



CLASSICISMS

February 16–June 11, 2017 | Public opening reception: February 22, 7–8:30 pm

From Attic vases to avant-garde art, expansive exhibition explodes the idea of classicism as an unchanging ideal



The University of Chicago’s Smart Museum of Art presents *Classicisms*, an exhibition that examines changing notions of classicism, the seemingly fixed principles of order, reason, and decorum that are associated with the classical age of ancient Greece and Rome.

On view February 16 to June 11, 2017, the exhibition and accompanying scholarly catalogue trace classicism’s meanings across the centuries from varying artistic, cultural, and ideological perspectives. The exhibition features 70 objects spanning diverse genres, eras, and media—paintings, ancient and modern sculpture, cast plaster replicas, and works on paper. From a rigorously geometric French academic painting to a collection of homoerotic nineteenth-century photographs, these works reveal a multifaceted concept with a complicated history in Europe.

“As an aesthetic ideal, classicism seems to depend upon a singularly fixed tradition connecting the centuries, upon an unchanging legacy rooted in models of an authoritative Greco-Roman past,” says co-curator Larry Norman, Frank L. Sulzberger Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures at the University of Chicago. “But this exhibition tells a quite different story. Through the striking variety of their artistic forms, subject matter, and political and moral designs, these images and objects demonstrate not only how surprisingly flexible the classical tradition proves but also how disruptive and multifarious its uses can be.”

“A project like *Classicisms* transcends any individual discipline,” adds co-curator Anne Leonard, Smart Museum Curator and Associate Director of Academic Initiatives. “Like many exhibitions at the Smart, it asks far-ranging questions and has involved a broad range of scholars in object-driven inquiry. The result is an exhibition that takes an ostensibly staid topic and explodes it into something utterly surprising and subversive.”

The opening of the exhibition will be celebrated during a public reception at the Smart Museum on Wednesday, February 22, from 7 to 8:30 pm, featuring in-gallery talks from UChicago scholars, a short performance excerpted from Court Theatre’s adaptation of the Greek tragedy *Electra*, as well as food and drink inspired by the art and ideas on display.

ABOUT CLASSICISMS

Classicism is often associated with a conventional set of rules founded on supposedly timeless notions such as order, reason, and decorum. As a result, it can be understood as rigid, outdated, or stodgy. But as history demonstrates, classicism itself is far from a stable concept. As an aesthetic category, it has more often given rise to debate than consensus, prompting questions about what models it seeks to emulate, how its principles are adapted to different cultures and times, and what effect its exemplary works should produce on the public.

The 70 objects featured in the exhibition, ranging from antiquity to the twentieth century, are primarily drawn from the Smart Museum’s collection. This core is supplemented by loans from the Art Institute of Chicago, the Cadbury Research Library at the University of Birmingham (United Kingdom), the Horvitz Collection (Boston), the Milwaukee Art Museum, the Minneapolis Institute of Art, the Museum of Modern Art (New York), the Newberry Library (Chicago), the University of Chicago Regenstein Library, and the Spurlock Museum of World Cultures (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign).

The exhibition is divided into four major sections:

Classical Models: Imitation and Contestation

Drawing connections between disparate eras and media—ancient statues, classical portrait heads, cast-plaster replicas, academic figure drawings, and modern sculptures by Auguste Rodin and Henry Moore—this section will demonstrate the commanding authority of classical models and show how they in turn became a focal point for modern artists seeking to revise, challenge, or overturn canonical forms.

Ruins and Remains

This section highlights the enduring fascination of ruins, both as a reminder of the transience of classical perfection and a source of inspiration to later artists. Featured works include imposing engravings of Roman antiquities by Giovanni Battista Piranesi; prints after Claude Lorrain’s Arcadian scenes; Louis Dupré’s *Portrait of M. Fauvel, the French Consul, with View of the Acropolis* (1819, Smart Museum of Art); and 19th-century photographs documenting ancient monuments.

Harmony and Dissonance

Offering a challenge to prevailing classical associations with order, calm, and reason, this section presents a range of works that alternately embrace or reject traditional classical ideals, such as Sébastien Bourdon's *Christ Receiving the Children* (c. 1655, Art Institute of Chicago), Jean-Baptiste Regnault's *Socrates Tearing Away Alcibiades from the Embrace of Sensuality* (1785, Smart Museum of Art), William-Adolphe Bouguereau's *Homer and His Guide* (1874, Milwaukee Art Museum), and Joel Peter Witkin's photograph *Canova's Venus* (1982, Smart Museum of Art). It shows the boldly inventive side of classicizing artists such as Nicolas Poussin and introduces subversive modes of classical reception, including the homoerotic emphasis of late-nineteenth-century Hellenism.

Clarity and Obscurity

This section questions another common assumption about classicism and classical art: its legibility. The iconography and didactic messages of classicizing art can often be anything but clear. A varied set of paintings, sculptures, and works on paper will demonstrate the important place of riddles, masks, and hidden meanings within the stylistic conventions of classicism—and the persistence of these enigmatic motifs over time, with examples ranging from antique vases to more modern works including Raffaello Monti's marble sculpture *Veiled Lady* (c. 1860, Minneapolis Institute of Art), Giorgio de Chirico's painting *The Seer* (1914–15, Museum of Modern Art), and Christo's print *Wrapped Venus, Villa Borghese, 1963* (1975, Smart Museum of Art).

The themes of *Classicisms* spring from an interdisciplinary planning process organized by the co-curators and involving scholars from the University of Chicago representing a broad range of disciplines, including the visual arts as well as literature, music, film, and more.

RELATED PROGRAMS

The Smart Museum will present a series of free public programs including guest lectures, tours, art-making workshops, and programs for families. A complete list of programs will be made available online in the near future at: <http://smartmuseum.uchicago.edu/exhibitions/classicisms>.

RELATED PUBLICATION

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with essays and other contributions by an interdisciplinary group of fifteen scholars. The book is published by the Smart Museum of Art and distributed through the University of Chicago Press. Available spring 2017.

CURATORS

Larry F. Norman, Frank L. Sulzberger Professor, Romance Languages and Literatures, Theater and Performance Studies, Fundamentals, and the College, University of Chicago; and Anne Leonard, Curator and Associate Director of Academic Initiatives at the Smart Museum

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First page images (l-r):

Jean-Baptiste Regnault, *Socrates Tearing Away Alcibiades from the Embrace of Sensuality*, 1785, Oil on canvas. Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, Purchase, The Paul and Miriam Kirkley Fund for Acquisitions, 2013.31.

Raffaello Monti, *Veiled Lady*, c. 1860, Marble. Collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Art, The Collectors' Group Fund, 70.60.

SUPPORT

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Presented in the Richard and Mary L. Gray Gallery.

ABOUT THE SMART MUSEUM OF ART

As the fine arts museum of the University of Chicago, the Smart Museum of Art is home to thought-provoking exhibitions and an exquisite collection of more than 15,000 objects, including modern masterpieces, millennia-old Chinese ritual objects, rich examples of Renaissance painting, and provocative works of contemporary art. Through collaborations with scholars, the Smart has established itself as a driving force for creative thinking through the arts at the University and a pioneering model of what a 21st century academic art museum can be. The Museum also offers distinctive programs that inspire visitors of all ages to experience the dynamic role of the visual arts in our world. The Smart first opened in 1974.

Mission

The Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago opens the world through art and ideas.

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Hours

Tuesday–Sunday, 10 am–5 pm
Thursday evenings until 8 pm

Galleries are closed Mondays and holidays.

Admission is always free. All are welcome.