

1. Historical Overview

The death of the Sun King in 1715 ushers in a new age in France: the Enlightenment. Due to Louis XIV's tremendously long reign (1643-1715), it is his great-grandson, Louis XV, who inherits the throne at the age of 5. After a series of regents, Louis XV's personal reign begins in 1748.

Because of Louis XIV's lavish spending and costly entanglements in foreign wars in the previous century, the nation shoulders a substantial economic burden at the start of the eighteenth century: the national debt equals about 10 years of tax revenues. This economic burden, coupled with bad weather conditions resulting in poor grain harvests, produces difficult living conditions for the majority of the population. There are bouts of widespread grain shortages and famine, alongside increasing tax burdens for the **third estate**.

The political instability of the regency adds to the growing discontent among many sectors of the population. While Louis XIV convincingly exercised the authority of the absolute monarchy and kept the nobles in check, his successor, Louis XV, faces troubled times and a disgruntled populace. A new intellectual class emerges, the *philosophes*, who write critical works on a wide range of subjects, analyzing the inequities of the old regime. The work of these Enlightenment thinkers spurs the nation to begin thinking critically about living conditions and how they can be improved.

The *philosophes*, as their name indicates, represent a new breed of philosopher. But they are much more than philosophers: their work spans many genres and subjects. Authors such as Diderot, Rousseau, Voltaire, and Montesquieu write fiction—in the form

of plays, novels, short stories, and poetry, essays on a wide-range of philosophical subjects, discourses, treatises, and even pamphlets and pornography. These writers contributed to the “enlightenment” of their age by engaging in polemical debates on diverse topics and using every form of writing known—and even inventing new ones—in order to persuade and educate their readers.

Not only do the *philosophes* represent a new intellectual class in terms of their output, they also represent a new class from the perspective of their class origins. While some of the *philosophes* are from the nobility and hold important positions in French society, such as Montesquieu, who is a baron and a member of Bordeaux’s Parlement (high judicial court), other *philosophes*, such as Diderot and Rousseau, are sons of artisans. Denis Diderot is the son of a master cutler. He rises to become a member of this new intellectual elite through education and the new social connections available to writers in the eighteenth century. Rousseau, the son of a Swiss watchmaker, is an autodidact who becomes one of the most influential writers of his time. Many of these men live by their pens; that is to say, they are writers who support themselves almost exclusively through their writing.

The *philosophes*, as a group, give a critical flavor to the writings of the Enlightenment. The values of reason and truth take precedence over the established order of ritual and hierarchy in the previous age. The eighteenth century ushers in an era of lively conversation, witty exchange in cafés, rational argumentation, and biting satire that will lead down the road to the French Revolution. It is an age that values the exchange of ideas and sees itself as thoroughly modern. To foster the exchange of ideas, people meet in weekly **salons** to discuss the latest works in art, literature, music, and science. Salons

are generally hosted by women and bring together the intellectual elite of society for conversation, eating, drinking, and general amusement. Salons not only foster the sociability of the period; they also contribute to the spread of ideas.

In addition to salons, people also meet in cafés and even in gardens like those of the Palais Royal to discuss the latest ideas. And the spread of ideas extends beyond the city limits of Paris. Philosophers and intellectuals from around the globe share their ideas in the hopes of increasing knowledge and wisdom to improve the conditions under which people live. Indeed, it is during the eighteenth century that Voltaire first coins the word “cosmopolitan” to describe his age, for the Republic of Letters represents an international community of scholars dedicated to human progress in all aspects of life.

Most emblematic of the spirit of the Enlightenment is a major publishing project edited by Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d’Alembert: the *Encyclopédie*. This multi-volume work begins as a translation of the four-volume *Cyclopaedia* by Chambers, but ends up embodying the ideals of the age in its efforts to encompass all of knowledge within its pages. Diderot and d’Alembert write numerous articles themselves and commission experts in all domains to compile a work of great scope and breadth. The *Encyclopédie* includes articles on nearly every subject—from the mundane to the esoteric, from stockings and their manufacture to theories of natural right. Although the editors initially have permission to produce the *Encyclopédie* from *privileges* granted through royal authority, the privileges are revoked in 1759, leaving the work in a kind of legal limbo—not entirely legal, but not banned either. The Paris folio edition, first published between 1751 and 1772, includes seventeen volumes of text and an additional eleven volumes of illustrations in the form of plates.

When Diderot and d'Alembert begin the project of translating Chambers' *Cyclopaedia*, they imagine a well-ordered work, carefully linking the various fields of artistic and scientific endeavor represented in its pages. All the fields of inquiry—with the most up-to-date information available—are organized around the “tree of knowledge.” They imagine the entire sum of human knowledge circumscribed and ordered within the volumes of their magnum opus. But the project takes on a life of its own. The massive work produced, the *Encyclopédie*, represents a leap forward in the conception of knowledge: all knowledge cannot be neatly circumscribed in orderly articles arranged in alphabetical order; knowledge is messy and overlapping and defies the artificial boundaries of an alphabetical order or the confines of an encyclopedia article. To adequately represent knowledge in all its complexity and elasticity, Diderot and d'Alembert create a system of cross-referencing (*renvois* in French) to assist the reader in reconstructing the tree of knowledge. The system of cross-referencing works against the alphabetical order of the *Encyclopédie*, and to some extent against the artificial boundaries of the individual articles. So, for example, if you read the article on “Geneva,” cross-references send you to “waterspout” and “tidal wave,” because they are meteorological phenomena associated with lakes in Switzerland; to “Eucharist,” “hell,” “faith,” and “Christianity” for more information about the Protestant religion as it is practiced in Geneva, to “effluvium” for more on the noxious odor emanating from cemeteries and the Genevan practice of burying the dead away from the middle of the city; and finally, to “socinianism” for an explanation of the theological doctrines of Faustus Socinus, related to beliefs about the trinity and the divinity of Christ. The more adventuresome and creative reader, in fact, Diderot's “ideal reader,” not only follows the

cross-references in the articles and reads the related materials mentioned explicitly, but creates his/her own cross-references by looking up other topics mentioned in the article.



Louis-Michel Van Loo, *Denis Diderot*, from postcard, Editions de la réunion des musées nationaux, 1984.

The following excerpt from Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* comes from an article by Diderot entitled, "Encyclopédie," in which he describes the collective project and its appropriateness for the age of reason.

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Encyclopedia. This word signifies *chain of knowledge*; it is composed of the Greek preposition *ἐν*, *in*, and the nouns *κύκλος*, *circle*, and *παιδεία*, *knowledge*.

Indeed, the purpose of an *encyclopedia* is to collect knowledge disseminated around the globe; to set forth its general system to the men with whom we live, and transmit it to those who will come after us, so that the work of preceding centuries will not become useless to the centuries to come; and so that our offspring, becoming better instructed, will at the same time become more virtuous and happy, and that we should not die without having rendered a service to the human race.

It would have been difficult to propose a more extensive object than covering everything related to human curiosity, duty, needs, and pleasures. For this reason, some persons accustomed to judge the possibilities of an enterprise by the limited resources they recognize in themselves have pronounced that we will never bring ours to completion. . . .

When one considers the immense material for an *encyclopedia*, the only thing one perceives distinctly is that it cannot be the work of a single man. How could a single man, in the short span of his life, manage to comprehend and develop the universal system of nature and art? Whereas the numerous scientific communities of La *Crusca* spent forty years constituting its vocabulary, and whereas our French Academicians had labored for sixty years on their dictionary, before producing its first edition! Yet what is the dictionary of a language? What is a lexicon, even executed as well as it can be? A precise collection of the articles to be filled in by an encyclopedic and analytical dictionary.

Diderot, Denis. "Encyclopedia." *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*. Translated by Philip Stewart. Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, 2002. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0000.004> (accessed June 29, 2026). Originally published as « Encyclopédie, » *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 5 : 635–648A (Paris, 1755).

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For many reasons, the court and the Church are concerned about the dissemination of information during the eighteenth century. If the *philosophes* are interested in “enlightening” the people—at least a wider portion of the population than was previously educated or had access to learning—the Church and particularly the king

take steps to minimize the damage done to their authority by the spread of new ideas. Through the system of **privileges** (a kind of royal permission to publish a work or primitive form of copyright), the king is able to establish a system of censorship in order to keep the spread of enlightenment in check.

Because of the system of censorship, many books are either not officially sanctioned or banned outright. But this does not mean that the books are not printed and do not circulate. On the contrary, eighteenth-century France has a healthy clandestine book trade, with banned books and marginally legal books circulating freely among a fairly broad reading public.

2. The Parisian Cityscape

Continuing with royal urban policy begun in the Renaissance and advanced under Louis XIV during the seventeenth century, the monarchy builds the *Place Louis XV* (today the *Place de la Concorde*). But unlike town squares constructed in the early periods that are surrounded on all sides by uniform buildings, the *Place Louis XV* is a largely open space. Flanked by the Seine River to the south, the gardens of the Tuileries Palace to the east, and the Champs Elysées to the west, the only buildings lie to the north of the square. The newly built Pont de la Concorde connects the square to the left bank. The emphasis on wide-open space is evident in the painting below from the late eighteenth century.



DeMachy painting of view from Tuileries gardens over Place Louis XV
(from Anthony Sutcliffe, *Paris: An Architectural History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, p. 54)

The creation of new wide-open urban space finds its echo in other areas developed during the age of Enlightenment. The *Ecole militaire*, or Royal Military Academy, is founded in 1751. Its design, with a central inner courtyard and several smaller interior courtyards, reflects the eighteenth-century taste for open space. The *Ecole militaire* opens out onto the fields of the *Champ-de-Mars* destined for military exercises. With the development of the *Ecole militaiare*, main avenues are built, creating the street layout for the *Invalides-Ecole militaire* neighborhood in the west of Paris.

Development in other neighborhoods also echoes the preference for open spaces. In 1757, construction begins on the new church of Sainte Geneviève, today the *Panthéon*. This outstanding example of neo-classical architecture (discussed in the next section) includes the development of the surrounding area. The Rue Soufflot is created to connect the *Panthéon* to the Luxembourg gardens.

Construction in other neighborhoods continues as the aristocracy builds more *hôtels* in the rococo and neo-classical styles (discussed in the next section). The Faubourg Saint

Honoré, to the north of the Champs Élysées, sees the development of aristocratic mansions to house the *salons*. Among these new buildings is the Élysée Palace, today home to France's president. On the left bank, and on the west side of Paris, where the aristocracy prefer to live ever since the displacement of the court to Versailles, the Faubourg Saint Germain area sees the construction of numerous mansions including the *Hôtel Matignon*, today the residence of the French prime minister, and the *Hôtel Biron* that today houses the *Musée Rodin*.

Consistent with Enlightenment attitudes toward harmony and order, and influenced by academic and intellectual discussions about urban development and architecture, construction regulations emerge for the first time during the eighteenth century. Inspired by a desire for uniformity in building, but also to promote health and hygiene, these regulations require buildings of 4 to 5 stories with the first floor reserved for the aristocracy. Other floors usually contain rented apartments for the lower classes, with the highest levels reserved for the lowest classes.

Real estate speculation also continues during the eighteenth century. One prime example of such speculation is the renovation and development of the *Palais Royal* area with gardens and shops. As we saw in the last section, the age of Enlightenment values the exchange of ideas. The gardens of the *Palais Royal* become a meeting and socializing area for all segments of society—from *philosophes* like Diderot to students from the Latin Quarter and prostitutes.

People meet and gather to discuss new ideas in the salons of the new *hôtels*, in the gardens of the *Palais Royal*, and in cafés. Cafés represent a kind of extended living room to the society of eighteenth-century France. People discuss political ideas, play chess, eat

light meals, or just people-watch in the increasingly popular cafés in Paris. The following describes *Le Procope*, the first café to open in Paris and a popular one among the *philosophes* and revolutionaries.

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During the eighteenth century, the café craze spread to Paris. These are places where people get together and exchange audacious, critical, ideas about reform. Current trends in philosophy and literature are discussed in a lively way. There are also “flies,” police spies that eavesdrop on the debates. But their presence barely hinders the conversation: some verbal precautions suffice to cover dangerous ideas. The best-known cafés are the Procope, the Gradot, and the Laurent or the Régence at the Palais Royal, where Diderot has the two characters in his *Rameau’s Nephew* meet.

The Parisian café the Procope, created in 1686, quickly becomes one of the most popular literary cafés in the capital. Authors like Voltaire or Rousseau get into the habit of going there. Supplanting the Café de la Régence, the Procope becomes the refuge of philosophers and encyclopedists. Diderot supposedly wrote articles for the *Encyclopédie* there. At the end of the eighteenth century, the Procope gets the nickname “The Chamber of Commons”: “It was called that derisively, because it’s the place where operations of the court are challenged and criticized; thus, the sanctuary of English freedom was parodied,” explains Louis-Sébastien Mercier in his *Tableau de Paris* [*Panorama of Paris*]. The Procope still exists nowadays. It is situated at 13, rue de l’Ancienne-Comédie, in the 6th arrondissement of Paris.

« Le Café Procope, L’un des hauts lieux de la *nouvelle philosophie* » *Bibliothèque nationale de France*, trans. By Julia Simon ; <https://essentiels.bnf.fr/fr/image/1c5ce2f7-1d11-48e9-8c11-8de1a19c6dc8-cafe-procope>.

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Images from <https://www.procope.com/>.

One final construction project marks the eighteenth century: the king decides to build a new wall—not to keep out foreign invaders, as in previous centuries, but in order to facilitate collecting taxes, or duties, on goods brought into and leaving the city of Paris. The new fiscal wall or *Mur des Fermiers Généraux* (Wall of the Tax Farmers) is erected around the city of Paris with gates located on major roads. Today, the Rotunda of la Villette still stands from this early fiscal wall.

3. Architectural Style

The architectural style of eighteenth-century France falls into two broad categories: **rococo** and **neo-classical**. The rococo is adopted in the first half of the

century and is characterized by an ornate, decorative style that is appropriate for intimate settings. The term rococo derives from the word *rocaille* (rockwork), that originally referred to the use of shells for ornamentation, and designates the preference for curving lines, especially in the shape of rocks, shells, foliage, and scrolls, for elaborate embellishment. Thus, the rococo style is best suited for interiors. Indeed, with the rococo, ornamentation for ornamentation's sake seems to be the guiding principle, making larger work feel as though it lacks coherence and unity. Although there are some examples of modest residences built in the rococo style, like the *Hôtel Chenizot*, the majority of larger *hôtels* and official buildings of the eighteenth century, such as the *Ecole militaire* and *Panthéon*, are designed in the neo-classical style.

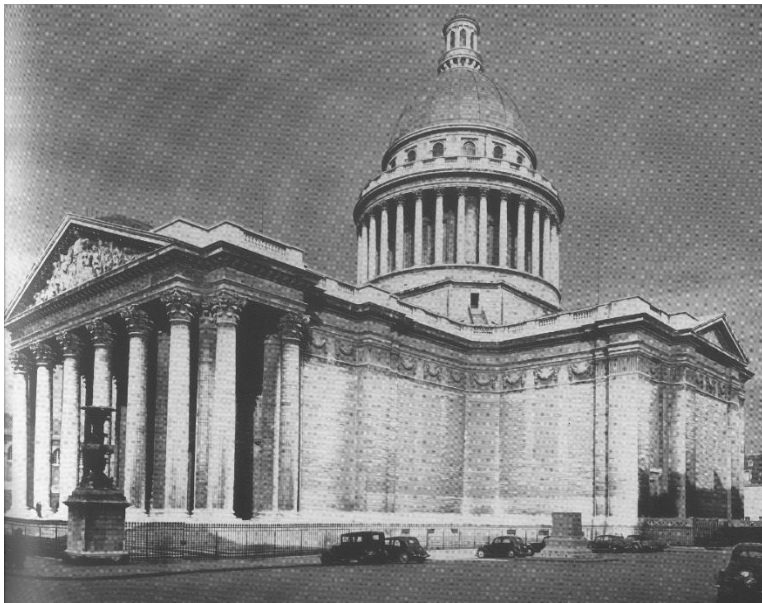


The Salon des Glaces inside the *Grand Trianon*, decorated in rococo style. Pozzoli, Milena Ercole, *Paris past and present*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1997, p. 129.

Neo-classical architecture reflects the influence of reason in the age of Enlightenment through its return to the values of classical antiquity, but without slavish copying of work from the past. The *neo* in neo-classical needs to be taken seriously, for

eighteenth-century architects see themselves as innovators who have learned valuable lessons from the past.

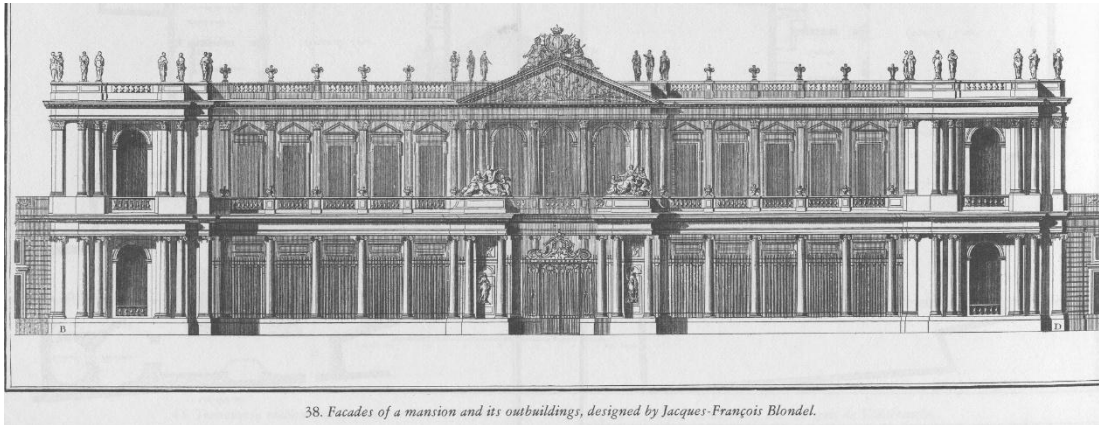
Perhaps best known among eighteenth-century architects is Jacques-Germain Soufflot, the man responsible for designing the Ste-Geneviève church, now the Panthéon. This shining example of French neo-classical architecture illustrates the harmony and proportions valued during the Enlightenment. The use of columns and a dome to crown the church echo the architectural style of Greek and Roman antiquity while the proportions represent the “modern” values of Enlightenment rationality.



Ste-Geneviève, view from south-west. Braham, Allan. *The Architecture of the French Enlightenment*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980, p. 81.

Aristocratic *hôtels* are also built in the neo-classical style. The plate, show below, from the *Encyclopédie*, is of an *hôtel* designed by Jacques-François Blondel, architect of the king, and illustrates French neo-classical architectural style of the eighteenth century with its emphasis on regularity on both the horizontal and vertical planes. The columns and statuary offset the two-story design to create a symmetrical, harmonious edifice,

without the ornamentation and fantasy associated with the baroque and rococo styles. There is a great deal of emphasis placed on geometrical shapes and a self-conscious avoidance of the ornamental organically inspired scrollwork of the rococo.



An *hôtel* designed by Jacques-François Blondel from Denis Diderot, ed. *The Architectural Plates of the "Encyclopédie"* New York: Dover, 1995, p. 25.

4. Literature and Intellectual Currents

Much of the literature of the eighteenth century serves a critical and/or didactic purpose. The *philosophes* prize reason and critical analysis of the society in which they live, over and above considerations of aesthetic form, displays of erudition, or service to the monarchy. In keeping with such values, literature in eighteenth-century France branches out into new genres. The novel gains in popularity, as writers address themselves to an audience that is more literate and better able to read and understand works individually. The subject matter of literature changes as well. The myths and historical figures that were popular in the art and literature of the seventeenth century—geared toward the aristocracy—make way for a literature with broader appeal. It is not necessary to be acquainted with the Greek and Roman gods to read the novels and essays of the

Enlightenment. Rather, authors use humor and satire to cast a critical gaze on the manners and morals of their own time.

Though capable of writing plays and poetry in the classical style of the previous century, Voltaire (pen name of François Marie Arouet) is best known today for his satirical short stories, such as *Candide* and *Micromegas*, that poke fun at the prejudices of the unenlightened. Voltaire uses wit, satire, and biting irony to mock religious zealots, the insanity of war, and the misconceptions Europeans have of other peoples, in order to bring about change for the better in French society.

Montesquieu, another of the *philosophes*, and a member of the Bordeaux Parlement (high judicial court), is also interested in improving social and political conditions in France. His first novel, *Persian Letters*, uses the literary genre of the **epistolary novel** (novel composed of letters) to create a text in which travelers from a foreign land see France from an “outsider’s” perspective. This technique—defamiliarization—enables Montesquieu to analyze and criticize all aspects of French social life in the eighteenth century, as his Persian travelers discover their host society.

Montesquieu chooses Persian travelers for a number of reasons. First, travelers from Persia represent a point of view that is very different from the traditional European perspective. They are Muslims and they live in a society ruled by a despot. Thus, the religious and political values with which they are familiar are very different from those found in France. Second, the relations between men and women in Persian society are also different from those in Europe. Determined by the values of their religion, social life in Persia is marked by the cloistering of women inside harems. Men move about freely in the public space while women stay isolated within the private space of the harem. So, to

Persian travelers, social life in France, with its mix of men and women, seems exotic and foreign. Finally, by creating Persian travelers, Montesquieu taps into the French interest in “exotic” cultures. As his Persians move through and criticize French society, they also reveal interesting things about their own culture. In the final analysis, the things revealed about Persian society also create a mirror for French society. As French readers gaze into the mirror of Persian society as it is represented in the novel, they catch not only a glimpse of their own society as foreigners might see it, they also see similarities—sometimes unflattering ones—between Persian society and their own. In other words, Montesquieu paints a critical portrait of French social and political life by seeing it from an outside perspective and, at the same time, he also paints a critical portrait of French society through his depiction of Persia.

The following excerpts from Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*, illustrate his use of his Persian travelers, Rica and Usbek, to criticize different aspects of French life in the eighteenth century.

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Letter 28

Rica to ***

Yesterday, I saw something rather odd, although in Paris it happens every day.

Towards the end of the afternoon, everyone assembles and goes to perform in a sort of show, called, so I have heard, a *play*. The main action is on a platform, called the *stage*. At each side you can see, in little compartments called *boxes*, men and women acting out scenes together, rather like those we have in Persia. Here are may be a woman

unhappy in love, who is expressing her amorous yearnings, while another, with greater vivacity, may be devouring her lover with her eyes, and he looks at her in the same way. Every emotion is displayed on the faces of these people, and conveyed with an eloquence which is all the more effective for being silent. Here the actresses are visible only down to the waist, and usually have a shawl, out of modesty, to cover their arms. Down below there is a crowd of people standing up, who make fun of those who are performing above, and they in turn laugh at those below. . . .

Letter 99 Rica to Rhedi, at Venice

I find that in France the capriciousness of fashion is amazing. They have forgotten how they were dressed this summer; still less do they know how they will be dressed this winter. But the hardest thing of all to believe is how much it costs for a husband to keep his wife in fashion.

What use would it be to give you an exact description of their clothes and their accessories? A new fashion would come along and destroy all my work, together with that of their tailors, and before you had received my letter everything would have changed.

A woman who leaves Paris to spend six months in the country comes back looking as antiquated as if she had been away for thirty years. . . .

Sometimes women's hair styles gradually go up and up, until a revolution suddenly brings them down again. There was a time when because of their enormous height a woman's face was in the middle of her body. At another time, her feet occupied the same position; her heels were pedestals supporting them in mid-air. It is almost

beyond belief, but architects have often been obliged to make doorways higher, lower or wider according as women's fashions required such alternations, and the conventions of their profession have been subordinated to caprice. Sometimes you see a prodigious number of beauty-spots on a woman's face, and they all disappear the next day. Once women had waists and teeth; nowadays such things are out of the question. With this changing nation, whatever the humorists say, the daughters are different from their mothers. . . .

Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, trans. C. J. Betts, New York: Penguin, 1973, 79-80, 183-84.

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One final letter from Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, raises deeper questions concerning cultural identity and cultural contact. While the letters above critique the monarchy, the Catholic religion, the theatre and opera, and French fashion, the letter below asks what it means to be from a particular culture, what constitutes cultural identity. In letter 30, through Rica, Montesquieu asks, "How can one be Persian?" the most famous sentence from the novel.

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Letter 30

Rica to Ibben, at Smyrna

The inhabitants of Paris carry their curiosity almost to excess. When I arrived, they looked at me as though I had been sent from Heaven: old men and young, women and children, they all wanted to see me. If I went out, everyone stood at the windows; if I was in the Tuileries, I immediately became the center of a circle; even the women surrounded me, like a rainbow composed of a thousand colors. If I was at a show, I would see a hundred lorgnettes focused on my face straight away. In a word, never was a man seen as

much as I was. It made me smile sometimes, to hear people who had hardly ever been out of their rooms saying to each other: ‘You’ve got to admit, he really does look Persian.’ It was incredible: I found portraits of me everywhere; I saw multiples of myself in every shop and on every mantelpiece, so greatly did people fear that they had not had a good enough look at me.

To receive such a honor as this is bound to become burdensome. I didn’t believe myself to be so curious and unusual a person, and, although I have a very good opinion of myself, I would never have imagined that I was likely to create a disturbance in a great city where nobody knew me at all. This made me decide to give up Persian costume and dress like a European, to see if there was still anything remarkable about my countenance. The experiment made me realize what I was really worth. Free of all foreign adornments, I found myself assessed more exactly. I had reason to complain of my tailor, who, from one instant to the next, had made me lose the esteem and attention of the public; for all at once I fell into a terrible state of non-existence. Sometimes I would spend an hour in company without anyone looking at me, or giving me the opportunity to open my mouth. But, if someone happened to tell the company that I was Persian, I would immediately hear a buzz around me: ‘Oh! Oh! Is he Persian? What a most extraordinary thing! How can one be Persian?’

Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, trans. C. J. Betts, New York: Penguin, 1973, p. 83.

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As we have seen, using the literary device of an epistolary novel, Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* asks important questions about cultural identity. His implicit comparisons of French and Persian society also suggest critiques of the Church and the monarchy in France. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, another of the *philosophes*, launches a more direct attack on social and political values in eighteenth-century France. His *Social Contract* is one of the most important and influential works of political philosophy to emerge from the French Enlightenment.

Rousseau is from Geneva, a democratic Swiss republic. The son of a watchmaker, he is almost entirely self-taught. In 1732, he makes his first trip to Paris, capital of the Enlightenment. In the following excerpt from his *Confessions*, one of the first modern autobiographies, he describes his expectations from the great city.

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How greatly did my first sight of Paris belie the idea I had formed of it! The exterior decoration that I had seen at Turin, the beauty of the streets, the symmetry and alignment of the houses, had led me to expect something even finer in Paris. I had imagined a city of a most imposing appearance, as beautiful as it was large, where nothing was to be seen but splendid streets and palaces of marble or gold. As I entered through the Faubourg Saint-Marceau, I saw nothing but dirty, stinking little streets, ugly black houses, a general air of squalor and poverty, beggars, carters, menders of clothes, sellers of herb-drinks and old hats. All this so affected me at the outset that all the real magnificence I have since seen in Paris has not been sufficient to efface my first impression, and I have always retained a secret aversion against living in the capital. I may say that all the time I did, subsequently, reside there was entirely devoted to seeking

means which would enable me to live elsewhere. Such is the fruit of an over-lively imagination, which exaggerates beyond the common measure and always see more than it is told to expect. I had heard such praise of Paris that I had imagined it like ancient Babylon, which, had I visited it, should no doubt have found falling equally short of the picture I had formed of it. The same thing happened to me at the opera, which I hastened to visit on the day after my arrival; the same thing happened to me later at Versailles; and later still when I saw the sea; and the same thing will always happen to me when I see sights of which I have heard too much. For it is impossible for me, and difficult for Nature herself, to surpass the riches of my imagination.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Confessions*. Trans. J. M. Cohen. New York: Penguin, 1953, 155.

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5. Art

With the death of Louis XIV in 1715, royal patronage of the arts declines. Louis XV and Louis XVI do not embody the spirit of absolute monarchy with the style and ability that Louis XIV did before them. As a result, and in response to growing academic discussions about art, the eighteenth century sees the arrival of new genres of painting that reflect the values of the period.

Whereas the seventeenth century supported large canvases with historical and mythological subjects reflecting the power and grandeur of the absolute monarchy, the Enlightenment appreciates paintings that depict more contemplative scenes and subject matter that appeals more to reason than to the emotions. While there are still dramatic historical canvases produced during the eighteenth century, and a large number of rococo

paintings depicting cherubs on puffy clouds, there are important developments in the areas of portraiture, domestic scenes, still-lives and landscape painting.

Influenced by the new values of the Enlightenment that encourage the use of critical reason, the paintings of eighteenth-century France promote individual moral values rather than the splendor of the monarchy. Jean-Baptiste Greuze and Jean Siméon Chardin both paint domestic scenes that preach the values of domesticity and the joys of family life. Diderot extols the virtues of the paintings by Greuze in his *Salons* (descriptions of exhibitions mounted in the courtyard of the Louvre): “Here is your painter and mine, the first one among us who took it upon himself to give morals to art, and to link events so that it would be easy to write a novel from them.” One painting that Diderot particularly admires by Greuze depicts a young girl with her dead bird, which Diderot interprets as a metaphor for her lost virginity. Diderot believes that this painting teaches a moral lesson about regret and remorse: the young girl has neglected her moral duty—according to Diderot, because she forgot to feed her pet bird while she was off on a rendez-vous with her lover—and now must face the consequences of her moral lapse. Diderot admires the way in which Greuze teaches the moral lesson for, although he claims that the painting preaches chastity, he finds himself drawn to the girl, wishing that he were her lover. This combination of moral sentiment, seductiveness, and voyeurism is characteristic of the genre paintings of the French Enlightenment.



Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *The Dead Bird*, from postcard, Editions des Musées Nationaux, Paris, 1975.

In addition to paintings that teach a moral lesson, Chardin and Greuze also depict domestic scenes in which the subject is deeply absorbed in a given activity. Many of these paintings represent children engaged in games such as building houses with cards, reading, blowing soap bubbles, or playing with toys. The intense absorption of the subjects depicted invites the viewer to quietly contemplate their activities. The spectator of these paintings finds him/herself as quietly absorbed with the paintings as the subjects within them. Unlike the grandiose depictions of historical or religious events that appeal to and move the passions, these peaceful domestic scenes invite the speculation and meditation of reason.



Jean-Baptiste Chardin, *Child with Top*, from postcard, Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1979.

Finally, landscape painting becomes increasingly popular during the eighteenth century for many of the same reasons that make genre painting appealing. Landscapes, as they are painted during the French Enlightenment, invite the spectator to walk into the painting and enjoy the natural surroundings. Most landscape paintings, such as those of Claude-Joseph Vernet, depict tranquil scenes that evoke the calm of nature. However, the sublime is also beginning to make its appearance in art. Instead of peacefulness and tranquility, some landscapes reveal the power of nature in the representation of storms, intended to awaken feelings of awe in the spectator. Within the safe confines of one's home, before a painting of a storm, one can wonder at the powerful destructive forces of nature while rationally contemplating the marvels of the natural world. Again, these paintings stress a rational reaction, tinged with emotion, but ultimately aimed at provoking a philosophical attitude toward art and the world around us.



Claude-Joseph Vernet, *A Seashore*, from Michael Levey, *Painting and Sculpture in France 1700-1789*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972, 1993, p. 200.

6. Music

There are many types of music composed during the eighteenth century. Opera continues to be a major art form, as is evident in the excerpt from Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* above. The Parisian public of the eighteenth century, very much like that of the seventeenth century, adores going out in public "to see and be seen." In many respects, opera is the perfect type of spectacle for this primarily social activity.

But the Parisians of the age of Enlightenment also enjoy smaller social gatherings, such as those that take place in the salons. For these more intimate settings, a different type of music is required. The music for these intimate settings does not require elaborate spectacle and staging, but rather invites quiet listening, much like the calm contemplation that the paintings of the period evoke from the spectator.

Chamber music, named for the smaller rooms in which it is performed, meets the needs of a very sociable public that likes to gather in more intimate settings and engage in informed dialogue on a variety of topics. This more intellectual public's taste in music is

also a bit more sophisticated than that of earlier periods: the listener of the eighteenth century likes to listen to music that has a certain melodic and harmonic complexity built around the notion of **counterpoint**.

Counterpoint is a compositional strategy in music that uses a base melody and adds independent but complementary melodies to create a complex harmonic whole. Often times in counterpoint, one instrument will establish the base melody and other additional instruments will join in with their distinct, melodies to create a music that has a complex texture. The overlapping and interwoven melodies respond to one another, while at the same time creating a unified piece of music.

In a sense, eighteenth-century chamber music is a more cerebral type of music, suited to the tastes of the age in which it is produced. It appeals to the senses—the sounds of the instruments penetrate through the listener’s sense of hearing—but it also appeals to reason. The counterpoint creates harmonious, orderly, mathematical relationships that reason can contemplate and appreciate.

Like the instruments of the seventeenth-century, the instruments of eighteenth-century chamber music are relatively quiet in comparison with today’s louder instruments. In particular, the use of the harpsichord gives Enlightenment chamber music a light quality. Unlike the piano, the harpsichord is not able to register dynamic differences. In other words, the notes sound at the same volume no matter how softly or forcefully the player touches the keys. Many of the other instruments as well, including the transverse flute, the baroque trumpet, and the lute, are quieter instruments in comparison with today’s modern instruments. Thus, their dynamic ranges are also somewhat limited.

What results is a calm, quiet, but intensely intricate music that invites listening rather than dancing, and quiet contemplation rather than enthusiastic, passionate response.

Jean-Philippe Rameau is one of the most important composers of eighteenth-century France. His theoretical work in harmony establishes mathematical principles on which his compositions are based. He composed numerous operas—that were in a new style opposed to that of Lully—in addition to works for harpsichord and some sacred music.

Rameau’s “Pièces de clavecin en concerts” (Pieces for harpsichord in concert), represents his ensemble chamber music. Each “concert” or suite is composed of 3 to 5 movements that are unified by a common key. They may be performed by harpsichord alone or with flute, violin, and/or viol. The counterpoint is evident in the use of the different voicing of the instruments (harpsichord, flute, and violin in the recording) to distinguish the independent, but complementary melodies.

Listen to the Pièces de clavecin en concert no. 5 at this link:

https://youtu.be/UvXBl_D1lms?si=8MsXOHfo3UTEprm-