸ What has been called ‘Romantic neoclassicism’, for instance (Fuseli, Blake, for instance) is very different from the strain of neoclassicism that I will be considering, as is the more Roman-inspired and decorative neoclassicism of Robert Adam.¹⁹ Elements that might be identified as Gothic, Rococo, Sentimental, or Romantic coexisted with classicizing during this period, and artists such as Raphael, Poussin, Guido Reni, and

¹⁷ The title of a gigantic and important exhibition, in 1972, sponsored by The Council of Europe and the Arts Council of Great Britain.
¹⁹ Irwin (1966: 167) on neoclassicism’s appreciation and eclectic use of the art of periods other than that of classical Greece.
Michelangelo were important mediators of antiquity for the neoclassicists.²⁰ Italian ‘primitive’ painters of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were objects of admiration and sources of inspiration for some of the same qualities as were attributed to the ancient Greeks.²¹ No doubt it would be possible to subject the historical phenomenon of neoclassicism to death by a thousand cuts, but a term is as viable as what it allows one to do, and the reader will have to decide whether what it does in this book vindicates my use of the term. I am isolating an aesthetic strain that, like all such strains, was conflated and hybridized with others. Insofar as I engage with those other strains, it will be in terms of (in)compatibilities, or of the lability to which this neoclassicism is particularly prone. My aim is not to build a total picture of a given artist, work, or period so much as to explore the aesthetic implications of a particular classicizing impulse.

National differences that affected the culture of neoclassicism in its core period prove that it was susceptible of different ideological and political inflections.²² It was, indeed, an international phenomenon: from its original forms in France, Italy, Germany, and Britain, it spread as far as St Petersburg, Philadelphia, Washington, and Sydney.²³ One of the parameters of national differences was the balance between Greek and Roman inspiration in the different cultural situations. Napoleon’s imperial neoclassicism was more Roman than Greek, as was the neoclassicism of the French revolutionaries, whereas German neoclassicism spearheaded a cultural revolution energized by philhellenism.²⁴ British neoclassicism had a symbiotic relationship with industry, an association that the more reverent philhellenism of Germany rejected.²⁵ But, whatever the different inflections of French, British, Italian, and German neoclassicism, the common matrices were the city of Rome, where representatives of the different nations met, admired the same classical

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²⁰ According to Irwin (1966: 121), Poussin was not generally appreciated in eighteenth-century England, the neoclassicists being exceptional.
²² Though she avoids the term neoclassicism, Cora Gilroy-Ware’s study (2020) of the classical body in Britain during this period distinguishes the different political implications of different approaches to that body.
²⁴ Josef Anton Koch, in 1798, expressed disillusionment with the French Revolution, which he had hoped would bring ‘Spartanische Simplicität’ (Wittstock 1975: 54).
²⁵ Hoffman (1979: 14–16) contrasting the symbiotic relationship of industry and neoclassicism in England with their polarization in Germany, where a kind of religious awe made classicism incompatible with business.
works, and visited each other’s studios, and the writings of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, resident in Rome from 1755 to 1768.²⁶

Despite criticisms of the use of the term ‘neoclassicism’ to denote a period style, I am keeping the term as a label for my subject for a number of reasons.²⁷ First, my emphasis is not exclusively on a period or national culture, but on a particular kind of classicizing aesthetic, which is most strongly associated with the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but whose characteristic attitudes and values reach both backwards and forwards; there is a modernist version of this neoclassicism, and the term has also been applied to phenomena in the ancient world itself.²⁸ I will later be examining the ancient collection of poems known as the Anacreontea as a neoclassical text. One could even make a case that Winckelmann’s canon of ‘Greek’ art itself consisted of ‘neoclassical’ copies of the Roman period. The term neoclassical, with a small n, seems the best general one for the distinctive aesthetic and relation to the classical past that I will be examining. But my other reason for using this term is that it has widespread currency, and often retains the negative force of its original uses; with this force it can be applied critically rather than historically.²⁹ I will be quoting abundantly from the repertoire of abuse that has been directed against neoclassicism, not only because to some degree or other most of us are susceptible to its burden, but because this abuse carries with it the uneasy consciousness of a relation to the ancient world haunted by the memory of its now lapsed exemplary status. In other words, the term neoclassicism concerns not only the relation between certain postclassical artworks and the ancient world, but also our judgement of that relation, and our own relation (often through neoclassicism) to the ancient world. Though half of this book will concern figures who worked in what is usually called the

²⁶ Winckelmann’s Gedanken was translated into English in 1765 (by Henry Fuseli) and 1766, though his Geschichte had to wait until 1850 for its first English translation (by Henry Lodge). French translations and resumés of Gedanken appeared within two years of its publication, and there were French translations of Geschichte in 1766 and 1781 (Pommier 1989: 10–11). Lessing’s Laocoon was more frequently translated and read, and many knew Winckelmann’s ideas through Lessing’s quotations (Østermark-Johansen 2012: 71–2). On translations of Winckelmann, see Griener (1998), and Orrells (2011) on the illustrations of Winckelmann’s tomb in French and Italian translations of History.

²⁷ Craske (1997: 9) criticizes Rosenblum (1967) for keeping the old periodizing clichés alive by acknowledging their limitations and subtly departing from them. Coltman (2006a: 6–8) on some of the lines of approach to defining the phenomenon.


²⁹ e.g., ‘Neoclassicism understood here not historically but critically, distinguishing a sclerotic from a true classical style’ (Haynes 2003: 75).
Neoclassical (with a capital N, as it were) period, the other half takes us into later, and in one case earlier, periods.³⁰

What does the prefix neo- in our term neoclassical imply?³¹ If Renaissance suggests forward-looking energy fuelled by discovery, neo-classical suggests resuscitation, repetition motivated by reverence, familiarity, and ‘an orgy of subservience to Greco-Roman antiquity’.³² It might even suggest a classicism at two removes, dependent on the previous classicism of Nicolas Poussin, for instance.³³ The prefix neo- suggests an acknowledgement of the limits of our active relationship with ancient culture, as though the present could only be a second best. Robert Rosenblum sums up the negative connotations of the term as the view that ‘Neoclassic artists were content to produce slavish and hence stillborn imitations of Greco-Roman antiquity. With retrospective nostalgia, they presumably copied a past they believed greater than the present, and were willing even to submerge their own artistic personalities in this veneration of the antique.’³⁴ Neoclassicism diverts the present into the past. It is anachronistic, like the commemorative statues that dressed up contemporaries in togas, or undressed them entirely à la grecque.³⁵ Finally, the prefix neo- implies a newness that could be seen as a vulgar imposition on antiquity: what is old becomes shiny new, the marble a gleaming white, the chairs ready to be sat on (after all, they once had a use).

³⁰ Irwin (1997: 1) distinguishes three periods: 1750–90, the period of the Grand Tour; 1790–1830, the development of a more austere style, which spreads beyond Europe; 1830 to now, in which neoclassicism survives (e.g., in Fascist architecture) without being dominant.

³¹ In German, simply Klassizismus. Bückling and Mongi-Vollmer (2013: 11) on the German terminology.

³² Vermeule (1964: 156). Similarly negative is Saisselin (1992: 20), on the Winckelmannian ideal: ‘This was not the self-imposed discipline of true classicism such as obtained in the Renaissance and the Baroque, the creation of order in the face of tendencies towards disorder, disintegration, exaggeration, multiplicity and unbounded imagination, but rather a neoclassicism requiring that certain works be imitated and imposing doctrinal standards from outside.’

³³ Michel (1989: 7), insisting that Winckelmann’s classicism was new, not neo-.

³⁴ Rosenblum (1967: 3), apropos the common juxtaposition of Joseph-Marie Vien’s painting Marchande à la toilette (1763) with an engraving of the then freshly unearthed Roman painting it imitates.

³⁵ In that connection, one might ask whether it is absurd to allow that the modern world could produce examples of heroism to be celebrated but not the language in which to celebrate them, or whether heroism removes itself to some timeless zone that can be represented only by antiquity. A lively debate arose in the late eighteenth century about whether a contemporary hero should be portrayed in modern costume rather than ancient (see Irwin 1966: 148–50, with reference to Benjamin West’s painting The Death of Wolfe of 1771, and Simson (1989) on the Kostümstreit over an equestrian statue for Fredrick the Great). Napoleon was resistant to Canova’s insistence on portraying him in heroic nudity, rather than in contemporary military dress (Johns 1998: 93–8, 104–9). In the end, Canova had his way. In the ancient world, Roman portrait statues sometimes combined realistic heads and idealized nude bodies; one that Canova might have known is the Borghese Statue héroïque, now in the Louvre. On nudity in ancient and modern art, see also Squire (2011: 115–53).
Neoclassicism was not a term used by neoclassicists of its core period. Phrases such as ‘the grand manner’, ‘the true style’, or ‘the great style’ were the usual ways of referring to what we call neoclassicism. The ‘grand style’ in painting, as recommended by Joshua Reynolds, must be purged of all signs of localism: classical historical subjects, universally available, were to be preferred. Our term neoclassicism dates back to the second half of the nineteenth century, though the earliest uses in English did not apply the term to the neoclassicism with which I will be concerned in this book, but to literature of the time of Dryden and Pope. Later (1881) it was used of Poussin, accompanied by adjectives such as ‘noble’, ‘solemn’, and ‘austere’, emphasizing the ‘sculpture-like dignity’ of the figures. In 1893 a man must be a scholar before he can make neoclassicism even tolerable in art. David Irwin sums up: ‘The prefix “neo” is used, as it has been commonly used from about 1860 onwards, with the Greek etymological meaning of a new form of some already existing—but possibly long dormant or dead—language, idea or belief.’

In spite of these connotations of the word, eighteenth-century neoclassicism, like the Renaissance, was a phenomenon given impetus by rediscovery. This was a rediscovery not of texts, as in the Renaissance, but of visual art, and specifically sculpture. For the most part the objects of this rediscovery had long been available, but they now promoted a fresh understanding of the inspirational potential of ancient Greek culture oriented around the aesthetics of its sculpture. The ancient world was now to be seen. Winckelmann’s encounter with Greek sculpture taught others how to look at it and fall in love with it. Recognizing a ne plus ultra of beauty and taste, Winckelmann raised the question of how we should respond. To put it in the words of another

36 Lilley (2012: 102).
39 Irwin (1973: 363) cites William Rushton in 1863, Afternoon Lectures on English Literature (pp. 44, 63, 72).
40 Athenaeum, no. 2783, cited by Irwin (1973: 363). As we shall see, sculptural ideals are crucial to neoclassical taste.
41 The Times, 6 May 1881, p. 17.
42 Irwin (1973: 363). Cardini (1992), relying on French and Italian material, reconsiders what he calls the communis opinio that ‘neoclassical’ was coined in the 1860s, in connection with the visual arts, and in a pejorative sense. He concludes that it was used as early as 1861 (by Baudelaire); that it was not always applied to the visual arts; and that the literary application was not always an extension of the application to the visual arts. He contests the assumption that it always had a negative sense. Cardini’s modifications of the communis opinio are useful but do not affect its basic gist.
43 Hale (1976) notes that in the second half of eighteenth and on into the early nineteenth centuries it was the sculpture, not the paintings, that attracted visitors to the Uffizi.
44 Ernst (1993: 483): the notion of ‘seeing’ the past gained currency as a result of the late eighteenth century’s proliferation of illustrations of ancient art, which began to accustom people to a visual experience soon rivaling not only the tangible antique, but also the written text.
German writer’s confrontation with Greek sculpture, ‘you must change your life’ (‘du musst dein Leben ändern’).\(^45\) A more contemporary equivalent of Rilke’s admonition would be Goethe’s famous remark about Winckelmann himself: ‘one learns nothing on reading him, but one becomes something.’\(^46\)

Far from being reactionary, Winckelmann’s classicism was a revolutionary liberation from the more literary, seventeenth-century ‘neoclassicism’ dominated by rules supposedly derived, mainly by French authors, from the ancients.\(^47\) Once again, Goethe encapsulated the more immediate and personalized relation to the ancient world that Winckelmann’s writings had encouraged when he said ‘let each be a Greek in his own way, but let him be that’.\(^48\)

Winckelmann’s antiquity was decidedly Greek. The eighteenth century had seen a broad shift from generalized admiration of the ancients to a distinction between Greek and Roman, with a preference for Greece towards the end of the century.\(^49\) The subjects of surviving ancient sculpture, hitherto often assumed to be exemplary Roman figures, were increasingly reidentified (more correctly) as figures from Greek myth. To match the excavations at Herculaneum (1738) and Pompeii (1748), and the publications that resulted, Hellenic antiquity was brought to the fore by James Stuart and Nicholas Revett’s expedition to Athens in 1751, funded by the Society of Dilettanti (founded 1734), an expedition that produced the influential volumes of *The Antiquities of Athens*.\(^50\) Greek architecture was being rediscovered and reassessed, and in particular the Doric order, which was to become the emblem of the ‘Greek Revival’.\(^51\) Stark, ‘primitive’, and severe, the Doric order could be seen without visiting Greece in the temples at Paestum.\(^52\) In 1787, Goethe, on his way to Sicily, found the ruins at Paestum ‘offensive and

\(^{45}\) The last words of Rainer Maria Rilke’s poem ‘Archaische Torso Apolls’, on which more later in this chapter.

\(^{46}\) ‘Man lernt nichts, wenn man ihn liest, aber man *wird* etwas’ (Eckermann 1984: 208; Friday, 6 February 1827).

\(^{47}\) See Bell (2015: 44) for Winckelmann’s liberating effect, shifting the influence of antiquity from a chain of imitation or the following of rules in favour of the individual’s inspiration to emulate the products of a cultural moment.

\(^{48}\) ‘Jeder sei auf seiner Art ein Grieche, aber er sei’s’ (*Antik und Modern*, 1818; Goethe 1994: 176), identifying Greek clarity and serenity (‘die Klarheit der Ansicht, die Heiterkeit der Aufnahme’) as the appropriate objects of our enthusiasm.


\(^{50}\) First volume 1762; second volume, with detailed drawings of the Parthenon, 1787.

\(^{51}\) The term ‘Greek Revival’ was first used by Charles Cockerell in 1842 to denote a classicism based on the Ionic and Doric orders, rather than the Corinthian columns prevalent in ancient Rome. See Jenkyns (1991: 51–4) on the rise of the Ionic and Doric orders.

even terrifying’, but on his return, after steeping himself in the ‘primitive’ beauties of Homer’s poetry, he returned to Paestum and was converted.⁵³

So the shift to a reverence for antiquity focused on Greece rather than Rome was also a shift towards an austere and ‘primitive’ aesthetic, epitomized by the new taste for the Doric order.⁵⁴ Along with this shift in taste went the promise that learning to appreciate the art of antiquity was an ethical exercise that would inculcate a ‘noble’ cast of mind.⁵⁵ The ascetic strain in neoclassicism was bound up with reform: public taste was to be improved.⁵⁶ The Baroque and Rococo of the Ancien Régime, legitimated often through associations with ancient Roman culture, was charged with decadence. It was time to regenerate modern culture by reconnecting with what is essential, simple, and whole. German classicism, particularly, was concerned with the educative potential of antiquity to heal the fragmented and divided nature of the modern condition with visions of wholeness and unity.

**Winckelmann**

The publication of Winckelmann’s *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerey und Bildhauerkunst* (*Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture*) in 1755 is as good a starting point as any for neoclassicism as a historical phenomenon. Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–68) was the son of a Prussian cobbler who, by virtue of his scholarly work on Greek art, rose to be the librarian of Cardinal Albani and prefect of antiquities for the Vatican. From 1755 to his death in 1768 he lived in Rome. But Winckelmann was state librarian in Dresden, and had still not visited Rome, when he made his hugely influential statement, in the *Gedanken*, that Greek sculpture displays ‘eine edle Einfalt und eine stille Grösse’ (‘a noble simplicity and a tranquil greatness’). He saw these characteristics not only in Greek sculpture but also in ‘Greek writings of the best

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⁵³ Jenkyns (1991: 51). Flaxman visited Paestum in 1788 and said of the temples: ‘The simple greatness of their effect elevated and delighted my mind more than all the architecture I have seen in Italy.’ The Baroque churches of Naples, by contrast, he thought were ‘in bad taste’ (Irwin 1979: 45).

⁵⁴ A more Roman, and less ascetic, classicism continued to be championed, most notably by Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–78) and Robert Adam (1728–92). Adam’s decorative schemes featured heavily in British neoclassical domestic spaces.

⁵⁵ Bell (2015: 40–1) quotes Schiller on the moral effect of contemplating a cast of the Belvedere Torso in the Mannheim Antikensaal (founded 1769). Schiller celebrates the moral character of the German response to antiquity, and warns against bowing down to the ‘dead treasure’ of England and France, plundered from Rome.

⁵⁶ Craske (1997: 13–14) on the emerging notion of the ‘polite public’ in the second half of the eighteenth century, and pp. 23–8 on the role of art in the project of improving public taste.