

The motifs of antiquity have provoked many a classical revival down the centuries, and the opening of the VSA's Weston Cast Court this autumn is just the latest sign that we are on the cusp of another / By Dominic Lutyens

The fresh face of neoclassicism

An Italian marble head of Hadrian, available from stone specialist Lapicida (www.lapicida.com)



A revival of neoclassicism in contemporary design has simmered under the surface for a year or so, and is now gathering pace. Obsessed with resurrecting the culture and styles of Greek, Roman and Egyptian antiquity, the original neoclassical movement – and the accompanying Empire style in the decorative arts – flourished from the mid 18th to the early 19th centuries. Today's revival is partly a throwback to the last time neoclassicism was in vogue, the late Seventies and early Eighties. Many established designers currently revisiting it, such as Nicky Haslam and Nigel Coates, will remember that well. But still more who are too young to have lived through it are referencing neoclassicism today – proof that we're witnessing a new trend.

Museums are fuelling this, too. Earlier this year, Sir John Soane's Museum mounted an exhibition on neoclassical architect and printmaker Giovanni Battista Piranesi, while its recent show, *Peace Breaks Out!*, focused on the summer of 1814 when Europe celebrated peace after the fall of Napoleon. This November, the V&A will open its newly refurbished Italian Cast Court, renamed the Weston Cast Court, which will feature more than 60 of the museum's 19th-century reproductions of Italian Renaissance monuments – another influence on neoclassical architects such as Soane.

As highlighted by the V&A's 2011 exhibition, *Postmodernism: Style* & *Subversion 1970-1990*, the earliest manifestation of the Seventies neoclassical revival was postmodernist architecture, which rebelled against the modernist straitjacket of strict functionalism, and embraced ornamentation, including classical elements. Philip Johnson's AT&T building in New York, for example, was irreverently crowned with a classical pediment. Design was similarly smitten: in Italy, Ettore Sottsass, Alessandro Mendini and other avant- > *"APPRECIATION OF THE PAST IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY COVETABLE AS OUR LIVES BECOME EVER MORE DOMINATED BY TECHNOLOGY"*

ABOVE: Marc Bankowsky's plaster resin 'Drapery Console', available from Maison Gerard at Istdibs (www.Istdibs.com)

BELOW: 'Héraclès' dumbbells by

Charlotte Juillard, from Fabrica

(www.fabricashop.myshopify.com)







BELOW: Jennifer Gray's 'Amphora Garland' stone necklace from Mint (www.mintshop.co.uk) comes complete with its own urn

garde designers flirted with neoclassical forms. Founded in 1979, British textile design duo Timney Fowler made fabrics that were emblazoned with motifs such as Roman coins or details of buildings by neoclassical architect Robert Adam. And London's Eighties homeware emporium Oggetti, beloved by yuppies, stocked the must-have mid-century homeware of artist Piero Fornasetti, who regularly drew inspiration from ancient Roman and Greek architecture. In fact, Cole & Son, which has made wallpapers created from Fornasetti drawings since 2007 – including 'Malachite' (the green mineral often used to make neoclassical urns and obelisks) and 'Procuratie' (which depicts classical arches on St Mark's Square, Venice) – undoubtedly helped kick-start the current neoclassical revival. Nigel Coates recently collaborated with Piero Fornasetti's son Barnaba to create furniture upholstered in fabrics printed with classic Fornasetti motifs: malachite, cameos and Roman coins.

Incidentally, Fornasetti didn't slavishly imitate neoclassicism but fused it with surrealism, as did artist Jean Cocteau, whose films often alluded to ancient Greek and Roman myths. And in the early 20th century, artist Giorgio de Chirico, who later influenced the surrealists, painted the colonnades and piazzas of contemporary Florence and Turin, juxtaposing these with neoclassical sculptures.

Similarly, while the first disciples of neoclassicism were bent on replicating classical culture, today's young designers are giving it their own contemporary spin. One major reason for the new trend is that it chimes with a widespread belief among many creatives that crafts – and an appreciation of the past – will become increasingly covetable in the future as our lives become ever more dominated by technology.



BELOW: Michael Eden's 3D-printed 'Prtlnd' vase, inspired by the British Museum's Portland Vase, was bought by Leicester's New Walk Museum



ABOVE: Lapicida's 'Classical Fragments' collection of salvaged and restored statuary of all ages

Andrea Trimarchi and Simone Farresin, of Italian duo Formafantasma, represented in London by Gallery Libby Sellers, have created a particularly striking example – two wallhangings called 'Efesto' and 'Atena' named after the Greek mythological gods of Mount Etna. Picturing images of stone deities and fragments of volcanic rock, they're made of basalt fibre derived from volcanic lava, billed as a sustainable alternative to carbon fibre. Tellingly, Formafantasma is sometimes "inspired by Ettore Sottsass and postmodernism," says Trimarchi.

Meanwhile, French designer Charlotte Juillard recently created her marble and metal 'Héraclès' dumbbells – used as paperweights – for the Extra-Ordinary Gallery, a new collection of objects launched this year by Fabrica, Benetton's communication research centre. Juillard describes her piece as "reminiscent of the stone lifting weights of ancient Greece – forerunners of today's dumbbells. My design ironically twists the dumbbell's functionality into a narcissistic, beautiful object." She was also inspired by parallels between today's "cult of the body" and that of ancient Greece.

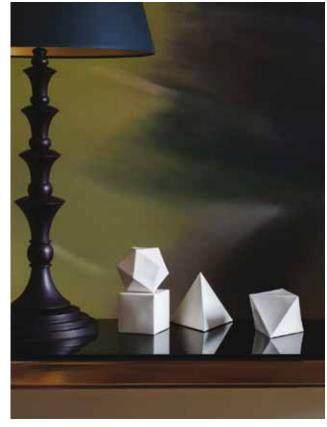
London homeware shop Pentreath & Hall, co-owned by artist Bridie Hall and architect Ben Pentreath, stocks obelisks, Soanian convex mirrors, découpage trays picturing Empire chairs and Peter Hone's plaster intaglios depicting classical scenes. "Our intaglio boxes and obelisks are inspired by the Grand Tour I never took," quips Hall, whose studio walls are covered with Cole & Son's 'Malachite' wallpaper. The obelisks also surely pay homage to Pentreath's affection for Seventies interior designer David Hicks, who adored creating vignettes with them. And, as Hall adds, "For Ben, who's a classical architect, these forms are ingrained in his design style." > 

OPPOSITE: Formafantasma's Atena', from Gallery Libby Sellers (www.libbysellers.com)

BELOW: 'Le Temple de Jupiter' wallpaper depicts a landscape of classical ruins (www.zoffany.com)

BOTTOM: Artist Bridie Hall's 'Scholar's Set' of Platonic solids (www.pentreath-hall.com)





Maverick ceramic artist Michael Eden fuses modern technology with neoclassical forms. 'Prtlnd' is his interpretation of the British Museum's Portland Vase, one of antiquity's rarest survivors; 'Wedgwoodn't' is a tureen in homage to Josiah Wedgwood. Yet both are created digitally and made not of porcelain, but nylon. As such, the Wedgwood reference is perfectly apt, claims Eden: "He's an icon of the Industrial Revolution, an age that experimented with new technologies." Sculptor Marc Bankowsky (represented by New York gallery Maison Gerard) cites 17th-century painter Nicolas Poussin's mythological scenes as his main influence. He creates resin or plaster consoles and screens redolent of neoclassical drapery, their self-supporting appearance lending then a surreal, ghostly quality.

London store Mint stocks pieces that channel the neoclassical spirit, including Kiki Van Eijk's 18th-century inspired 'Jewels' chaise longue and Jennifer Gray's 'Amphora Garland', a porcelain urn incorporating a necklace of architectural fragments and plaster figurines. Gray is hugely inspired by Soane but her homages to him are spiked with humour. One of her creations is a pair of headphones with earpieces shaped like classical stone heads called 'Headphones for Soanes'. Fusing old and new techniques, including 3D printing and hand-crafting, her designs are often cast in Jesmonite or reconstituted marble, then distressed to give them an aged appearance.

Stone specialist Lapicida's 'Geometrics' line of patterned stone floors is inspired by those found in Robert Adam's buildings, such as Osterley Park, while its 'Classical Fragments' range comprises salvaged remnants of buildings or marble statuary, such as details of columns or feathered wings. Neoclassical-influenced prints of classical ruins adorn wallpapers too, from Zoffany's 'Le Temple de Jupiter' to Clarke & Clarke's 'Babylon'.

Clearly, a wide cross-section of the design community now looks favourably on the neoclassical aesthetic, and some proffer profound reasons for its desirability. "It appeals as it's elegant and gender-neutral. Transcending time, it complements both classical and modern interiors," says Peter Gomez, Zoffany's head designer. There may even be a scientific reason why we're attracted to neoclassicism, says Jason Cherrington, founder of Lapicida: "The Golden Ratio, which governed the proportions of neoclassical art and design, is widely seen in the geometry of nature and speaks directly to human beings' hard-wired perceptions of beauty and harmony." According to Marjorie Trusted, senior curator of sculpture at the V&A, the neoclassical influence has never gone away – she points out that "classical ideas of proportion and order often underlie modern architectural forms." Arch-modernist Le Corbusier fervently advocated the Golden Ratio, for example.

Aesthetics aside, some believe there are social reasons why neoclassicism is still popular today. "It coincided with the Age of Enlightenment," says Nigel Coates. "Religion was beginning to be cast off and a secular age – like our own – was dawning." Jerzy Kierkuc-Bielinski, exhibitions curator at Sir John Soane's Museum, suggests that "socially, our approaches to sexuality and gender are close in feeling to the age of the Caesars." Coates even feels that the neoclassical aesthetic emits a sexual frisson: "The paintings of Jacques-Louis David and flesh-bearing sculptures of Antonio Canova have constrained, erotic qualities." Far-fetched? Perhaps a visit this autumn to the V&A's Weston Cast Court might prove his theory right.