

European rediscovery of Antiquity

Although the achievements of classical antiquity were not entirely forgotten in the Middle Ages, it is undeniable that the artists of the European Renaissance and later periods looked to ancient models, particularly sculpture and architecture, with fresh admiration and reverence. This was part of a general sense in these centuries that the past was superior to the present not only artistically but also intellectually and culturally. Artists and their patrons thus sought to highlight their own importance and sophistication by associating themselves with this distant past. In the meantime, regular discoveries of ancient statues and archaeological sites spurred artists, architects, and designers to ever bolder imitations and interpretations. Though these attempts to revive the accomplishments of ancient artists may often today seem more fanciful than archaeologically exact, there is no doubt about the sincerity of those who, like Raphael in the Renaissance and Nicholas Poussin in the Baroque, labored to bring to life the visual language of the long dead cultures of Greece and Rome. The zenith of the Neoclassical style occurred in the second half of the eighteenth century after the rediscoveries of the nearly intact Roman towns of Herculaneum (in 1738) and Pompeii (in 1748). The quantity and detail in those finds fueled a fad for all things ancient not only in the fine arts but in the decorative arts and fashion as well. The taste for the classical even reached America, where Thomas Jefferson's Virginia State Capitol building of 1788 in Richmond stands as one of the Neoclassical movement's chief monuments. However, despite (or perhaps because of) the ubiquity of the ancient modes, the style became seen as less serious and less relevant to modern life, notwithstanding an attempt by the French Neoclassical painter Jacques-Louis David and his followers to return to a more severe and less frivolous style. Yet over exposure had effectively damaged the dignity of antiquity, and soon after, in the early 19th century, Romantic artists sought to replace the challenge of the past by the challenge of the present.

KEY MOMENTS IN THE EUROPEAN REDISCOVERY OF CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

- 1471 Pope Sixtus IV installs Roman bronzes in the Palazzo dei Conservatori on the Capitoline
- 1506 Pope Julius II orders Donato Bramante to design the Belvedere for display of the Vatican's collections of antiquities, including the Apollo Belvedere and the Laocoön
- 1587 The Column of Trajan in Rome is rededicated to Saint Peter by Pope Sixtus V
- 1590s Workers accidentally discover and subsequently rebury evidence of a lost city, later excavated and identified as Pompeii
- 1631 The first modern catalog of antiquities, the *Galleria Giustiniani*, is published
- 1738 Excavations begin at Herculaneum
- 1748 Piranesi begins publication of the *Antiquities of Rome*
- 1762 Stuart and Revett's *Antiquities of Athens* is published
- 1764 Johan Joachim Winckelmann's *History of Ancient Art* is published in Germany
- 1794 Napoleon transports key Italian antiquities to Paris
- 1801–12 The Parthenon Marbles (“Elgin Marbles”) are transported to London
- 1820 The Venus de Milo is discovered
- 1870 Heinrich Schliemann begins excavating at Troy