

AMERICAN NEOCLASSICISM

The founding of the American republic coincided with the popularity of Neoclassicism. Since the ancient Roman republic seemed an apt model, the new country clothed itself in the garb of the old. It adopted Roman symbols and terms like "Senate" and "Capitol" (originally a hill in ancient Rome). For a century, official buildings in Washington were Neoclassic knock-offs.

The fact that Neoclassic became *the* style was mostly due to Thomas Jefferson, an amateur architect. He built the University of Virginia as a learning lab of Classicism. The ensemble included a Pantheon-like Rotunda and pavilions in Roman temple forms. Jefferson used Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian orders to demonstrate the various styles of architecture to students.

In sculpture, antique figures in an idealized, Classical style were also the rage. One of the most acclaimed works of the nineteenth century was Hiram Powers's "Greek Slave" (1843), a marble statue of a naked girl in chains that won international fame. Horatio Greenough applied Neoclassical doctrines less successfully. The practical American public laughed at his statue of a bewigged George Washington with a nude torso and Roman sandals.

The first American-born painter to win international acclaim was Benjamin West (1738–1820), whose work summed up the Neoclassic style. He was so famous for battle scenes that he became president of the British Royal Academy and was buried in St. Paul's Cathedral. West spent his entire career in England, and his London studio was a mandatory stop for visiting American painters.

BEGINNINGS OF AMERICAN ART. The fact that a talented American had to pursue his craft in England was due to the backward state of the arts. Most colonists were farmers, preoccupied with survival and more interested in utility than beauty. They were from working-class stock, hardly the type to commission works of art. The influence of Puritanism with its prejudice against

"graven images" meant that the church would not be a patron. There were no large buildings to adorn or great wealth to buy luxury items. Silver and furnishings showed fine craftsmanship and Federal architecture was handsome. But sculpture was practically unknown except for graveyard statuary.

The first American painters were generally self-taught portrait or



"The Peale Family," 1770–1773, New-York Historical Society.

Peale: The Leonardo of the New World. Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827) was a model Enlightenment man. A scientist as well as artist who was unfailingly curious and energetic, his list of skills and interests rivaled Leonardo's. He came to painting through craftsmanship and was a saddler, watchmaker, silversmith, and upholsterer before becoming the most fashionable portraitist in the colonies. Peale was also a Revolutionary war soldier, politician, and ingenious inventor. He conceived a new type of spectacles, porcelain false teeth, a steam bath, and a stove that consumed its own smoke. He was also first to excavate a mastodon skeleton, which he exhibited in the natural history museum he founded in Philadelphia with more than 100,000 objects. His list of firsts included the first art gallery in the colonies and the first art school.

Peale was the father of seventeen children. He named them after painters and they obliged him by becoming artists, like the portraitist Rembrandt, still-life painter Raphaelle, and artist/naturalist Titian. "The Peale Family" includes nine family members and their faithful nurse (standing with hands folded). Peale himself stoops at left holding his palette. He titled the painting on the easel "Concordia Animae" (Harmony of Souls), indicating the painting's theme.

The composition emphasizes the essential unity of the group. Although they are divided into two camps, all are linked by contact of hand or shoulder except the nurse. The figures slightly overlap, with the scattered fruit also binding the two halves. Peale suggests a visual tie by the painter's brother seated at left sketching his mother and her grandchild at right. This type of picture, or "conversation piece," was popular in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century painting. It represents perfectly the ideal of *e pluribus unum*.

Peale's most famous work is "The Staircase Group," a life-size trompe l'oeil portrait of his two sons climbing stairs with a real step at the bottom and door jamb as a frame. Peale painted the scene so convincingly that George Washington reportedly tipped his hat to the boys.

At the age of 86, the inexhaustible Peale was known to whoop down hills riding one of the first bicycles. He finally succumbed to overexertion while searching for a fourth wife.

sign painters. Their work was flat, sharply outlined, and lacking in focal point. Portraiture was, not surprisingly, the most sought-after art form, since politics stressed respect for the individual. Itinerant limners, as early painters were called, painted faceless single or group portraits in the winter and, in spring, sought customers and filled in the blanks.



Copley, "Portrait of Paul Revere," c. 1768–70, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Copley's portraits of Boston society offered sharp glimpses into his subjects' personalities.

COPLEY: THE FIRST GREAT AMERICAN PAINTER. Painting in America was considered a "useful trade like that of a Carpenter or shoe maker, not as one of the most noble Arts in the world," complained America's first painter of note, John Singleton Copley (pronounced COPP lee; 1738–1815). Despite this disrespect, the Bostonian taught himself the profession by studying anatomy books and reproductions of paintings. In his teens, he set up as a portrait painter and, by the age of 20, completely outstripped any native artist. He was the first colonial to have a work exhibited abroad. With Copley, art in America grew up.

Copley had an astonishing ability to record reality accurately. His subjects had real bulk, and he brilliantly simulated reflected light on various textures. Copley also portrayed his sitter's personality with penetrating observation. Eliminating the columns and red curtains used to dress up portraits, he concentrated on the fleeting expressions and gestures that reveal character. Although he painted his well-to-do clients' costumes in detail, he focused on the individuality of their faces, where each wrinkle suggested character.

PAINTING THE CHARACTER OF THE COLONIES. Copley's portrayal of his friend, a shirt-sleeved Paul Revere, was an innovation for its time, when a portrait never pictured manual labor. Yet Copley posed the silversmith holding a teapot he had made, his tools in clear sight. Revere had not yet taken the midnight ride that Longfellow set to verse but was already a leading opponent of British rule. His shrewd, uncompromising gaze and the informal setting without courtly trappings summed up the Revolution's call for independence.

STUART: THE FIRST DISTINCTIVE AMERICAN STYLE. Gilbert Stuart (1755–1828) was America's other great painter of the Neoclassic period. Stuart refused to follow established recipes for painting flesh, saying he would not bow to any master, but "find out what nature is for myself, and see her with my own eyes." He used all the colors to approximate flesh but without blending, which he believed made skin look muddy, like saddle leather. Something of a pre-Impressionist, Stuart made skin seem luminous, almost transparent, through quick brushstrokes rather than layered glazes. Each stroke shone through the others like blood through skin, giving a pearly brilliance to his faces. Flesh, Stuart said, is "like no other substance under heaven. It has all the gaiety of a silk mercer's shop without its gaudiness and gloss, and all the soberness of old mahogany without its sadness."

Stuart was the equivalent of court painter for the new republic. His contribution was in simplifying portraiture, discarding togas and passing gestures to emphasize timeless aspects. Stuart painted faces with such accuracy that Benjamin West said Stuart "nails the face to the canvas."



Stuart, "George Washington," (The Athenaeum Portrait), 1796, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Stuart's portraits of George Washington demonstrate how the painter went beyond the European tradition. By stripping away all nonessentials (the background was never completed), Stuart implies that greatness springs only from individual character. The portrait omits Washington's smallpox scars but hints at his endurance in the firm line of his mouth. Some have questioned whether the tightly clamped lips indicated not the fortitude to survive Valley Forge but the general's uncomfortable wooden teeth.

In any event, this image has become the most famous American portrait of all time. A victim of his own success, Stuart came to hate the job of duplicating the likeness, which he called his "hundred dollar bills." Now this national icon stares from its niche on the one-dollar bill.