

Western Art II

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Final Essay- The Renaissance and Neoclassicism

The Renaissance period had a considerable influence on all aspects of culture in Europe and elsewhere. Reformers within the church challenged their beliefs and eventually became Protestants, the Printing Press was invented and encouraged the development of literacy, and the idea of a Liberal Arts education became prominent. Under this new form of Humanist education, artists were trained in mathematics and Classical texts in addition to their artistic craft, and the resulting works raised artists to places of fame and high social status. These famous Renaissance works featured a blend of naturalism and idealism, a harmonious composition, and an overall sense of stability and clarity. Over two centuries later, the artists of the Neoclassical period sought to create pieces of art similar to those of the Renaissance, inspired by Classical teachings and echoing these features. By examining two paintings, Raphael's *The School of Athens*, and Anton Raphael Mengs' *Parnassus*, it can be concluded that Renaissance art influenced the art of the Neoclassical period through a sense of harmony and stability, the naturalized and idealized depiction of human figures, and the infusion of Classical ideals and morals.

A prominent feature of Renaissance art that made it so famous, and was fervently adopted by Neoclassical artists, is an overall sense of stability and harmony. This is achieved with a carefully, mathematically planned composition. In *The School of Athens*, Raphael creates a composition that is activated by the painting's arched setting, continuing backwards in a

system of barrel vaults through linear perspective. These receding lines land harmoniously behind the two “main characters” of the painting, the philosophers Plato and Aristotle. The eye then expands outward to explore a variety of figures and their energetic, gestural poses, creating a dynamic and harmonious effect. Similarly, the composition of *Parnassus* starts with a central figure (Apollo) and branches outward and downward harmoniously. This is an example of a Triangular Composition, which is used in many Renaissance paintings such as Da Vinci’s *Virgin of the Rocks* and Raphael’s *Madonna of the Goldfinch* to create a unified and balanced piece. This sense of unity, balance and harmony exhibited in the Renaissance becomes a central feature in Neoclassical art.

Renaissance artists depicted human figures in an innovative and captivating way by blending naturalistic depiction with idealism. This is achieved by paying close attention to the principles of anatomy (often determined mathematically), then heightening those principles to create an ideal figure. The figures in both *The School of Athens* and *Parnassus* exhibit these characteristics. The figures’ poses are also important to achieve this effect: The many dynamic characters of *The School of Athens* show a variety of poses that show a combination of relaxation and tension that goes along with a shifting of weight: the two figures at the center (Plato and Aristotle) walk forwards, the sitting figures cross their legs or twist their bodies, one figure leans against the wall hunched over his writing. Similarly, Apollo in *Parnassus* holds a contrapposto stance with one knee bent, and the surrounding Muses also adopt a variety of poses. Both the poses of the figures, and the anatomy and features of the figures themselves in both paintings combine naturalism with idealism, showing that this important Renaissance feature carries itself into Neoclassicism.

Arguably the most prominent influence from the Renaissance period to the Neoclassical is the infusion of Classical ideals. In fact, this facet of influence creates the very foundation of the Neoclassical movement, as artists turned to the past to revive a sense of civic morality. Renaissance artists were often educated in mathematics, philosophy, poetry, and the sciences, and the *School of Athens* is a good embodiment of this education. It is part of a series of four paintings commissioned by Pope Julius II that depict the “four branches of knowledge”: philosophy, poetry, justice, and theology. *The School of Athens* portrays the philosophy branch, depicting a fantastical gathering of philosophers from many disciplines, discussing their ideologies. *Parnassus* shows the same sense of having been steeped in these educational elements, the inspiration this time being poetry and the arts. It features characters from classical mythology: Apollo, the god of poetry, music, and the arts, and the nine muses. This mythological reference also hints back at the Renaissance, although these references were less used back then, in favor of religious ones. Giorgione or Titian’s *The Pastoral Concert* and Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* come to mind. *The School of Athens* itself includes mythological references in the form of sculptures of Apollo and Minerva. The two paintings’ use of classically-inspired architecture also suggests a steeping in Classical ideals: *Parnassus*’ inclusion of a simple Doric column is more subtle than the grand barrel-vaulted structure of the *School of Athens*, but it gets the point across. Bringing back the influence of a classical education is central to Neoclassicism, and *Parnassus* exhibits this well.

Many other artists followed in the wake of Mengs’ *Parnassus*, which is considered to be the first full expression of Neoclassicism. The Renaissance techniques from works such as *The School of Athens* that inspired *Parnassus*, such as a harmonious composition, naturalistic and

idealistic depiction of figures, and references to Classical culture and virtues, are glaringly prominent in subsequent Neoclassical works. Angelica Kauffmann's *Cornelia Pointing to Her Children as Her Treasures* and Joseph Wright of Derby's *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air-Pump* are examples of such works. Renaissance influence not only inspired the Neoclassicism movement, but formed its very foundations. If nothing else, the fact that Anton Raphael Mengs was named after the famous Renaissance artist Raphael should speak volumes about the artists of the Neoclassical movement and their desire to return to the past.

Works Cited

Stokstad, Marilyn, and Michael Watt Cothren. *Art History*. Pearson, 2018.