

Greek Revival Architecture and the American Perception of Ancient Greek Culture

Ancient Greek culture has always fascinated western post-classical society, to the point that there is a word to describe this admiration— philhellenism. A philhellene is an admirer of Greece or Greek culture¹ (from Greek *philos*, meaning beloved, and *Hellēnikos*, meaning Greek).²

This essay will examine how Greek Revival architecture in America perpetuates an idealised image of ancient Greek society and the implications for contemporary perceptions of democracy and justice.

The polarity of philhellenism grew during the 19th century and was a significantly influential concept during the Romantic movement (1798–1837). This era saw Western society develop a particular interest in ancient Greek culture, viewing it through an idealised lens as the foundation of contemporary society.³ This early Hellenism gave rise to Greek Revival, a style of architecture that emulated ancient Greek architectural principles and was particularly prominent in northern Europe and North America, acting as a precursor to Neoclassicism.

Today, there are many notable examples of the style, especially in the United States, where most major examples remain.⁴ Greek Revival was so popular in mid-19th century America that it is referred to as the “National Style” of the country, with many government and institutional buildings in the style, such as the New York County Courthouse (completed 1927), and Lincoln

¹ Merriam-Webster (2024) *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Available at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/phihellene> (Accessed: 20 December 2024)

² Harper, D (2020) *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Available at: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/phihellene> (Accessed: 20 December 2024)

³ Quint, Zachary (2021) *University of Michigan Library*. Available at: <https://apps.lib.umich.edu/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/200th-anniversary-greek-war/phihellenism> (Accessed: 21 December 2024)

⁴ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia (2023) "Greek Revival". Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/art/Greek-Revival> (Accessed 3 January 2025)

Memorial (completed 1922), both strong architectural symbols of justice and democracy.⁵ These buildings evoke ideals of civic virtue and permanence, yet also serve as a reminder of how architecture shapes cultural mythology. This has led me to pose the question: Why has ancient Greek architecture come to symbolise ideals such as justice, democracy, and power in the United States, and how closely do these ideals align with ancient Greek society?

The style's introduction to America can be credited, in part, to notable philhellene Thomas Jefferson who, along with his contemporaries, had a strong appreciation for Greek Revival. Jefferson and other early leaders sought not only aesthetic inspiration from ancient Greece but also symbolic links to its perceived democratic and civic virtues. Through him, we can begin to see not only why National Style became so popular but also how it came to symbolise such strong ideals.

I would argue that the enduring view of ancient Greek civilisation as embodying ideals of justice, democracy, and civic virtue is reinforced by National Style and that its continued use in institutional buildings has reflected and reinforced the perception of ancient Greece as a paragon of these values, creating a feedback loop between architectural form and cultural myth.

To delve deeper into why Greek Revival architecture came to embody ideals of democracy and justice in America, we must consider the broader influence of ancient Greek thought on early American leaders.⁶ Jefferson's philhellenism serves as a key example; extending beyond architecture to governance, and drawing inspiration from Aristotle and Montesquieu (both of

⁵ Gongadze, Nana (2020) *Great American Treasures*, National Society of the Colonial Dames of America. Available at: <https://www.greatamerican treasures.org/the-old-is-new-again-greek-revival-architecture-and-great-american-treasures/> (Accessed: 21 December 2024)

⁶ Jefferson, Thomas (1811) *Thomas Jefferson to Destutt de Tracy*, 26 January 1811. Available at: <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-03-02-0258#:~:text=I%20had%2C%20with%20the%20world.only%20at%20it's%20errors> (Accessed: 30 December 2024)

whom engaged with ancient Greek political ideals) to emphasise the balance of governmental branches.⁷ His drafting of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 rejects absolute monarchy and states that governments derive “their just powers from the consent of the governed”.⁸ The influence of Greek society is further seen in Jefferson’s agrarian vision for America.⁹ However, these interpretations often relied on selective readings of history that omitted the contradictions and complexities of ancient Greek society.

Ancient Greece is often idealised as the birthplace of democracy; however, this narrative removes nuance. Athens is celebrated for its early democratic system, but participation was limited to free male citizens, excluding women, slaves, and non-citizens.¹⁰ Moreover, this system was vulnerable to political instability and manipulation, as evidenced by the oligarchic coup of 411 BCE, which briefly dismantled democratic institutions altogether.¹¹ Justice was not impartial by modern standards, where ostracism— a practice where citizens could vote to exile individuals— was as much about political rivalry as justice.¹² The agrarian vision of Jefferson might align with Greek ideals of self-sufficiency, but the economies of Greek city-states, or poleis, often relied heavily on slavery, which complicates their legacy. (American society did parallel this reality as a slave society until 1865).¹³

⁷ Cunningham, A. (1978) *The Philhellenes, Canning and Greek Independence*. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4282697> (Accessed 30 December 2024)

⁸ Jefferson, Thomas (1776) *Declaration of Independence: A Transcription*. Available at: <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript> (Accessed 30 December 2024)

⁹ Jefferson, Thomas (1785) *From Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 28 October 1785*. Available at: <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-08-02-0534> (Accessed: 30 December 2024)

¹⁰ Martin, Thomas R. (2010) *An Overview of Classical Greek History from Mycenae to Alexander*. Available at: <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0009%3Achapter%3D9%3Asection%3D3%3Asubsection%3D1> (Accessed 3 January 2025)

¹¹ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia (2009) “Council of the Four Hundred”. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Council-of-the-Four-Hundred> (Accessed 3 January 2025)

¹² Oral, Uğur (2023) “Ostracism”, *The People’s Way Of Protecting Democracy From Tyrants In Ancient Athens*. Available at: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/2793784> (Accessed 3 January 2025)

¹³ Hesiod (c. 700 BCE) *Works and Days*. Available at: <https://chs.harvard.edu/primary-source/hesiod-works-and-days-sb/> (Accessed 30 December 2024)

The mythical identity of ancient Greek culture as symbolising ideals of justice, democracy, and power has been perpetuated by National Style. However this raises questions about the accuracy of such myths. Romans adapted Greek cultural achievements, adding a layer of reverence that filtered into Renaissance and Enlightenment thought, furthered by romantic movement thinkers cherry-picking elements of Greek culture that aligned with their ideals, ignoring aspects like oligarchy, inequality, and imperialism. Architecturally, the Corinthian order's decorative and grandiose nature might symbolise power and aspiration more than justice or democracy, raising questions about whether modern interpretations accurately reflect ancient Greek values.¹⁴

To understand the symbolism of ancient Greek architecture, it must first be understood that there are three distinct classical orders, each with its own guides for proportion, shape, and ornamentation. In Archaic Classical Greek architecture (700–500 BCE), the two principal orders were Doric and Ionic.¹⁵ The first, Doric, is characterised by fluted columns with no base—simple and sturdy, symbolic of strength. The Ionic order introduces bases supporting the taller, more fluted, balanced columns. They also have two scroll-like volutes on the capitals (at the top). Ionic columns often evoke a sense of harmony and knowledge (such as the Temple of Athena Nike). During the late Classical period (400–323 BCE) a new order appeared: the Corinthian.¹⁶ These orders were even taller, the most ornate, with the capitals featuring carved leaves, spirals, and other decorative additions, bringing to mind symbols of grandeur.¹⁷

¹⁴ Martínez, Antonio Marco (2013) *Graecia capta (by Romans)* Available at: <https://www.antiquitatem.com/en/graecia-capta-greek-culture-quignard/> (Accessed 3 January 2025)

¹⁵ Hellenic National Archeological Museum *Archaic Period National Archaeological Museum*. Available at: [https://www.namuseum.gr/en/collection/archaiki-periodos-2/#:~:text=The%20term%20Archaic%20was%20coined,\(700%2D500%20BC\)](https://www.namuseum.gr/en/collection/archaiki-periodos-2/#:~:text=The%20term%20Archaic%20was%20coined,(700%2D500%20BC)) (Accessed: 21 December 2024)

¹⁶ Hellenic National Archeological Museum *Hellenistic Period National Archaeological Museum*. Available at: <https://www.namuseum.gr/en/collection/ellinistiki-periodos-3/#:~:text=During%20the%20Hellenistic%20period%2C%20namely.conquests%20of%20Alexander%20the%20Great> (Accessed: 21 December 2024)

¹⁷ Hemingway, Colette (2003) “Architecture in Ancient Greece.” In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Available at: https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/grarc/hd_grarc.htm (Accessed 21 December 2024)

The symbolic meaning of these orders is clearly visible in Greek Revival architecture—for example, the Doric order appears in the Second Bank of the United States, which played a significant role in shaping the debate and eventual development of a federal banking system.¹⁸ Its robust simplicity visually reinforced institutional strength and stability.¹⁹ Likewise, the Ionic Tennessee State Capitol in Nashville is a historical democratic seat for the 16th state.²⁰ Both of these buildings, designed by William Strickland, one of the most influential contributors to the National Style, represent the unyielding power of freedom and democracy in a government.²¹ Along with the ornate Corinthian Supreme Court, the ultimate arbiter of justice, these architectural choices represent institutional power and visually embody the ideals of fairness, permanence, and rational governance.²²

Through Greek Revival, the United States not only established a visual identity of strength and permanence but also reinforced a narrative that tied its democratic aspirations to the cultural and political legacy of ancient Greece. Yet, this narrative reflects more about the aspirations of early American leaders than the realities of ancient Greece itself. By adopting Greek architectural forms, early American leaders like Jefferson sought to align their burgeoning democracy with the values they admired in ancient Greece: justice, civic virtue, and rational

¹⁸ National Park Service (2024) *Second Bank of the United States*. Available at: <https://www.nps.gov/inde/learn/historyculture/places-secondbank.htm> (Accessed: 22 December 2024)

¹⁹ Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis (2019) *A History of Central Banking in the United States*. Available at:

<https://www.minneapolisfed.org/about-us/our-history/history-of-central-banking#:~:text=The%20First%20Bank%20of%20the%20United%20States%3A%201791%2D1811.government%20on%20sound%20financial%20footing> (Accessed: 31 December 2024)

²⁰ Nashville Public Library (2020) *Close up of an original ionic capital column from the Tennessee State Capitol*. Available at: <https://digital.library.nashville.org/digital/collection/nr/id/18/> (Accessed: 22 December 2024)

²¹ Tatman, Sandra (2002) *Philadelphia Architects and Buildings Biographies*. Available at: https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar_display.cfm/25248 (Accessed: 22 December 2024)

²² Supreme Court (2014) *Supreme Court Building History*. Available at: <https://www.supremecourt.gov/about/buildinghistory.aspx> (Accessed: 22 December 2024)

governance. These ideals were filtered through the lens of Enlightenment thought and Romanticism, which selectively celebrated certain aspects of Greek culture while overlooking others, such as its reliance on slavery, exclusionary democracy, and political instability.

Greek Revival architecture serves as both a reflection of and a reinforcement for a cultural myth that links the American experiment to the ancient Greek polis. While these buildings act as enduring symbols of democracy and justice, they also highlight the power of architectural storytelling in shaping historical associations and national identity. By critically examining their symbolism, we can better understand how historical narratives are constructed— and how they can both inspire and obscure historical complexity.

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