

The European Enlightenment & Its Great Thinkers

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information adapted from: <http://mistral.culture.fr/cg-bin/chronologie-eng/argx/Berthelemy/Moreau/Suovere>, and <http://www.wsu.edu/%7EEden/ENLIGHTEN/ENLIGHT.HTM>

Who Were the Philosophes?

-**mostly lived in the middle of the 18th c.** (1700s), all across Europe (especially France, England, Italy and Germany)

-**a group of people who thought and studied about everything:** science, machines, literature, philosophy, sociology, politics, government, art, agriculture - all the natural and human sciences

-believed in the **perfectability of humanity**

-wanted to **get rid of false systems of thought**

-wanted to **organize and systematize different areas of study**

-**focused on practical ideas** and not general philosophy because they wanted to better human individuals, institutions & belief systems

-**believed the ultimate goal of progress was to harness the natural world for the benefit of humanity and to learn to live peacefully with one another**



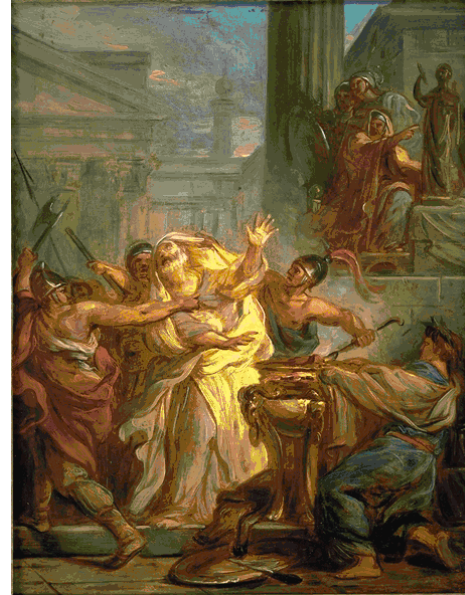
The Ploughing Lesson. Vincent van Gogh, 1889. Bordeaux, Musée des Beaux-Arts (inv. BxM 340. BxM 6003).

Three Central Ideas of the Philosophie Movement

Rational & Intentional Progress: human history is mostly the history of the continued improvement of humanity in three ways - 1) growing knowledge of the natural world & the ability of man to use technology to manipulate it, 2) overcoming ignorance that comes from superstitions and religions, 3) overcoming human cruelty and violence through social improvements and government structures

Deism: 1) religion should be reasonable and should result in the highest moral behavior of its believers, 2) knowledge of the natural world has nothing to do with religion and study of it should be approached completely free of religious beliefs

Tolerance: a fair, just and productive society absolutely depends on religious tolerance



The Conspiracy of Elzevir: 1789. Douai, Musée de la Chartreuse (inv. 2780).

Some Famous Philosophes

Voltaire - religious tolerance; most terrible violent crimes in history had been done in the name of religion

Diderot - the encyclopedia (actually, over 100 French philosophes worked on it); the purpose was to secularize learning and refute out-of-date ideas

Montesquieu - political theory; division of powers in government with checks & balances

Hume - since no one can know anything for certain, no individual is in a position to pass judgment on alternative moral ideas

Smith - how nations get wealthier

Wollstonecraft - equality of women's intelligence & worth

Rousseau - liberty; the social contract: individuals give up freedom in exchange for protections from the government



Woman with a Mouse, Drolling, 1788, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Orléans.