

Critical Terms - Classicism

EMMA BARKER: Hello, I'm Emma Barker, Senior Lecturer in Art History at the Open University. And I specialise in 18th century French art.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: And I'm Kathleen Christian I'm also a senior lecturer at the OU and I specialise in Italian Renaissance art, particularly the reception of antiquity in Renaissance Rome.

EMMA BARKER: And today, we're going to be thinking about classicism, which is a term that crops up a lot in both in my field and in Kathleen's. But it's really a very slippery term. It's quite hard to pin down exactly what it means.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: I think first you have to distinguish between classicism and classical antiquity. So classical antiquity was a period of time between about the eighth century BC and the fifth century AD in Greece and Rome, whereas classicism is what is inspired by classical antiquity after the end of classical antiquity, looking back upon classical antiquity.

EMMA BARKER: Yes. But I think you also have to remember that classicism itself, the word, isn't actually coined until the 19th century. And since then, classicism has really come to be associated not just with the imitation of ancient art, but also with such qualities as harmony, order, proportion, balance. So it's really seen as a style equivalent to other historical styles in European art, like Gothic and Baroque. But then this is a totally different way of thinking about classicism from the way people thought about it in, really, the kind of heyday of its influence on European art between about 1500 and 1800, when it was simply the highest form of art and really seen as expressing such abstract principles as truth, reason, and goodness.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: I think there are a lot of different questions that the term classicism raises for the student of art history, for example, what does it mean in different periods? If you say that it extends over these centuries, what does classicism mean in different times and places? And since classical antiquity itself is such a huge period of history, what does it refer back to when it's used?

EMMA BARKER: But also when you're talking about the term classicism in order to make a beginning talking about these things, it's really important to go back to the first major revival of classical antiquity in European art.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: Right. Well, the Italian Renaissance is really seen as the beginning of the concept of classicism. You have humanists and artists looking back upon the antique past and seeing it as an ideal, as something that is better than the present in terms of the rules that it seemed to have. It seemed to have a theory for beauty, for order, for let's say philosophical ideals that people in the Renaissance wanted to re-attain. They wanted to be able to study it, look back upon it, and revive it in that time.

EMMA BARKER: But what kind of artists and objects are we really talking about in terms of what the Renaissance is associated with?

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: So for example, you have in the 15th century, the first collections of antique sculpture. You have artists coming to sketch them, draw from them, learn from them, and imitate them in their own work. So it's a phenomenon that extends across painting, sculpture, and architecture. And in the 16th century, it's theorised, it becomes more of a concept that is written about, particularly by Giorgio Vasari, who was an artist and historian, who talked about the ages of the recovery of the antique in the Renaissance. So at a certain point, artists began to understand the antique, they got better at understanding the antique until they finally got to the point where they were as good as antique artists and could even surpass the antique. So the concept of classicism when you go into the 16th, 17th century really begins to solidify around Raphael and his painting. In particular, if you look at The School of Athens, you can see what people saw as being the classical ideal in Raphael, which is symmetry, proportion, harmony, order. You see this in the architecture, which is a reflection of the classical ideal that people were solidifying around his work.

EMMA BARKER: Yes. I think it's also important to realise that this whole kind of a ideal focused around the ancient and Raphael really gets institutionalised, both in Italy and then across Europe, in academies of art that offer this art training that really is based on the copying of antique sculpture and also Raphael. And then there's really this new departure, which happens around the mid-18th century when people start to feel that current artistic practice isn't imitating ancients closely enough, that it's really got corrupted. And they therefore start to want to imitate antiquity more strictly in the sense both of much greater archaeological accuracy, so going back to look at ancient buildings more closely, but also an attempt to recapture what they see as the lost purity of the ancient world.

And really the key figure here is the German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who writes about the famous antique sculptures with amazing intensity. And he's also really key, I think, in shifting the focus from Rome, which had really been the focus of all of this so far, to Greece. This purified a more rigorous kind of classicism that you get in the later 18th century is what's known as Neoclassicism in order to distinguish it from the earlier kinds of classicism that you've been talking about.

And really, if you can take The School of Athens by Raphael as a kind of embodiment of Renaissance classicism, then the kind of manifesto painting of Neoclassicism is the French artist Jacques-Louis David's Oath of the Horatii, which is an incredibly austere and intense painting. It's not in fact an ancient Greek subject, but it's from the very early history of Rome, showing three brothers vowing to die for their country. And everything is incredibly pared down, austere. There are very few figures. And even the architecture is very plain and primitive with columns that have no bases.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: So how would you distinguish classicism from Neoclassicism?

EMMA BARKER: Well, I think that classicism is really this vision of ideal beauty about harmony and grace. And Neoclassicism is an emphasis much more on purity, rigour, and the primitive. It's just a much, much more austere version of classicism.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: In the 16, 17, 18th century no one was using the term classicism. When do people start to use that term?

EMMA BARKER: Yes. Really, the first person to talk about classicism, to use the word classicism is the French writer Stendhal, who coined the term in 1817. And then he applies it

to what he sees as this really boring, rule-bound, outdated art, which is how he sees the art of David and his followers. And he contrasts it with what he sees as the much more exciting, original, up-to-date art, which he calls Romanticism. And then Neoclassicism gets coined much later as an even more negative term for really debased kind of imitation classical art.

And then once the term classicism is in circulation, people start using it. And they start using it not just as a term of abuse but they try and make it an analytical category. And really, the key figure here around 1900, is the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin, who starts defining classicism in a very systematic way. He does so by means of a contrast between what he calls the classic art of the Renaissance and the later art, the 17th century style known as the Baroque.

And he really does this through what he calls the specifically visual. He really talks about classicism as a linear style, for example, as opposed to the Baroque, which he sees as painterly. So here with Wölfflin, we really get the classical classicism as a neutral category. And it's without an evaluative character.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: So under Wölfflin, it becomes a neutral ideal, but it's not actually neutral. It's still a category that is privileged and raised above others.

EMMA BARKER: Think about classicism broadly from the perspective of the 21st century. I think it's quite hard to get back to those historical periods and really understand them when it was valued so highly, because part of its prestige in earlier centuries was so much to do with its elite associations. You had to be rich to study Greek and Latin literature. You had to be rich to travel to Italy.

And now we see that as an elitism that we're uncomfortable with. There's also that it's considered Eurocentric. It now seems to us absurd that you should privilege the heritage of Greece and Rome over and above every other world culture. I also think that there's the rather uncomfortable fact that the European powers who went out and colonised the rest of the world, they asserted their authority, their domination by building often grand classical buildings. So you can find these grand imposing classical buildings all over the world in former colonised countries, from the United States to India.

And then in the end there's the most probably the most uncomfortable fact of all is the way that classicism was used by the Nazis. And they really favoured artists who worked in a classicizing manner. Even today, there are racists who admire the whiteness of classical sculpture, because they see it as embodying this 'European white ideal'. The really funny thing is that, of course, that actually, scholars know that all of these white sculptures were actually really brightly painted and that our modern ideas of race would have made no sense whatever to the Greeks and Romans.

So I mean, for me, I think that it just really shows it goes back to the point that we were making classicism isn't one thing. You can engage with in all sorts of ways, in good ways as well as bad.

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: Right. So I think what we would conclude is that we're not ending the study of the classical tradition or of classicism. It's still something that's been a major force in the history of art for centuries. It's just that we need to look at it from the

perspective of who was using it, why they used it, how they defined the term, and how it differed for different eras.