



## European Art: Eighteenth Century

by Kieron Devlin

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Neat divisions do little justice to the diversity of styles, artists, and characters that fermented during the eighteenth century in Europe. During this period, men whom we would now call homosexuals, such as Johann Winckelmann, Horace Walpole, and William Beckford, were at the forefront of public taste, championing respectively the fresh interest in Classical, Gothic, and Oriental styles.

In the early decades of the eighteenth century, the Baroque style dominated. Tastes shifted from Baroque's depersonalizing spaces and grandiosity to the more lighthearted, warmer, and more intimate Rococo style. This shift in taste was accompanied by a growing interest in interior decoration, especially the elaboration of the boudoir, not least at the Court of Versailles.

In the second half of the century innovations in interior décor, spearheaded by Robert Adam and Thomas Chippendale, established a popular Neoclassical revival. The century also saw the triumph of Enlightenment values and of scientific knowledge, as well as growing secularism and feminism, which culminated in the fervor of the French revolution and a new spirit of democracy.

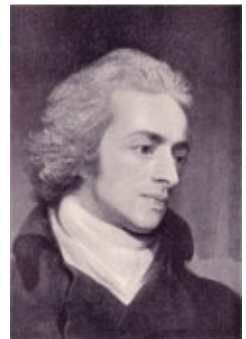
### Connoisseur Personalities

From the gay point of view, one of the most fascinating aspects of eighteenth-century art is the crucial positioning of great "connoisseur" personalities, many of whom were homosexual. These men, especially Winckelmann, Walpole, and Beckford, managed to influence public taste in a way not seen before, despite the fact that they had difficulty concealing their homosexuality.

Although the heterosexual Lords Burlington and Chesterfield established the taste for Italian art, they were easily trumped by Johann Winckelmann, whose influence was such that he was dubbed the father of both art history and archaeology. In addition, however, Horace Walpole reclaimed Gothic as an artistic and literary style; and later, William Beckford championed the interest in Orientalism that was initially given impetus by multi-lingual translator William Jones.

Beckford, England's wealthiest man, whose affair with his younger cousin William Courtenay caused him to be outcast from English society, established a mania for collecting from Europe's vast treasure house of art to which he had privileged access.

Winckelmann's case is especially noteworthy since his idealized love of young men fundamentally changed the way art was subsequently conceived. He and his followers placed the young male nude at the absolute pinnacle of beauty.



Three important "connoisseur" personalities (top to bottom):  
1) Johann Joachim Winckelmann in a portrait created by Raphael Mengs shortly after 1755.  
2) Horace Walpole.  
3) William Beckford.

## Antoine Watteau

The ascendancy in the early decades of the century of painters such as Antoine Watteau, originally Flemish but working in France, is important as evidence of the trend away from the Baroque towards a more scaled-down, intimate, individual style full of charm, sensuousness, and grace.

At this time, painters felt a new sense of freedom to pursue their individual interests, outside of any school or party line. Hence, Watteau's style tends to elude categorization. His paintings complemented the frivolous intimate "boudoir" style. He specialized in the *fêtes galantes* (scenes of gallantry) with graceful settings and consummate draftsmanship, which exerted a charm that was not always fully appreciated until a century later.

Art historian Michael Levey characterizes Watteau as the tubercular artist of the bitter-sweet, comparable to Mozart in music and Keats in poetry. His work has a melancholy mood as he was fond of painting sad clowns, or the *commedia dell'arte*, which suggests his affinity with society's rejects and misfits. His *Embarkation for Cythera* (1717) best exemplifies this languorous, nostalgic mood, where time seems inexorable.

Walter Pater, perhaps sensing a parallel sensibility to his own, one that we would now read as gay, described Watteau as "always a seeker after something in the world that is there in no satisfying measure or not at all."

## Rococo Style

During the century, the frivolous roseate style of the Rococo became popular, particularly in France. Above all, Rococo emphasized grace, color, lightheartedness, and gaiety--as in a studied lack of seriousness that might now be interpreted by gay audiences as unashamedly "camp." The style was provocative and sometimes so excessive as to become merely "chic" and superficial.

In décor, rococo was characterized by numerous mirrors, gilt-edged panels, ribbon framing, elaborate scrolls, and cornucopias with a flowing movement. As a decorating style, it flourished especially in Bavaria, and the Schloss Nymphenburg in Munich (1734-1739) by François Cuvillies is a perfect example.

Rococo reached its zenith of frivolity with Jean-Honoré Fragonard's *The Happy Accidents of The Swing* (1776), with its cunning eroticism where the man seated on the left points into the girl's billowing skirts as she gaily swings upwards. Even the foliage in this painting looks like frilly underwear.

In the Rococo, classical subjects were treated with a daring, witty playfulness. The sight of flesh, female in particular, was applauded, even by female audiences and patrons. It was in many ways a subversive style that mocked what artists had come to see as the empty heroics of the Baroque.

François Boucher, under the patronage of Madame de Pompadour, painted with less finesse than Watteau but with an element of fantasy that enshrined the arts of love. He continued Watteau's eroticizing of the space between the viewer and viewed. Showing subjects face on and up close, Boucher's *Reclining Girl* (1752) is notable for its daring treatment of the female nude. Diderot observed that Boucher's pupils had a penchant for painting "chubby pink bottoms" rather too hastily.

## Italian and Spanish Artists

During the eighteenth-century, art from Venice was in great demand, especially in England where panoramas of the Grand Canal were particularly prized. Giovanni Antonio Canaletto along with Francesco Guardi were masters of these ceremonial and festive scenes of regattas. Guardi's brushwork in some ways foreshadowed the Impressionists.

Other Venetian artists of the period included Giambattista Tiepolo, whose technique many believed unsurpassed. His painting *The Death of Hyacinthus* (1782) is said to be modeled on a real death in a homosexual affair. Paolo Veronese also worked very much in the Baroque mode, but with substantial individual flair. Their massive lush, opulent canvases and altar pieces were greatly admired.

It was Giovanni Battista Piranesi, however, who heralded a strikingly new approach. His etching series entitled *Imaginary Prisons* (1745) contained almost violent chiaroscuro effects that immediately captured the public imagination. He depicted architecture in ruins, but in an emotional way, somewhat like opera scenery. Some etchings suggest a nightmare reality.

His work satisfied the growing taste for accurate archaeological details, but added a questing, nostalgic, romantic spirit. The influence of Piranesi's work was to be a continued inspiration even on interior designer Robert Adam, causing people to reevaluate the antique.

Francisco de Goya working in Spain also produced paintings of exceptional verve and intensity, particularly in his etchings. Though his work is not easily classified, it also presages the deeper, darker feelings unearthed by Romanticism.

### **Johann Winckelmann and the Neoclassical Revival**

The Grand Tour to the archaeological ruins of Italy and Greece became *de rigueur* for a gentleman hoping for a complete education. New discoveries at the sites of Herculaneum and Pompeii in Italy were significant enough to warrant a detailed examination of Greek and Roman art.

First there and eager to study the artifacts was Johann Winckelmann, a humble teacher and son of a cobbler from Germany. He eventually managed to be elected in charge of the Antiquities in Rome. Once Winckelmann was established in Rome, he almost single-handedly formulated a new system of thinking about Greek Art, one that clearly drew on his personal taste for adolescent male nudes with slim hips and underdeveloped pectorals.

Winckelmann's monumental study of Greek statuary, *The History of the Art of Antiquity* (1764), had a profound effect and was recognized immediately as setting a new standard of art criticism and art history. He made the notion of "noble simplicity and calm grandeur" gain currency in what emerged as a new aesthetic throughout Europe. Central to this notion was the male nude, classed as the highest and most esteemed pinnacle of art.

Winckelmann formulated, sometimes in unashamedly ecstatic prose, an almost measurable system that privileged the ideals of beauty and the sublime. While not denying female beauty, his ideas were clearly rather than ambiguously homoerotic. This favoring of a slim, toned youthful body represented a shift from what that had previously been the acme of beauty, a mature, tortured frame. *The Apollo Belvedere* became one of the most admired Greek statues because of Winckelmann's ecstatic criticism.

Winckelmann's work was more than art history or art criticism. It was fundamentally a plea for a homosocial ideal that asserted the primacy of art for a healthy culture. Central to his vision was his sheer delight in male--and some female--physiques.

Even Hegel acknowledged Winckelmann's contribution to European culture as lending force to establishing both art history and archaeology as serious scholarly studies. The murder of Winckelmann in Trieste in 1768 shocked not only Goethe, who lamented the news, but the whole of Europe.

### **English Neoclassicism**

In England Robert Adam, working with a variety of artists such as Angelica Kauffmann, achieved a Neoclassical revolution in interior decoration in the eighteenth century. At Syon House, Middlesex, and Harewood House, Yorkshire, he utilized fresh tints and color combinations, artful settings, integrated schemes, and bas-reliefs based on Greek models.

While the early decades of the century still upheld the legacy of Baroque architecture, the Italian influence was soon manifested in a quieter, simpler Palladian style for villas, and for the imaginative leap represented in Piranesi. William Kent invented the garden landscape based on notions of picturesque ruins from sketches of Greek and Roman ruins. Lancelot "Capability" Brown made this style fashionable and declared that "nature abhors a straight line."

In palaces and stately homes, patrons indulged new notions of the wild and picturesque based on the idealized landscapes of painter Claude Lorrain. They wanted undulating surfaces, informal layouts, winding paths with miniature classical temples and grottoes or Chinese summer houses casually dotted around large estates. This landscaping heralded the broad canvases and storm-ridden sentiments of the later Romantics.

Frederick the Great of Prussia, whose homosexual tendencies failed to diminish even after harsh treatment by his father, commissioned his own designs for the palace at Sans Souci. The house there imitated that of Roman Emperor Hadrian at Tivoli. The busts of Antinous, Hadrian's lover, at Sans Souci functioned as code for desires that could not otherwise declare themselves. Frederick also had a Chinese summer house, which reflected an increasing eclecticism in taste.

### **William Hogarth**

In England, William Hogarth, though he was influenced by French painting, often produced paintings of a highly original quality. In *Harlot's Progress* (1732), *Marriage à la Mode* (1745), *The Rake's Progress* (1735), and other series, Hogarth produced satirically observed narrative paintings in which he used humor for moral ends. His satirical targets included fops, who may be read as gay in contemporary terminology.

These paintings, reproduced as prints, were hugely popular and continue to be so. *The Harlot's Progress* inspired Hofmannsthal's libretto for Richard Strauss' opera *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911), while *The Rake's Progress* inspired a less than action-filled libretto by W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman for Igor Stravinsky's 1951 opera of the same name. Later in the twentieth century, David Hockney, in his own designs based on Hogarth, personalized the theme of the Rake, identifying him as the gay artist, an outsider in an uncomprehending society.

### **Horace Walpole**

Horace Walpole--youngest son of Sir Robert Walpole, generally regarded as England's first prime minister--became an amateur architect, an art historian, and great chronicler of gossip. He was also the man who coined the word "serendipity." Known as an eccentric, he was the author of *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), the first Gothic novel, to which many subsequent horror stories owe a huge debt. This novel almost single-handedly made fashionable the taste for the bizarre, for love of doom and gloom. It also helped establish the Gothic as a site of sexual paranoia, especially the conflict between homosexuality and homophobia.

In his mock-Gothic mansion at Strawberry Hill, Twickenham, to which he continually added traceries, turrets, and tombs, Walpole expressed his own architectural tastes, while also presiding over a literary circle that included not only gay men (such as the poet Thomas Gray) but also the lesbian sculptor Anne Damer and her lover Mary Berry.

Although Walpole regarded the Gothic as a decorative style, rather than an integrated design, Twickenham nevertheless was an important forerunner of the High Church Gothic style that characterized public

buildings in the nineteenth century.

### **William Beckford**

William Beckford was handsome, erudite, homosexual, and, at one time, the wealthiest but least appreciated man in England. His father's fortune was based on estates in Jamaica and on slavery, to which Beckford never referred. Beckford was hounded out of England after the exposure of his relationship with his younger cousin, "Kitty" Courtenay.

Beckford lived in splendor in Portugal and traveled restlessly across Europe, even witnessing the storming of the Bastille on his travels. But upon his return to England he was shunned by society and became an eccentric recluse, a virtual exile in his own country.

From youth Beckford was obsessed with the *Tales of One Thousand and One Nights* and sought to recreate that feeling in fantasy Oriental interiors, especially at the extraordinary palace he built on his country estate, Fonthill Abbey (1796).

Beckford pioneered a more eclectic range in tastes than was previously thought admirable and built a treasure trove of decorative items in his collections. He retreated into his own Aladdin's fantasy world, reputedly maintaining a harem of boys. He even identified himself as a relation of Caliph Haroun al Rashid.

Beckford's vast resources allowed him to set the tone for collectors. His novel *Vathek* (1786) is a decadent romance that was admired by Lord Byron, and, a hundred years later, by the Symbolists. Beckford not only awakened the world to the rich beauty of Oriental designs, but he was also one of the world's great art collectors.

### **Romanticism**

Eighteenth-century art finally gave way to Romanticism, which is usually dated as encompassing the period 1785 to 1825.

While eighteenth-century neoclassicism valued generalities and public expression, Romantics prized the particular and the private. Yet these interests sometimes fused, as in the extremely pared-down linear drawings of Homeric subjects by John Flaxman.

Flaxman's drawings were reproduced in his book illustrations and on Wedgwood pottery. He paralleled the work of French painter Jacques Louis David and helped embody the homosocial ideals given new impetus by the French Revolution.

Romanticism's cult of the bizarre found expression not only in such literary movements as Gothicism, but also in art. Henry Fuseli, a Swiss artist, thought by some to have homosexual leanings--he was known to depict lesbian scenes and females seducing men--believed that his friend William Blake, "was damned good to steal from." Blake however rejected Academic art in favor of a private mysticism.

Horace Walpole called Fuseli's work "Shockingly mad," with the emphasis on the mad, a characteristic that may be said to apply to Blake's work also. The appreciation of the weird, the sublime, and the picturesque became a cornerstone of Romantic individualism.

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#### **About the Author**

**Kieron Devlin** studied Art & Design at Manchester Art School, England. He holds a Master's degree from Leicester University and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from New York City's New School. He is working on a novel and a collection of short stories.

European Art of the Eight has been added to your Cart. Add gift options. Buy used. This book is an excellent resource for eighteenth-century art history. It is almost impossible to find a textbook on this subject that is not devoted to one country or medium (such as painting or architecture). This work is the only one I've found that is truly comprehensive of European art in this period, and its only drawback is that each artist and topic are considered so briefly (two or three pages) that you are left wanting more. 18th Century Love. Portrait of the singer Teresa Lanti [she posed as the castrato known as Bellino and was one of Casanova's lovers]. I loved reading about Bellino in his Memoirs :3. Portrait of Joseph Henry of Straffan. Batoni was the most sought after portrait painter in 18th-century Rome. Adorned with decadent decorative arts and steeped in affectation, it's no surprise that the French Court led European preference for elaborate clothing and accessories—everything from luxurious wigs to the colorful shoes of the 18th century. Just as the Venetian Masks Handmade in Venice - England-Based Shop - Shipping Worldwide! See related links to what you are looking for. The art of Europe, or Western art, encompasses the history of visual art in Europe. European prehistoric art started as mobile Upper Paleolithic rock and cave painting and petroglyph art and was characteristic of the period between the Paleolithic and the Iron Age. Written histories of European art often begin with the art of the Ancient Middle East and the Ancient Aegean civilizations, dating from the 3rd millennium BC. Parallel with these significant cultures, art of one form or another existed all