

The Classical Heritage

Neo-Classicism formed one of the four 'legs' of the chair on which the disparate movements of Modern Art sat. The others being Romanticism, Symbolism and Realism. Of course these definitions are not exclusive: there was a strong romantic streak in Ingres's character, and much of David's work has a symbolic content. The great disruption to the perceived 'purposes' of art caused by the Impressionists and Post Impressionists may have left many artists floundering on the muddy shores of past academic traditions but it opened up, in the turbulent years of the twentieth century, vast unimaginable territories for the younger generations to explore. However they were not averse to plundering the past in their search for and discovery of new forms of expression. As Picasso said: bad artists copy, good artists steal, and many found a rich vein of forms and ideas to mine in the art of the Neo Classicists.



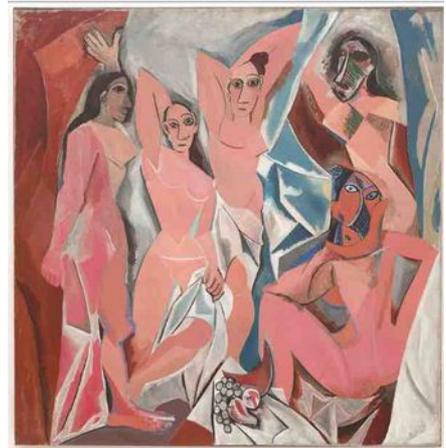
Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger* 1907

Picasso always declared a great admiration for Ingres. Parallels between Ingres' late work *The Turkish Bath* and this early work of the Modern master, his most celebrated pre-Cubist picture, are apparent not only in the subject matter: young nude women in a relaxed environment (the Harem and the brothel - earlier studies for the *Demoiselles* showed a sailor entering through the curtain on the right); but also in the clear outlines and flattening of the forms.



Seurat, *Les Poseuses (The Models)* 1888.

Arranged in a frieze like manner, with shallow depth of pictorial space, Seurat's models take up classical poses, back, front and profile, in a clear triangular format; the lefthand model seated with her back to the viewer referencing Ingres' *Grande Baigneuse*.



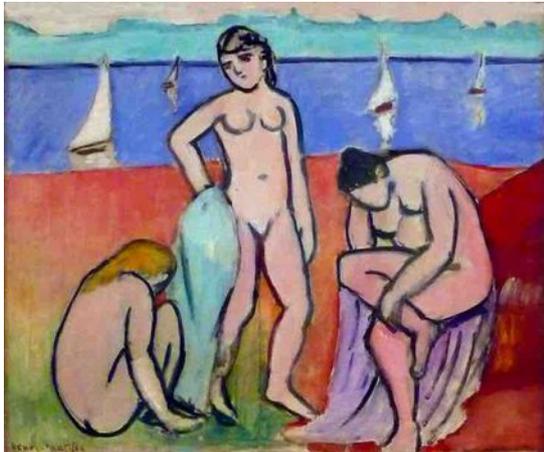
Other details of note is the seated figure with her back to the viewer (which is also a 'steal' by Ingres from his youthful *Grandes Baigneuse*); the two figures with raised arms over their heads; the standing figure on the left in profile and the woman on the right, with a dark skinned servant in the *Turkish Bath*; the still life at the bottom of the picture; and the circular arrangement of the figures in both compositions.

Picasso, *Portrait of Gertrude Stein* 1906

In the flattening and outlining of the facial features, which emphasises the idealisation of the form at the expense of mere likeness, Picasso's portrait of the American poet and patron of the arts has echoes of the clarity of Ingres' portraits. When it was remarked that Gertrude didn't look like that Picasso replied 'no, but she will.

Picasso, Seated Nude Drying her Foot 1921

The large form and the small breasts, the lack of variety in the skin tones, the sculptural rendition of the folds in the white cloth, the clear outline and the simplified background, represented by three bands of colour, all combine to emphasise the monumentality of this figure from Picasso's 'classical' period when he returned to a more recognisable mode of representation in the 20's.

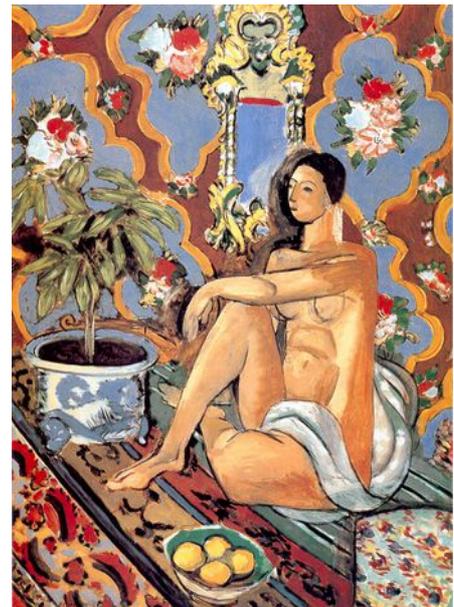


Matisse, Three Bathers 1907

From Matisse's Fauvist period the *Three Bathers*, in the flattening of the forms, the emphasis on outline and the lack of individuality and 'portraiture'; the frieze like arrangement and emphasis on design and abstract structure; and the subject of nude figures in a landscape all derive from classical sources.

Matisse, Decorative Figure on an Ornamental Ground 1934

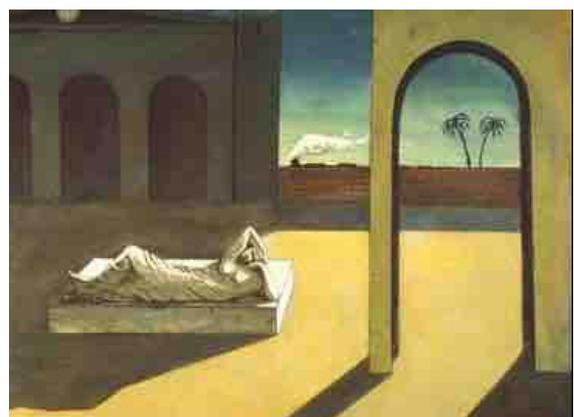
The nude in an interior was a theme popular with Matisse. He painted many nudes, and women in Turkish costume which he titled *Odaliques*, a term which refers to a female slave or concubine in a harem or seraglio. The subject was popular among artists in the nineteenth century, when the exoticism of the near east, as portrayed in the memoirs of travellers such as the *Letters from the Orient* by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu created the climate for 'Orientalism' and the representations of none European subjects and cultures.



Ingres, Odalisque with Slave 1842

de Chirico, The Soothsayers Recompense 1913

In his 'Metaphysical Town Square' series the Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico set his enigmatic figures against the architecture of archways and piazzas that were familiar to travellers in search of the classical heritage of Europe.





de Chirico, *The Song of Love* 1914

Here de Chirico depicts an outdoor architectural setting typical of his works at this time. The main focus of this work, which prefigures surrealism, is a small wall on which is mounted a Greek sculpted head and a surgeon's glove.



Léger, *Mother and Child* 1922

The "mechanical" works Léger painted in the 1920s, in their formal clarity as well as in their subject matter—the mother and child, the female nude, figures in an ordered landscape—are typical of the postwar "return to order" in the arts, and link him to the tradition of French figurative painting represented by Poussin and Corot.



They share traits with the work of Le Corbusier and Amédée Ozenfant who together had founded Purism, a style intended as a rational, mathematically based corrective to the impulsiveness of cubism. His compositions from this period are dominated by stable, interlocking rectangular formations in vertical and horizontal orientation.

Combining the classical with the modern, Léger's *Nude on a Red Background* (1927) depicts a monumental, expressionless woman, machinelike in form and colour.

Delvaux, *The Break of Day (L'Aurore)* 1937

Paul Delvaux is known for his oil paintings that fuse elements of Surrealism with classical forms. A recurring theme in Delvaux's work is nude women, incongruously reclining or wandering silently through classical buildings or train stations, combined with motifs such as skeletons and other unexpected objects. Deeply indebted to the works of Giorgio de Chirico and René Magritte, Delvaux's scenes are characterised by long shadows, oppressive atmospheres, and unsettling juxtapositions. Of de Chirico's influence, Delvaux once said, "With him I realised what was possible, the climate that had to be developed, the climate of silent streets with shadows of people who can't be seen."





Magritte, *Perspective: Madame Récamier by David*



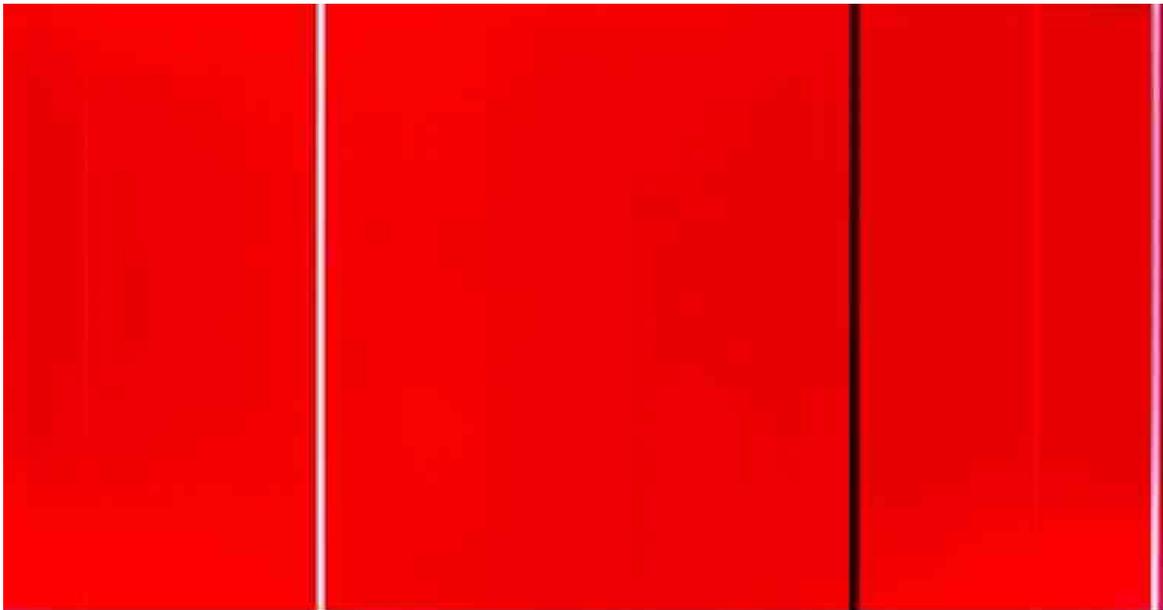
During the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Surrealist painter René Magritte made a series of "Perspective" paintings based on well-known works by the French artists François Gérard, Jacques Louis David, and Édouard Manet, in which he substituted coffins for the figures represented in the original paintings.

This 1951 irreverent work of art is almost identical to the painting by Jacques-Louis David with the exception that where Madame Récamier reclined seductively; Magritte substituted her body with a coffin. The only reminder we have of the lady is her white gown which we see cascading to the floor.

Barnett Newman, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* 1950-51

Barnett Newman was the most austere and intellectual of American artists. His large canvases are composed with the intention of communicating a sense of locality, presence, and contingency.

He was a student of philosophy and the titles of his paintings often suggest classical or quasi religious themes. He credited Ingres as a progenitor of abstract expressionism, explaining: "That guy was an abstract painter ... He looked at the canvas more often than at the model. Kline, de Kooning—none of us would have existed without him."



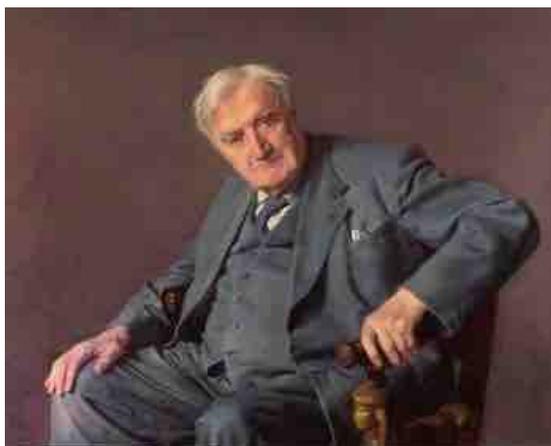
Vir Heroicus Sublimis (242 cm × 542cm) has been interpreted in a variety of ways. Many critics, when discussing Newman, refer to his attempt to capture both the tangible and intangible, "spirit and matter", and *Vir Heroicus*, with its particularly large scale, is the epitome of that struggle.

Viewers feel as if they are in the presence of something monumental, but Newman wanted viewers to see more than that: he wanted to convey his feelings about the tragic human condition.

The Latin title of this painting can be translated as "Man, heroic and sublime." It refers to Newman's essay "The Sublime is Now," in which he asks, "If we are living in a time without a legend that can be called sublime, how can we be creating sublime art?" His response is embodied in part by this painting—his largest at that time. Newman hoped that the viewer would stand close to this expansive work, and he likened the experience to a human encounter: "It's no different, really, from meeting another person. One has a reaction to the person physically. Also, there's a metaphysical thing, and if a meeting of people is meaningful, it affects both their lives."



Barnet Newman said that "the present painter is concerned not with his own feelings or with the mystery of his own personality but with the penetration into the world mystery." And: "The painting should give man a sense of place: that he knows he's there, so he's aware of himself. In that sense he relates to me when I made the painting because in that sense I was there ... [Hopefully] you [have] a sense of your own scale [standing in front of the painting] ... To me that sense of place has not only a sense of mystery but also has a sense of metaphysical fact. I have come to distrust the episodic, and I hope that my painting has the impact of giving someone, as it did me, the feeling of his own totality, of his own separateness, of his own individuality and the same time of his connection to others, who are also separate."



Kelly, *Portrait of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, series 1952–53

The influence continued through the 20th century. Gerald Kelly recalled Ingres' *Portrait of M. Bertin 1832* when painting his restless and confined series of portraits of Ralph Vaughan Williams between 1952 and 1961.



David, *Portrait of Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier and his wife* 1788



Nelson Shanks, *Portrait of Diana, Princess of Wales* 1996

John Nelson Shanks (1937 – 2015) was an American painter, teacher and art historian influential in the revival of classical realism in the United States. His portraits of royalty, politicians and celebrities added to his international profile as one of the foremost contemporary figurative painters. His best known work is probably his portrait of Diana, Princess of Wales, completed in 1996.

