Stylistic Characteristics of Neoclassical Art

The neoclassical art of the late 18th and early 19th centuries revived the stylistic characteristics of the Renaissance artists and of the ancient classical period.

Classical—a reference to the art and culture of the Greeks in the 5th century BCE and to the art of the Greeks and Romans in general.

In neoclassical art we will see many of the stylistic characteristics that were defined in the Renaissance period.

Neoclassical art is stable, balanced, static and clear. It is an intellectual art well suited to illustration.

Examples of classicism in art—classical motifs, such as acanthus leaves, classical architecture and the contrapposto pose. These motifs were introduced to the popular culture of the time by the discoveries at Pompeii.

- Contrapposto—the weight of the figure rests on one leg and the head turns in the opposite direction. The torso twists in an elongated “S” curve.
- Linear—forms are defined by line, rather than by contrasts of color and value, (a range of tones from light to dark).
- Color—fills in the outlines that define the forms. Color plays a less important role.
- Light—objects are evenly lighted. Contrasts of light and shade are used primarily to model forms within an outline.

Compositional characteristics of neoclassical paintings:

- Planemetric—main objects are shown parallel to the picture plane.
- Picture Plane—the actual two-dimensional surface of a wall or canvas.
- Picture Space—the illusion of three-dimensional space created on a two-dimensional surface.
- Central Focal Point—located on the central axis. This results in symmetrical balance, also called formal balance. Formal balance creates a static composition and lends a timeless quality to the art.
- Compositional Shapes—stable, static shapes that organize the various elements of the composition.
  - Stable triangle
  - Dominant horizontal and vertical lines that sometimes interlock to form a grid.
  - Architectural backgrounds featuring the elements associated with classical architecture, such as arches and domes.
- Closed Composition—all eye paths lead back to the central focal point.
In evaluating neoclassical art, we must consider that artists working in the late 18th and early 19th century could not forget what they had learned from the Baroque masters. There are elements of Baroque art in neoclassical works. Artists chose the characteristics that suited their creative purpose.

**Terminology**

- Classical
- Contrapposto
- Linear
- Color
- Value
- Light
- Planometric
- Picture Plane
- Picture Space
- Central Focal Point
- Symmetrical Balance (also known as Formal Balance)
- Compositional Shapes
- Closed Composition