Introduction: Order, Progress and Protest

The eighteenth century, in which Voltaire wrote on the age of Louis XIV and Gibbon on the Roman Empire, has been credited with the rediscovery of history. It has also been claimed as the period in which we in the modern age begin to recognize ourselves. The French Revolution of 1789, in particular, appears to mark off an almost objectively distinct past that we can learn from but never feel part of, and open up an exposure to the in calculable that has kept us busy ever since. Cutting a swathe between two such very different worlds — the enclosed systems of the court autocracies of Europe, based on the ‘Divine Right of Kings’, and the fluid and open-ended society which asserted the natural rights of all men to freedom and equality — the Revolution has understandably acquired the status of a turning point.

Familiar images have rounded out this picture: the storming of the Bastille; the crowds marching on the French king’s palace at Versailles; Wordsworth, in Paris in 1790, hailing the Revolution as a new dawn; the Revolutionaries resetting the calendar in the first year of the new Republic (1792) at Year One; the ultimate beheading of Louis XVI in 1793. Not everything about the French Revolutionaries’ violent course of action was new. Events in Paris had been preceded in 1776, across the Atlantic, by the American colonists’ Declaration of Independence from the British Crown, and by the winning of that independence by force of arms in 1783. Republicanism worked out on the basis of a new social contract of equality between constituent states, and freedom of all citizens under the law, had then secured a signal success. Nonetheless, when the move to liberty came in 1789 it was on the continent of Europe, on the soil of what Louis XIV, who had died only seventy years before, had built up into the most powerful of nation-states. The other monarchies of the old continent, and all the sources of authority, secular and ecclesiastical, of what historians have termed the ancien régime, were seized as by the shock reverberations of an earthquake.
When the violence and unforeseen effects of the Revolution are taken into account, however, it is its context which provides its greatest interest for the student of the arts. This book is about themes of cultural continuity through evolutionary times, and the ways in which they related to new ideas which overrode them, before and after the great political and social rupture of 1789. The themes will be outlined later in this introduction (pp. 26-7); but the fundamental notion which lies behind them underwrites the entire period from 1700 to 1850, of which the French Revolution forms a midpoint. This is the relationship of authority to individual freedom of action.

Such a concern had been debated in the general context of human affairs for centuries, not least by the ancient Greeks. But the eighteenth century experienced new incentives to disengage from the absolutism of received rules, and test the play of alternatives. Some of these incentives came from existing examples: societies such as those of England and Holland, where individual problem-solving was encouraged by the Protestant ethic. The English constitution, balanced between King and Parliament after the country’s Glorious (and bloodless) Revolution of 1688, which installed a Dutch-born king on the throne, confirmed a degree of freedom in the distribution of power which received close attention from continental observers. The French writer Voltaire, visiting England in 1726-28, praised ‘that wise Government where the Prince, all-powerful for doing good, has his hands tied for doing evil’. Voltaire, a convinced admirer of Louis XIV’s autocratic organization of the French state, devoted two of his Lettres Philosophiques on England (published in English in 1733, in French in 1734) to the English system of divided power.

Further incentives came from the shared exercise, in an age imbued with the idea of progress, of the powers of rational and essentially secular enquiry. This happened across the entire Western World, now enlarged to include St Petersburg (founded 1703) in Russia and Philadelphia (1681) in North America. In what a later age was to call the ‘Enlightenment’, critical evaluation was extended to all institutions, and all received dogma – religious and political – was tempered by a probing scepticism. Spreading from England, a form of theological belief known as ‘deism’ scanned a God-created universe with a confidence in human reason that many advocates no longer felt in established churches. Non-Christian religions and cultures were increasingly studied (notably those of India, as the West’s familiarity with the sub-continent deepened towards 1800), even if, in general, Europe’s estimate of its own cultural superiority remained intact and, for many, Christian revelation continued to inspire.

From the century’s beginning, characteristic initiatives were being taken in the individually differing cultures of England, France and Germany, which would hasten the spread of the Enlightenment. In England a free press had been allowed in 1695 and was enjoying the first flurries of active life. Though political and social rather than philosophical matters absorbed much of this, press censorship in continental countries made English newspapers and journals the envy of enlightened circles in Europe that were committed to widening the bases of debate. In France, where Louis XIV’s long reign lasted till 1715, the royal protocol that had congealed round the courtiers at Versailles was leaving Paris free not only to consolidate its famous salons, where matters of the day were discussed, but to provide the principal hub for the expression of French contemporaneity in thought and culture across the civilized world. In Germany, not yet a single nation but a collection of autocracies, there was the foundation by Leibniz, in 1700, of the Berlin Academy of Sciences, giving promise of the commitment to international scholarship that Germany was to achieve before the century was out, through its own ‘Enlightenment’, and hold up as an example to the world in the following century.

The fundamental optimism of most Enlightenment enquiry sat well with the revelations of a universe kept orderly by gravitation, as described by Isaac Newton (1642-1727, see Chapter Three). The English poet Pope (1688-1744) found much to admire in the apparent perfection of the Newtonian model; and so, across the Channel, did the longer-lived Voltaire (1694-1778). But both these representatives of their times reacted with outrage to evident imperfections in their own societies. Pope, a Catholic living in Protestant England under the first two Georges, perceived a corrosive dullness in English affairs. This is condemned at the end of his poem The Dunciad (1743), in words of awesome catastrophe:

She comes, she comes! the sable throne behold
Of Night primeval and of Chaos old!
Before her, fancy’s gilded clouds decay,
And all its varying rainbows die away.
Wit shoots in vain its momentary fires,
The meteor drops, and in a flash expires.
As one by one, at dread Medea’s strain,
The sick’ning stars fade off th’ ethereal plain . . .
Nor public flame, nor private, dares to shine,
Nor human spark is left, nor glimpse divine!
Lo! thy dread empire, Chaos! is restored;
Light dies before thy uncreating word;
Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall,
And universal darkness buries all.

The British way of life so admired by Voltaire appears, in this poem, as in a kind of free fall. Voltaire by contrast, a deist in absolutist France, had specific targets in his sights, many to do with the Catholic Church: not only what he saw as its general indifference to public good, but also its ownership of property and, above all, its religious persecution. While his famous satire on optimism, Candide (1759), ended in dark resignation (p. 118), his increasingly outspoken campaigns for the unity of man, and for justice and tolerance, were to draw out all the passion for reform in him, and become international Enlightenment causes.

In the middle of the century a student of individual humanity who was also one of history’s great unpredictable Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78), was carrying enquiry to the very heart of ancien régime culture, seeing it (Discourse on the Arts and Sciences, 1749, and later works) as overblown, promoting
luxury, and a moral destroyer. His treatises on reforming education (Emile), and on the role of the individual citizen in relation to government (The Social Contract), appeared in 1762. He was to include Enlightenment figures themselves in his criticism: but the combustibility of his ideas on how men should live – looking forward with the reason they could usefully develop, but also back to the natural light from which they came – made him a beacon figure not only for the Enlightenment but for the entire Romantic age which followed.

Though always beset by censorship, the new habits of enquiry made swift headway with the educated, modifying even the Calvinism of Geneva, the esteemed city-republic where Rousseau had been born, and where Voltaire came to live in the 1750s. Enlightened thinkers speculated on the future of North America, where native Indian and immigrant white societies lived side by side. In turn the republican hopes of the American whites were fed by enlightened thinking. Its humanitarianism even made headway among the old despots of Europe, years ahead of the French Revolution. Under its influence Joseph II, Habsburg Emperor of Austria, abolished serfdom in his country in 1781 and torture in 1787. In Russia Catherine the Great (reigned 1762–96) initiated a sequence of major penal reforms as advocated by the Italian legal theorist Beccaria. Ideals of republics of citizens equally protected by enlightened laws led directly to notions of human betterment which became influential after 1800 in the form of the social utopianism of French and British reformists (see Chapter Six). Slowly, too, the movement to end the horrors of the international slave-trade grew in strength and Wilberforce lived to see Britain become the first modern nation to abolish participation in it in 1833.

As the nineteenth century opened Europe was entering a second revolutionary phase, politically less idealistic than the first: the massacres stage-managed by the Revolutionaries in Paris in 1792 and the Terror of 1793–4 had seen to that. Enlightenment hope for the unity of man that summered, it seems, in Napoleon after his reading of Voltaire, disappeared in his dreams of conquest and the wars that embroiled Europe for twenty years. The Code Napoléon, with its provision of legal equality, survived him to give a basis for modern civil law across much of Europe. But the Congress of Vienna of 1815, after his fall, found the leaders of the nations divided by sectional interests and even absorbed in efforts to revive the pre-Revolutionary trappings of royal and priestly power. Austria occupied part of northern Italy and Poland became a vassal state of Russia. Strong nationalism was aroused which would have marked effects on the arts, as we shall see. The uprisings which seized France in 1830, and Europe more generally in 1848, were the violent outcome of protest. In between the revolutions, as Balzac’s novels of Paris life reveal, this was a competitive society in which businessmen and industrialists fought a deadly game to secure political and personal advantage. Russian fiction reminds us (pp. 242–3) of the excesses of a bureaucratic world, in which authority at petty levels could be as death-dealing to individual freedoms and self-respect as it had ever been.

By the early eighteen hundreds, the Industrial Revolution in Western Europe was also offering the starkest evidence of a social upheaval that was no less powerful than the political, and even more unstoppable in its power of acceleration. Here too we must look to eighteenth-century beginnings in the application of the discoveries of science to technology, an activity in which the English emerged in the lead about 1750. It was also in England, where credit for factory-building was easily obtainable, that a massive investment in industrial productivity took place between 1750 and 1800. France, however (ancien régime), France, before 1789, had developed civil engineering to the highest scientific standards: and here the abolition of restrictions on labour imposed by the medieval guilds led to expanding local industries promoted by capitalists who employed rural workers. Both countries shared the optimism of this eighteenth-century phase. Even after the venom released under the Paris Terror began to threaten him, a leading Enlightenment figure, the Marquis de Condorcet, would write in 1793 that ‘progress will vary, but there will be no turning back’. But the future would be problematic: there was to be no turning back either of population growth, especially in the industrial cities of Britain, as work was sought there by part of an already increasing rural population displaced by land enclosure in the countryside. London’s growth was the most spectacular: a population of 600,000 in 1700 had become three million by 1851. Paris, with 250,000 people in 1700, possessed 1,500,000 in 1851; though the population of France, eighteen million when Louis XIV died in 1715, rising to twenty-six million in 1789 and thirty-four million by 1850, remained essentially rural-based. Long before 1800, London and England’s northern industrial cities were overcrowded: lodging-houses could not cope with demand for beds by those coming to find work. Dissenting religious beliefs, especially Wesley’s popular Methodism, and the millennial teaching of mystics such as Swedenborg – a version of which influenced Blake – flourished in such settings. In the 1830s the plight of children of seven to fourteen years of age working for thirteen hours a day in factories was being taken up by reformers. The many social evils were castigated to moving effect in the novels of Dickens.

The impact of the age of revolutions on the drama, literature, visual arts and music that are our theme will recur in the chapters which follow. Beethoven in Vienna, and Goya in Spain, to name only two practitioners in different fields, working against very different backgrounds, felt it deeply. But something must first be said about the ‘two world’ view which political and social commentary on the period 1700–1850 has also encouraged in assessments of the arts. ‘Before’, according to this view, we find a traditional respect for the authority of the past; especially for the classical, ‘form-perfecting’ civilizations of Greece and Rome, as shown, for example, in England’s early eighteenth-century ‘Augustan’ period of literature. ‘After’, we see a freedom of outlook that between 1800 and 1850 led to such form-defying extremes as the late painting of Turner or the music of Berlioz. In truth, if the main function of artists for centuries has been to set down what their contemporaries had most keenly wanted to see perpetuated, the revolutionary age could not fail to put that function to the test in dramatically new ways. The valuable distinction made by the literary scholar M.H. Abrams, in his book The Mirror and the Lamp (1953), between an art which objectively confronts the outside world, as a mirror reflects external
eraly', and that which expresses the artist's subjective feelings about that world, s lamp gives out light, finds support in the broad, generalized spectacle of 'classical' eighteenth century giving way to a 'Romantic' nineteenth. But it is important to recognize that changes in the arts are never as clear as helpful nalognies make out. Wordsworth's invocation to the French Revolution, 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive', left untouched the painter David's classically allowed habit of making nude studies of the figures in his modern subject-pictures and putting clothes on them. Beethoven and Schubert, together with Mendelssohn, Chopin and other composers of the early nineteenth century, all hared in the revival of regard for the formal musical structures which J.S. Bach had been elaborating to such gripping effect close to 1750. Turner and Berlioz themselves - as we shall see - constantly referred back to the 'classical designs' of their predecessors. It is indeed the diverse ways in which artists combine the freedoms of the present moment with the varied forms of authority of the past, the spontaneous with the structured, the openness of desire with the finalities of design, that make the century-and-a-half from 1700 to 1850 so endlessly rewarding. Such combinations had always been made: but never before, perhaps, in circumstances which - as we shall discuss in Chapter Four - left many artists with so strong a sense of their own individuality.

In a period of such diversity and overlaps of style, labels are inevitable but inadequate. Most of them were invented later than the art which inspired them. But their general currency today makes it essential that some attempt be made to give meaning to them, and especially to the relationships of such terms as 'Classical' (as now used of eighteenth-century styles, in much critical literature, with a capital C), 'Baroque' and 'Romantic' to one another.

Baroque to Classical

Long before 1700 'classical' art, embodying the values of Greece and Rome which had been renewed in Italy at the Renaissance, had come to represent for educated opinion a veritable touchstone of distinction by which all other art was measured. It is true that disputes conducted through the seventeenth century had asked whether the knowledge that man had accumulated since Antiquity had put the Moderns in a position of superiority. But Greek and Roman art employed ideals of symmetry, balance, proportion and measurement derived from mathematics. These, clearly, did not 'progress': they carried, rather, a changeless power to satisfy. French classicism, in particular, had recently put down deep, ineradicable roots in both art and poetry. In his L'Art Poétique of 1674 Nicolas Boileau had sought to define the qualities that made classical designs so admirable. Reason, he thought, had been their guide, eliminating all inessentials and irrelevancies and enabling the poet to arrive at a perfect, all-coherent statement. In the plays of Racine, who died in 1699, Aristotle's ideal of the tragic drama as an objectively complete whole was upheld by the poet's observation of the unities of time, place and action (the last requiring that all characters should behave in a manner consistent with their rank, and that decorum should not be infringed). The Academies founded by Louis XIV to watch over the different arts discussed how the mastery of form could enhance content by controlling it: through a writer's intelligible use of words or an artist's command of firm line that brooked no ambiguity, communication at the right elevated level with your audience, it was suggested, would be established.

The logic of such thinking clearly carried its perils: rules objectively built into works of art could - and did - easily become formulas. But around the turn of the century, in books that went through many English editions and which were quickly translated into French and German, Locke was generating interest in the processes by which the mind picks up information: the senses, he claimed, were in fact knowledge's only provider. This was to be a healthy corrective to runaway temptations to 'unpack' a work of art by looking only for what the rules had taught should be there. The composer Rameau's system of harmony (1722), based on relationships between sounds, certainly involved objective mathematical 'laws': but all Lockeians knew that music also entailed the impinging of sounds on the consciousness of a listener. This was a perspective that could not, as the century's music developed, be ignored, and which lent its own strength to the Baroque Age of music in which Rameau wrote, and to that of Haydn and Mozart which followed.

To campaigners for classical order in the late eighteenth century, what we now call 'Baroque' art and architecture seemed not only to disregard that order but to rely on its opposite, wildness and excess. A later claim that the word may derive from the Portuguese barroco, applied to an elongated (not truly spherical) pearl, has now come to convey a valuable, positive visual image, and also to illustrate a distinctive characteristic of Baroque art: movement in a given direction in preference to the self-contained symmetry or balance of classical design.2 If we remember this image, Baroque's 'wildness' begins to look like the inevitable, as well as literal, outcome of its structuring purpose. Baroque indeed - as an Italian creation - shares such an intention with classicism. By extension the name is now applied to the whole era, from 1600 into the eighteenth century, which savoured, in a variety of forms, the merits of calculated and sometimes overwhelming movement towards the spectator, notably in the emotional worlds of drama and that most extravagant of arts, opera. This last had originated about 1600 in Italy, but was itself heir to a cult of stage spectacle there which had grown up over a century earlier.

Full use had been made in the seventeenth century of the propaganda value of the visual Baroque: by the Catholic Church of Rome anxious to retain the faith of believers, and convert non-believers, through the sheer splendour and illusion of access to Paradise of Baroque churches; and by Louis XIV and other absolutist monarchs, keen to overawe all who served them as courtiers and who visited them as friends or enemies from other countries. But the Baroque quality of dramatic movement could also be deployed in the treatment of landscape or 'low life' themes, and this factor gave the style added resonance for painters of the following century. The Antwerp painter Rubens (1577-1640), well-versed in the Italian Baroque, was employed by European princes and
churchmen to put over his mastery of human themes in decorative ceilings and altarpieces. But elements which made Rubens's painting (Fig. 1) a natural transmitter of Baroque effects – especially rich colour and variety of brushstroke – were to reassert themselves continually, not least in the painting of Watteau (Plate I) before 1720, Boucher in the 1750s, Gainsborough and Fragonard from the 1760s and Delacroix (Plate VIII) from the 1820s.

While the visual imprint of the Baroque was strongly reinforced by Rubens, in France it had to withstand the authority of the painter Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665). Such a painting as The Testament of Eudamidas (c. 1650, Fig. 3) has a forcefulness of light and shade that had come to be part of the modern Baroque to which Poussin was sensitive, but its design has a concision and an austerity which proclaim it as a product of French classicism. Poussin's classicism coincided with that of the playwright Corneille, and was mirrored by the crucially important tragic dramas of Racine, which included the most emotionally intense of French plays, Phèdre (1677). In his book on tragic drama, George Steiner saw the seventeenth century as the 'great divide' in the history of his subject: the tragedies of Corneille and Racine, seen in the main by cultivated audiences familiar with their tightly-construed classical plots, were succeeded in the eighteenth century by plays which had to attract a bourgeois public with happy endings. We shall see that the classical unities of time, place and action in a Racine tragedy had to give ground as regard for the open structure of a Shakespeare play grew: but it should also be said that, however audiences might change, the boiled-down forms employed by Corneille and Racine and also by Poussin (who worked in Rome, home of classicism) produced a core of ever-fruiful resource for the French. Literary figures in our period from Voltaire to Stendhal wanted to explore in detail how Racine related to Shakespeare, and painters from David to Delacroix to refer back to an age which contained Poussin as well as Rubens.

The contrast between Italian-based Baroque and French classicism, therefore, was expressed primarily through visual media: the Baroque through architecture, sculpture, painting and staged opera; French classicism, essentially, through tragic drama and painting (and some architecture). Both sought controlled effects: those of Baroque, however, by the expansive act of taking the spectator over; those of French classicism, characteristically, by compression, by withholding themselves, and by making the spectator wish to follow. When each approach is controlled by a first-rate practitioner, as in the case respectively of Rubens and Poussin, a formidable experience is guaranteed. The 'Baroque'

Figure 1: Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640). The Flemish Kermis. Oil on panel, 149 x 261 cm. About 1622–30. Louvre, Paris.

While Baroque painting was often required to express high, elevated themes, it could also project animated, 'low life' subjects. Though the small-scale figures register here as a cumulative mass (all seen below the horizon-line, as in Bruegel), individual groups have a heroic character. The dynamically balanced couple to the right of the tree caught the attention of Watteau (Fig. 2). Rubens's picture, in France by 1685, was to influence paintings of Paris fairground subjects by Watteau's followers.
experience of a Rubens painting acts quickly, by overcoming time; that of Poussin is slower: 'a Dance to the Music of Time' is the theme of a painting by him (now in the Wallace Collection, London). Each, however, handles large themes: Rubens love, war, peace; Poussin love, sacrifice, the higher good.

Besides inheriting Italianate Baroque and French classicism, the eighteenth century renewed old controversies on the ability of the arts to affect the emotions. The views of Roman rhetoricians, Leonardo da Vinci (whose notes on the subject were published in Italian and French in 1631), Descartes (Traité des Passions, 1649), all provided the background to this. Specific demonstration was hard in the case of music, where matters were bound up with what the Italians called affetti (affections, emotions). It was easier to make recommendations in the visual arts. How is fear or hope or despair conveyed through human facial expression or in bodily movement? For the painters of the elevated classical or religious subjects that the Baroque age esteemed, Charles Lebrun, in his Méthode pour apprendre à dessiner les Passions (published 1698), codified the study of physiognomy, of facial structure and the way that it revealed feeling. His work, translated into Dutch, German, Italian and English, remained in constant demand throughout the eighteenth century, as 'high art' came up for fresh scrutiny in the light of such works as Hogarth's Election, depicting the passions as he saw them working in his contemporaries (Plate II).

While Enlightenment Europe was interested in making physiognomy a science, artists were to find that it helped to create new markets for them. The idea that the face proclaimed a person's character, obsessively stated in the writings of Johann Lavater (1741–1801), was illustrated by him in the form of silhouette profiles. His books quickly attracted Goethe, both scientist and artist. From the 1780s, until the invention of photography sixty years later, silhouette portraits were in popular demand (see also p. 29). And in the same period parallels drawn by Lebrun and Lavater between human facial expression and that of animals lent themselves entertainingly to the growing army of caricaturists (p. 133).

Another of the fields in which the Baroque overlapped powerfully into the eighteenth century was music and dancing for theatrical presentation, an ever-present ingredient of life at the princely courts. In the opera houses of Vienna, Prague and Dresden, the Italian tradition of spectacular architectural sets was also put to full use, and opera itself followed Italian models (see Chapter Two). In France the Italian-born Giovanni Battista Lully (1632–87), himself a dancer,

Figure 2: Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684–1721). Two dancing figures, after Rubens. Red chalk, 23.3 x 14.7 cm. About 1710. Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.

The primitive, disruptive vigour that was conspicuous in the dance movements of country-dwellers attracted northern artists such as Dürer and Rubens (Fig. 1), who strove to relate it to the formal completeness expressed by two 'answering' figures in classical art. One of several studies by another northerner, Watteau, after Rubens's Kermit, these whirling figures have, however, the lightness of the eighteenth-century Rococo.
(1683–1764), who also composed opéra-ballets (Les Indes galantes, 1735). Dancing was to remain a standard element of French opera into the nineteenth century.

In instrumental music, too, the Baroque proved a vital force. The concerto grosso, for grouped players against a full orchestral body, continued from Corelli (1653–1713) to Handel (1685–1759). The pioneer of the concerto for solo instrumental ‘voice’ against orchestra, Vivaldi (1678–1741), wrote about 230 examples for his own instrument, the violin; many were to inspire J.S. Bach (1685–1750) to transcribe them for harpsichord.

Largely because of its role at the European courts, modern musical histories use Baroque as a style-label for the period extending as late as 1750. This is helpful as a pointer to the broad change that took place around the middle of the century as an ideal of self-contained rather than expansive or cumulative form became established, and the age of Handel (died 1759) merged into that of Haydn (born 1732). Indeed, the climax of the Baroque in music was markedly later than in the visual arts. It was producing some of its grandest statements, especially in the work of Bach and Handel, after 1700, in circumstances far removed from those which had encouraged the style in the seventeenth century. The fuel that the Baroque provided for the Catholicism of Italy now nourished the Lutheranism of Bach, and in England Handel, trained partly in Italy and commanding a true Baroque robustness and organic vitality, had to observe the English taste for church anthems. In France, furthermore, a visual derivative of Baroque, introduced in interiors at Versailles about 1700 and later to be called ‘Rococo’, was to have a highly-effective counterpart in music.

The Rococo is the earliest of the eighteenth century’s ‘own’ styles. Characterized by an essential linear lightness, pitched in phrases rather than paragraphs, it was brilliantly scaled to the small, chamber-like interiors which began to be popular and where ‘chamber music’ might be played. These were important modifications. In music Baroque grandeur and Rococo intimacy now ran parallel: the date of Bach’s St Matthew Passion is 1727, and that of the fourth book of Couperin’s suites for harpsichord (his ‘Ordres’) is 1730. In the Bach, bass lines give a richness from below, large-scale choruses in overlapping counterpoint – one of the central interests of the Baroque – point up the lyrical flow of the arias; we have the impression of a realm of religious emotion opening and enfolding us. In the Couperin we are in the company of miniature portraits of people or moods where supple lines move forward punctuated by ornamental detail. It has often been pointed out that in the way that Rococo broke down the larger forces of the Baroque it was preparing the ground for the slim athleticism of the classical age of sonata composition which lay ahead. As Watteau lightened Rubens (Figs 1 and 2), so Watteau’s contemporary Couperin, in his shorter pieces, presented an idiom perfectly shaped for his age, bearing still in its ornamentations the stamp of its seventeenth-century parent, but full of unpredictable possibilities.

In the visual field where it had originated, Rococo touched contemporary minds and moods at many points. Though its name was first used by disap-
proving classicists at the end of the century, its derivation from rocaille, 'rock-work', a word included in the French Academy’s dictionary of 1741, pointed to old-established interests in natural and artificial caves or grottoes in gardens. Geological specimens, including shells and fossils, were looked at afresh as the collecting of such items for gardens split away from the time-honoured practice of forming indoor ‘collectors’ cabinets’. Shell collectors were meeting regularly at Dordrecht, Holland, in 1720 and shell auctions were soon to begin. Besides the promptings of science, the Rococo was nourished still more by desires for fantasy and entertainment, by an appreciation especially well-developed in the French temperament of the irrational alongside the rational, of pleasure together with instruction. While the reports of Jesuit missionaries about an apparent utopia that existed in China were impressing European philosophers, interest in the exotic and the collecting of chinoiserie objects made in Europe in what was imagined to be genuine Chinese taste took on special attractions. As the flourishing East India trade exposed European Rococo to the influence of porcelain – a long-admired Western import from China – Europe found the means (at Meissen in 1708) of manufacturing its own.

The decorative brilliance of the Rococo, in fact, became localized in innumerable crafts and their materials: wood, metal, porcelain and glass. The challenge to craftsmanship – notably in the making of furniture, furniture mounts, and silver – had never been greater, and never more labour-intensive. Furthermore, in addition to classical sophistication, such work drew on a vast repertory of natural effects that the Baroque had largely ignored – such as corals, icicles, flowing and dripping water. Finally, most revealing of all, Rococo design took up with that unclassical ingredient, asymmetry (Fig. 4).

The Rococo spread from France to appear most captivatingly in the palaces and churches of Bavaria and Austria. Away from its transports of spirit or body we may feel that a style which appears to depend so much on small-scale detail, or which breaks the continuity of the wall with mirrors, as in the Amalienburg, Munich (1734–39, Fig. 5), has forfeited all sense of the permanently architectural. But this wonderful room takes the very idea of immateriality to a pitch of fantasy that demands to be evaluated on its own terms. Classical self-containment would return (compare Plate III); meanwhile the Rococo, as a style for occasions, yielded to no competitors. It is no accident that chairs now provided for maximum relaxation (Fig. 4), and music became domestic. This was the period of Tafelmusik, ‘table-music’ – informal divertimenti or serenades which might be listened to or alternatively provide an agreeable background to conversation. Quick movements alternated with slower – but not very slow – ones. It was from experience of composing for these occasions that musicians such as Mozart developed their familiarity with the capabilities of instruments.

As the immediacy brought about by concerted forces in the arts of the Baroque gave way in the Rococo to greater intimacy, there developed an art of private encounter, often enough between ordinary people rather than the famous, which showed them conversing face to face, exchanging letters, listening to a reading or music. The painting of Watteau (Plate I) and De Troy
most remarkable of Frenchmen, Denis Diderot (1713–84), who wrote such dramas himself, wanted the artist who studied these situations to be both philosopher and, be it noted, musician. Music’s capacity to affect the emotions was to be looked at afresh. And two developments bearing on music itself were significant. First, the French word galant, connected earlier in the century with Watteau’s paintings of couples enjoying each other’s company in country parks (the fêtes galantes), had become attached to music with a melodic top line unthickened by Baroque counterpoint from below: in the middle of the century, this style came to prevail throughout Enlightenment Europe. Secondly, in Germany C.P.E. Bach was simultaneously projecting Empfindsamkeit, or ‘sensibility’, in dramatic works for solo keyboard (p. 95).

It was in this clarifying atmosphere that music entered its so-called ‘Classical Period’, the age of Haydn, Mozart and early Beethoven. Music in fact differed from all the other Western arts in the late eighteenth century in that works were now written which for posterity became benchmarks by which everything produced later – or earlier – was to be judged. There were a number of reasons for this. The German-speaking parts of Europe from which this music came were forming a new cultural identity on the map of Europe: the German Enlightenment, different from that of the French, will need more comment in Chapter Four (p. 183). This was against a background of much speculation about early music, but also of ignorance as to what precisely Greek and Roman music had been like. Plenty of guesses were being made, in particular about the music that had been part of the classical theatre. Antiquarian interests were being pursued, and reflected in academies and festivals such as, in England, the Three Choirs Festival, founded in about 1715. But the claims of visible, tangible and learnable classical models, of such moment to eighteenth-century architects, sculptors, painters and poets, did not apply to musicians. Despite the sumise and scholarship, music had no undisputed, playable antique models to respect, and certainly none to live up to. Diderot, at least, saw no problem: the thought occurred to him that the Ancients were likely to have spent more time inventing because they had no Ancients of their own to imitate.

Moreover, it was precisely now, in the middle of the century, that the structural shape of ‘sonata form’ was determined. This concept was to dominate instrumental music in Europe into the twentieth century. ‘Sonata form’ is concerned not only with structure but with the unfolding and resolution of ideas within it. In a typical first movement a first theme is stated, then a second, in a different (related) key; there follows a ‘development’ of one or both, and a ‘recapitulation’ in which the second theme is ‘reconciled’ with the first by being brought into the basic key. There are endless possibilities of varying such a basic scheme.

Furthermore, the scheme of a four-movement sonata for one or two instrumental voices (say piano, or piano and violin) could be adapted for combinations of three, four or five players or more (trios, quartets, quintets and so on) and, in the symphony, for larger forces (orchestras). Listening to eighteenth-century chamber music and symphonies, we find content fitting into form with
the closeness of a hand inside a glove: listening to a late Beethoven sonata, quartet or symphony we may be aware of content pushing form to new limits: but the parent discipline is still in charge. The principle of contrast, so fundamental to any dramatic argument, was to be given a special potential in the symphony. The origin of the word is sinfonia, the overture to an Italian opera. This was usually in three parts, fast, slow, fast. Transferred to the concert hall it could become a self-contained instrumental entity. Mozart’s Symphony No 32 is a ten-minute Italianate sinfonia. With the hundred and four Haydn symphonies and the forty by Mozart the sinfonia transformed itself, losing its house-warming theatrical origins, investing itself with the formal purposes of sonata form, and acquiring the substance and inner resource that placed it, with the string quartet, at the heart of musical achievement in the nineteenth century.

Music in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in fact, created its modern mode of speech, unhindered by the past it drew upon. In its very sonorities it turned a corner: the harpsichord, brilliant in ornamentation but with its sounds produced by quills, was succeeded by the piano, worked by hammers directly responsive to finger-touch, and therefore capable of greater dynamic variation; the light-sounding fortepiano in turn gave way to the flexible concert instrument used by Beethoven in his late maturity, and by Chopin. Among wind instruments, the recently-developed clarinet added its distinctive voice. After 1800 the symphony orchestra was enriched by brass instruments fitted with valves, which enabled them to play a full range of tones and in any key. French horns and trombones built with this advantage made possible the sound-world of Wagner.

One final suggestive fact about music’s eighteenth-century Classical Age is the way in which the more ‘original’ Romantics of the next century – notably Berlioz and Wagner – felt not merely the need to refer back to it, but enthusiastically saw their own work as part of a direct development out of it. Berlioz, himself a revolutionary, was inheritor of the revolution in attitudes to the role of music as exponent of dramatic situation that had taken place in the 1770s. For him, the ‘classical’ in music was expressed by Gluck who, as part of a reform of opera, had put music of a classically-shaped, restrained kind to the service of deep emotion (see Chapter Two, p. 96). Gluck had died less than

Figure 6: Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725–1805). Ange-Laurent de la Livre de Folly. Oil, 117 × 88.5 cm. Probably 1759. Samuel H. Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

La Livre, the wealthy son of a formier-général (one who collected indirect taxes for the Crown), held the court post of Introduit des Ambassadeurs. Greuze shows him as musician and connoisseur: a portfolio of prints and drawings is beside him. He sits on a chair à la grecque, of a kind which he had commissioned, as one in close touch with the latest fashion for severe line and antique pedigree: the style now known as Neo-classicism. These qualities were to contribute spectacularly to the distinction of French furniture throughout the remainder of the century, and into the Empire period under Napoleon.
siderable powers of re-invention and adaptation (see Chapter Three, p. 124). In the more venturesome architecture of Robert Adam (1728–92), which came to maturity in Britain in the 1760s and 70s and ultimately reached as a style as far as Russia and America, the Roman language of proportioned column, wall and ornament was turned to what Adam called ‘novelty and variety’. Standard proportions were narrowed or widened, grammatical ‘correctness’ in matters of detail was set aside, and yet the overall effect managed to look both calculated and comfortable to the eye. The Adelphi, a Thameside housing scheme built by Adam and his brothers in 1768–72, showed all these characteristics. Adam also created some of the most delightful interiors of this or any other age: sacrificing none of the lightness of touch that the outgoing Rococo had gained, yet disciplining that intimacy with sharply-profiled, low relief classical ornament (Plate III).

Other factors, more intellectually and emotionally challenging, were at work, however, involving not only the disinterment of life-lines from a past that Mediterranean archaeology was literally revealing by excavation, but meditations on a ‘true’ style, as contemporaries saw it, that these life-lines could ensure for the future. Ancient Greece was the chief focus of this. Baseless Greek columns, and Greek pots (then called Etruscan, as many were dug up in Etruria in Italy) recalled the very origins of classical form and the simplicity which was once visible before later refinements covered it up. The German art historian Winckelmann (1717–68) advised a study of the ‘calm greatness’ of Greek statues as a future necessity: ‘There is but one way for the moderns to become great ... by imitating the ancients’.11 This was a gospel with many practical applications in new contexts. Profile heads on monument (Fig. 30) or cameo lent antique authority to the taste for the silhouette. Greek-style motifs appeared in furniture (Fig. 6). Wedgwood (1730–95) adapted the lessons of Greek pottery to his famous basalt ware and creamware (Fig. 7). Classical architectural shapes were transferred to the new America, most signally by Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), third President, who saw the ‘cubic architecture’ as he called it, of the Maison Carrée, the Roman temple at Nîmes, as the only true choice for his Capitol building at Richmond, Virginia (p. 129).

**The Inspiration of Nature; the Move to Romanticism**

In contrast to Neo-classical certainties, new horizons were widening, not only in America but in Europe. There too they could have about them the appeal of the unfamiliar, even the disturbing. Some were geographical – India, as the English East India Company took up the administration of Bengal in the 1760s; or Egypt, especially after Napoleon’s archaeological initiatives following his expedition in 1798. Others were mental. The excitement long offered by the storm paintings of the Italian Salvator Rosa (1615–73) were now joined by the exhilarating appeal to the imagination of Garrick’s acting of Shakespeare, or by the ‘Sublime’, which Edmund Burke discussed in 1757. To the ancient writer