

## Neoclassical Architecture in France

As with other art forms produced in Neoclassical France, Neoclassical French architecture can be best described as idealistic and civic-minded. In many ways, the architecture of the Neoclassical period can be seen as a reaction to the Rococo: the Neoclassical artists valued reason, ideology, and logic more highly than pleasure and sentimentality, which had been favored by the Rococo artists. This is clearly reflected in the architecture of the time.

There have been many Classical revivals over the course of art history, but Neoclassical period proves distinct from these in that when it emerged, there was a contemporaneous boom in Classical archaeology. Scholars uncovered and studied classical buildings and sculptures, and artists in turn set out to create precise, scientific imitations of these earlier monuments. These artists were not only borrowing features from Classical architecture and applying them to their own buildings, but in some cases, copying the entire design of an earlier building. Generally speaking, Neo-classical architecture used the same architectural elements that were used in Baroque architecture, but they were arranged in a new way that was truer to the simplicity of Classical Antiquity. Neo-classical artists and thinkers advocated an imitation of the overall essence of Classical art, not just an imitation of its physical details. For example, the curvilinear, playfully arranged wall surfaces of the Baroque were replaced with more severe, planar wall surfaces that resulted in buildings that not only imitated certain details of Classical buildings, but also imitated their general effect on the viewer.

The leading Neoclassical architect in France was Jacques-Germain Soufflot, who spent time in Rome and Lyon before establishing himself in Paris. During his travels to Italy, Soufflot saw archaeological discoveries from Classical Antiquity first-hand, which exerted tremendous influence over his own later architecture. In Rome, he witnessed Italian Baroque architecture, which also influenced his design aesthetic.

Soufflot's most celebrated building is his **Panthéon**. Commissioned as the Church of St. Genevieve by Louis XV in 1755, it is Soufflot's most robust expression of Neo-classical ideals.





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The church is now known as the “Panthéon” because of its clear reference to Rome’s ancient Pantheon. Like the Roman Pantheon, the church is a centrally planned space defined by a large central dome and is prefaced by a highly classicizing porch. Like the porch on Rome’s pantheon, Soufflot’s Panthéon porch is defined by a row of Corinthian columns, a triangular pediment, and a wide entablature with a written inscription. Unlike Rome’s Pantheon, however, Soufflot’s building does not conceal the massive dome behind the pediment. His dome is distinctly adorned with Classical details.

As is so often the case with Neo-classical architecture, the building looks almost more Classical than the architecture of Classical Antiquity. These architects and thinkers emphasized Classical details to a point that made them almost “super-Classical,” with a refinement and ideology that speak to the political and intellectual spirit of eighteenth-century French culture.

