

## The Moderns between the Greeks and Romans Roundtable Talks

*Talks given by Daniela Gobetti, David Potter (“Why We are Romans”), Arlene Saxonhouse, and Lydia Soo on the topic of the Moderns between the Greeks and Romans. All copyrights (2004) remain with the presenters of these talks.*

# *The Moderns Between the Greeks and the Romans*

Daniela Gobetti

## **1. The classical tradition**

Our relationship with ‘the classics’ is a constitutive element of our own identity as ‘the moderns.’ The range of options we have in establishing that relationship goes from complete internalization to outward rejection. In *Alien Wisdom*, Momigliano has given us an excellent illustration of how the Greeks and the Romans did that themselves—thus establishing the pattern which we have more or less consciously repeated.

What features of the Greek and Roman traditions have become constitutive of our thinking of ourselves as ‘the moderns’? In what ways has our incorporating (or rejecting) features of their cultures changed over time? Does relying on the Greeks and the Romans still carry normative weight today? And what do we mean by ‘the Greeks’ and the ‘Romans’?

I will suggest the following:

1. the adventure of modernity is also the discovery of the internal articulations of what we call ‘the classics’
2. we discover that different aspects of the Greek and Roman traditions can be used as *models* for different aspects of the project of modernity
3. aspects of the classics that are fully internalized (metabolized, almost) lose their role as ideal models, even though observers can recognize their origin in the past

I will address these points by focusing on the issue of *political agency*, in particular on the conception of the individual as independent agent and its vicissitudes in modern times. I will suggest that the modern political agent owes more to the Roman juridical tradition than to the Greek ζῶον πολιτικόν, and that competing views are articulated that rely on other strands in Greek and Roman political thought and practice.

## **2. The onset of modernity**

‘The moderns’ inherit from the Italian Renaissance an image of the Greeks and the Romans as ‘the classics,’ that is, as forming a unified tradition which stretches more or less from Homer to imperial Rome.

The title of today’s conversation suggests, however, that it would be helpful to think of our three subjects—the Greeks, the Romans, and the moderns—in the plural. For a long

time we talked about modernity in the singular—from both a descriptive and a normative point of view—but I think many of us would now agree that modernity has evolved into a set of attitudes, and a complex web of social phenomena, that may as may not converge in one central point, or project.

Our becoming aware of the internal articulations of modernity has gone hand in hand with the disassembling of the ‘classical tradition’ I just recalled.

The onset of modernity is marked by the rethinking of the relationship between individuality, subjectivity, and community. As the *persona* of Catholic Christianity is challenged by the lonely individual of the Reformation, epistemological, ontological and political fault-lines begin to appear in the conceptual apparatus that allowed early modern Europeans to think of the Romans and the Greeks as a unit, and of themselves as epigones of the classical heritage. The change occurring with the Reformation by no means entails a complete rejection of that heritage, even though thinkers such as Descartes and Hobbes do attempt to give us notions of subjectivity that bracket or reject the classical tradition *in toto*.

What happens is that the relationship between the moderns and the classics becomes more complex. [For an interesting and rich illustration of that process, I invite you to read Vassilis’s book *The Rise of Eurocentrism, Anatomy of Interpretation* (which I would retitile *The Rise of Modernity*).]

1. Christianity, and its Hebrew component in particular, emerges from within the universe of the classical past as a separate strand. The Reformed Christian believer breaks fully away from his pagan, imperial, and Christian Catholic Roman predecessor. [The relationship with classical Greece becomes problematic to say the least; in any case, it is cast within the new demands of Protestant salvation.]

2. The subject of Reformed Christianity is, as Vassilis emphasizes, a tasteful reader and interpreter of texts. But what happens to that reader and interpreter when he turns into the political subject soon-to-be citizen of modern society? What notion of political agency should we expect as the appropriate complement to the notion of the individual as solitary reader? Can this agent remain the same as the agent of classical times, in particular the citizen organically tied to his traditional community?

3. The conception elaborated in response to these questions—which will become *hegemonic*, from Spinoza to Hutcheson, from Pufendorf to Rousseau—privileges the notion of the autonomous political agent as a holder of legal powers, and then rights, taken from the Roman juridical tradition of the *Corpus iuris* and its reelaborations in medieval and early modern times. Writers take advantage of the proteiform connotative universe of some crucial concepts so as to shift their denotative dimension: the solitary reader of the Holy Scriptures can also be the ‘jurist’ who interprets and enforces norms; the believer who puts his faith in the covenant with God becomes the contract-maker who institutes political authority; the ‘sinner’ striving for salvation can turn into the revolutionary fighter.

4. Writers begin to present as entirely innovative an idea of political agency that is actually dependent on features taken from the Roman juridical model. Over time, the presence of ‘Roman’ elements has become almost indistinguishable from what we believe the modern political agent to be.

5. The effort to present or preserve competing views of political agency and/or membership in the community brings to the fore the internal articulations of the classical tradition: Roman republicanism, Roman imperialism, Athenian democracy, Athenian oligarchy. These now begin to be perceived as embodying incompatible anthropological when not ontological projects, rather than being variations on a scale—as incompatible with political life *tout-court* oriental despotism was perceived to be in pre-modern times.

The unity of ‘the classics’ is called into question. Rome is separated from Athens. The continuity between Greek and Roman modes of political action, celebrated by the Renaissance, is called into question, down-played or rejected. Republican Rome and imperial Rome are recognized as antithetical. Profound differences are perceived between Athenian democracy and republican Rome.

6. The internalization of the Roman juridical tradition is also what undermines its normative import. How can ‘the other’ remain a model for us, if it is no longer separable from our own self? Contemporary contractarian theories—which are the ones that continue to rely on the political animal as a legal actor—feel no need to mention any connection to their classical antecedents.

As we internalize democracy as the optimal model of political organization for the moderns, are the ‘Greeks’ following the fate of the Romans and losing their idealized position in our imagination? Are we beyond the Greeks and the Romans? And if our relationship with them was constitutive of us as moderns, is this one more sign that we are leaving modernity behind?

[When I see the Afghans draft a constitution, or consider the spread of the language of human rights to factory workers in developing countries, or reflect upon the claim by militiamen that they have, individually and collectively, the right of revolution, I can easily disentangle the Roman elements of those beliefs and practices from the more recent layers with which they are intertwined. But I belong to a generation still educated to become fully aware of the role of the classics in our history and civilization. I do not see that happening in the United States today; and I believe it is not happening any longer in Europe as well.]

7. Afterthought. Who are the ‘Romans’ to whom we owe the *Corpus iuris*? For after all, it was Justinian who commissioned its compilation. So perhaps we are the children of Byzantium, rather than of Rome and Athens.

**Ingres, *Napoleon on His Imperial Throne*, 1806**

1. symbols in the painting
2. the contemporaries' reaction > Napoleon as the Byzantine emperor
3. the charismatic leader > contemplation and solitude

## Why we are Roman

To any of us educated in the 1970s and lost in time, this would seem like a non question. Romans were oddities, they had British accents, persecuted Christians, tramped about in fascist style uniforms and were of limited interest. At my undergraduate institution, one of the largest courses on offer was Humanities 103, where the elderly John Finley lectured to vast numbers of undergraduates about the virtues of Greek thought. No one would ever have suggested that there be a Humanities 104 where one might regale people with the glories of Roman civilization, which was, on the whole, regarded as an epiphenomenon of the Greek world. I fear that Harvard was no exception to the general rule, and the reason was not far to seek. We were not simply Greek, we were Athenian. We would not want to be confused with the Spartans, Corinthians or Thebans, all bad guys in Thucydides. Nor did we pause to wonder, if we extended identifications beyond Athens and Sparta, who would be the Thucydidean Belgians? In those days Thucydides described the paradigmatic conflict between a totalitarian state and a democracy, between a land power and a sea power. Pericles had foreseen the importance of a policy of containment to win through in the end, advising against ill-conceived foreign adventures (read Vietnam as Sicily) that could fatally weaken the democracy in its life and death struggle with the land power.

The view that Greek, read Athenian, democracy, is some sort of a biological ancestor of American style democracy is not dead. In his recent book entitled *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power*, Victor Davis Hanson asserts that the democratic tradition of Greece gave rise to the notion of the decisive

battle. He asserts that it is a peculiar feature of the European, and, by implication that we should expect democracies, by their very nature, to seek to annihilate their rivals. With the end of the Cold War there is no longer any point in reading Thucydides as a study in failed containment—and certainly not for what he was actually interested in: the way that war and the desire for power corrupts states; how people might be misled by irresponsible leaders and fall short of their own sense of decency. We should forget this altogether in Hanson's world, and concentrate on one passage of Herodotus (5.77) in which he states that the Athenians were weak when they were ruled by tyrants, and became strong only when they acquired *isagoreia*, the right of all Athenians to speak in the assembly, giving rise to the power, *ho boulomenos*, whose ability to alter policy from the floor of the assembly is indeed amply attested in matters great and small. While one may make some allowance for Hanson's notion of the role of direct democracy in contemporary America since he is an inhabitant of California, this is to deceive ourselves. We live in a democracy where the will of the majority is not sufficient to guarantee the result of an election because of the collective voting mechanisms devised by the founding fathers. Their model was the Roman Republic.

Politics narrowly defined in terms of foreign policy or electoral politics are not as instructive as they might be. To look as who we are we might first want to consider other aspects of life, and politics of other sorts. We might want to begin with topics such as sex and spectacle. In what remains one of the most compelling studies of Roman society produced in recent years, John Clarke has quite literally asked how they did it and how they depicted it. In comparing Greek and Roman representations of sexual activity he has noted that Greek artists concentrate on the act of penetration by the male. The

pleasure of the penetrating male is all that is of interest. The Roman artist will depict the shared pleasure of sexual partners, the woman on top, and people in bed together as equals. The position of women in the Roman world, in and out of bed was far different from that in the Greek world, largely, I think, because a woman could hold property in her own name (the archaic notion that she needed a tutor to guide her was recognized as a farce in Classical Roman law). Unlike Sparta, where women could also hold property, and where girls were included in the state system of education, Athenian women were as subordinate to their men in law as they were in depictions of sex. Arguably the most influential woman in fifth century Athens was a courtesan named Aspasia. Women of power and influence (if not always of good reputation) abound in the Roman tradition. Men might complain, and did, of women who acted too much like men, who controlled their own sexuality and could expect to enjoy themselves, but they had to admit that they were there (I confess a desire to have Lesbia's poem on that drip Catullus, but that is to trivialize—what we do know is that Cicero's discourse on Clodia might seem quite familiar to those familiar with the right-wing discourse on Hilary Clinton). While not wanting to suggest that the Roman world was one of perfect equality between the sexes (no Roman would dream of letting a woman vote), it was a world where control of self was not restricted by gender as much as it was by class. The discourse of sexuality could be extended to the attribution of specific sexual acts to people who were not Roman. The Roman effort to define same-sex relationships as something specifically un-Roman may perhaps resonate all the more in this day and age. The Romans developed the discourse of otherness as being somehow wrong with far greater sophistication than did the Greeks, who could simply divide the world between Greek and barbarian, slave and free, male

and female. The Roman could despise the Celt, the Syrian, the Egyptian, and the Greek, in terms specific to each. It is the discourse of the true imperial power that must acknowledge that all these groups are in some way part of it, but fall short, somehow of “all-Roman” status even while they moved into the power structure.

To define what was Roman for the mass of the population, Romans could turn to the theater and the sports arena, broadly defined. While Greekness in the Classical period (and post classical for that matter) was defined, in part, by the right to participate in games; the spectacle culture of the Roman empire exceeded that of any pre-modern society. The Roman system placed great emphasis on spectator participation—be it in determining the outcome of a gladiatorial fight, or the way that an execution would unfold, or pantomime victory. With the great mass of entertainers being classified as being somehow un-Roman, the performances of outsiders could raise issues more sharply. Just as we might transform entertainers and athletes into images, expecting some to be “good guys” standing up for the system, we also have more than passing interest in that famous product of the U of M, Madonna, precisely because she does the opposite.

Finally, we are alone, as were the Romans, to determine our political future. Stress on the outward oddities of the Romans, on gladiators, mad emperors and the like must never disguise the fact that the Roman empire presents the great challenge of stability and continuity for any superpower. This is a challenge that has nothing to do with Hanson’s imaginary biology of warfare. For all their complaining and their posturing, the Romans succeeded in producing a multi-ethnic state that ensured peace for centuries, whose leaders often understood the limits of their own power, and that even the greatest military power could not be used indiscriminately.

Those interested in the way that Hanson, who is a regular contributor to the *National Review*, has used Thucydides in arguments concerning current events might want to consult the following links:

V.D. Hanson “From New York to Baghdad, “

<http://www.nationalreview.com/hanson/hanson022103.asp>

V.D. Hanson, “Our Primordial World,”

<http://www.nationalreview.com/hanson/hanson200401160656.asp>

For a response to Hanson readers might well want to consult D. Mendelsohn, “Theaters of War”

[http://www.newyorker.com/printable/?critics/040112crat\\_atlarge](http://www.newyorker.com/printable/?critics/040112crat_atlarge)

The Moderns between the Greeks and the Romans  
Thursday, January 8, 2004

Arlene W. Saxonhouse

I want to begin in 1823 when a trading post was established by a certain Benjamin Woodruff and fellow settlers traveling north from Ohio to southeastern Michigan. They gave the town they settled into the rather uninspiring name of Waterville. Ten years later in 1833, the citizens of Waterville voted to change the name of Waterville to Ypsilanti in honor of the Greek general Demetrius Ypsilanti who had commanded the Greek forces against the Turks during the Greek wars of liberation. At the time, the inhabitants of Waterville had no special connection to Greece. They had come to Michigan from Ohio, not Athens or Corinth. The city, however, like many others at the time was filled with citizens who were eager to attach themselves to the Greek spirit of liberation that overthrew tyrants and founded the political model of self-rule. Ypsilanti is hardly the only city in the mid-1800's to be named or re-named with a view to recalling the democratic regime and democratic spirit of ancient Athens. For the same reason Doric columns grace many a front porch and bank facade in America.

In Congress at around the same time Daniel Webster is intoning the indebtedness of America to Greece in order to persuade Congress to send support to the Greeks in their resistance to the Turks:

An occasion which calls attention to a spot so distinguished, so connected with interesting recollections, as Greece, may naturally create something of warmth and enthusiasm. In a grave, political discussion, [*such as is supposedly going on on the floor of Congress*] however, it is necessary that those feelings should be chastised. [*and so he says*] I shall endeavor properly to repress them. [*but of course, he can't and so he goes on to*

say] We must indeed fly beyond the civilized world; we must pass the dominion of law and the boundaries of knowledge...if we would separate ourselves entirely from the influence of all those memorials of herself which ancient Greece had transmitted...This free form of government, this popular assembly, the common council held for the common good –where have we contemplated its earliest models? This practice of free debate and public discussion, the contest of mind with mind, and that popular eloquence.....whose was the language in which all these were first exhibited? Even the edifice in which we assembly, these proportioned columns....remind us that Greece has existed, and that we like the rest of mankind are greatly her debtors.

Here we hear Webster wallowing in American gratitude to Greece and her democratic legacy. Athens has powerfully captured the American political imagination.

But this was not always the case. More frequently in the whole period from Athens' submission to Macedonian rule in the fourth century BCE to the period when Waterville became Ypsilanti, ancient Athens and Greece generally offered the political model that was to be avoided, to be seen as the example of how not to structure political society. We see this abhorrence of Greece among, for example, the English historians of Greece from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. With a view to events happening across the Channel in France, they wrote of democracy in Athens as "a tyranny in the hands of the people" and saw "marks of kindred between Turkish despotism and Athenian democracy." The historian Gillies writes his history of Greece with a view to "exposing the dangerous turbulence of democracy." Athens was for him a "suspicious" democracy and a history provided the support of monarchical rule that would earn him favor in his England. When we turn to the Federalist Papers written about the same time as these histories, we find the language perhaps less purple, but the warnings about

turning to the model of Greek democracy are no less prevalent. Hamilton in Federalist 9 writes of the impossibility of reading "the history of the petty republics of Greece and Italy without feeling sensations of horror and disgust at the distractions with which they are continually agitated, and at the rapid succession of revolutions by which they were kept in a state of perpetual vibration between the extremes of tyranny and anarchy." Or Jefferson writing to his friend Isaac Tiffany in 1816 well after the adoption of the Federalist papers remarks: "But so different was the style of society then and with those people, from what it is now and with us, that I think little edification can be obtained from their writings on the subject of government....The introduction of this principle of representative democracy has rendered useless almost everything written before on the structure of government; and in great measure, relieves our regret, if the political writings of Aristotle, or any other ancient, have been lost, or are unfaithfully rendered or explained to us."

And indeed the Federalist Papers did not turn to Athens as a model of political structure for the new nation. Yet, despite Hamilton's claim in Federalist 9 that the new nation will draw on a new science of politics and new principles "now well understood, which were either not known at all, or imperfectly known to the ancients," the American founders in constructing the American constitution do look back to the ancient world – but it is the ancient world of Rome and not of Athens –and so we have the Capitol, the Senate, Washington as the Roman hero Cincinnatus – and especially the mixed regime that limits and restrains democratic principles. Jefferson in the quote just above notes the importance of

representation in the modern world, a discovery that lets the people be the fountain of political power, but still not rule themselves. Representation is to serve as filter, as Madison makes clear in Federalist 10 and again in 49 when he warns of too frequent assessment of fundamental laws of the society by the people. "The danger of disturbing the public tranquility by interesting too strongly the public passions, is a ..serious objection against a frequent reference of constitutional questions to the decision of the whole society." Rather, leave the law-making and politics generally to the skilled and noble leaders who recall the heroes of the Roman Republic, not the demagogues of Athens. It was the modern Cicero, not the everyman, whom the founding fathers wanted in the seats of political power. Representation along with the mixed regime modeled on the Roman republic offered the mechanisms to restrain rather than release the destructive forces of an unbridled democracy that marred the history of Greece. [somehow the turmoil of the first century BCE seems to have been forgotten here.]

And yet, less than half a century later Rome is yielding in the American imagination to Athens. Webster is appealing to our indebtedness to Greece. As Tocqueville surveying America was so aware, once the principles of equality start to surface, there is no stopping it . The America he saw was awash in egalitarianism and whether one liked it or not, that was to be the future and with that egalitarianism come democracy and the romanticization perhaps of Athenian democracy. While Webster is orating, in England George Grote (the political reformer whose energy was behind the widespread extension of suffrage in the

Reform Bill of 1832) is revising the way the history of Greece is to be written, no longer as with Gillies as a warning about tyrannical impulses of democracy, but as the exaltation of the glories that come to the democratic nation. Grote then writes: "Democracy in Grecian antiquity possessed the privilege ... of creating an energy of public and private action...the theory of democracy ....disposed the citizens to voluntary action and suffering on its behalf, such as no coercion on the part of other governments could extort. Grote admitted that "democracy happens to be unpalatable to most modern readers," but his history is to change that. The appeal of democracy is expanding and the apotheosis of Athens as the source of democratic practices begins.

BUT, and this is the point on which I want to conclude, we have this joining of democracy from Athens and republicanism from Rome in the modern political framework – and imagination, the republic to hold down the egalitarian forces of democracy, and the democracy to resist the filtering that brings forth the self-sacrificing nobler sorts into political power. During the American founding the differences between the republican and the democratic regimes were well marked and the defenders of one saw the dangers of the other [Anti-Federalists]. The distinction, though, did not last long and Jefferson indeed soon founded the Democratic-Republican party. We talk often today in the language of democratic republics – or the inverse – as the terms slide apparently seamlessly into one another, as if they were eminently compatible. I would contend that they are not; that they come from different political traditions and obviously from different languages. Calls for popular participation and egalitarianism chafe against

republican principles of filtering and elitism, as well as the necessary virtues found in the models of the Roman heroes. Greece and Roman have bequeathed different political models—our challenge is to acknowledge those differences and face the difficulties of trying to integrate what may be incompatible aspirations.

"The Moderns Between the Greeks and Romans"  
Lydia M. Soo

I would like to present three different episodes in the Greek-Roman debate as it applies to architecture--three episodes from the 15th, 18th, and 20th centuries that demonstrate some of the changing parameters of that debate.

In architecture, the early modern world began with a distinct sense of the difference between the Greeks and the Romans, and also a sense of a rivalry between them. Leon Battista Alberti, who wrote around 1450 the first treatise on architecture since ancient times, states: "Building, so far as we can tell from ancient monuments, enjoyed her first gush of youth, as it were, in Asia, flowered in Greece, and later reached her glorious maturity in Italy." (VI, 3) He goes on to describe how the "upright and noble minds" in Greece applied their "ingenuity" and drew the art of building "out from the very bosom of Nature." In the design of their temples, "They added, took away, and adjusted greater to smaller, like to unlike, first to last, until they had established the different qualities desirable in those buildings intended to endure for ages, and in those erected for no reason as much as their good looks."

The Romans went further however, Alberti continues, to discover that in nature, "grace of form could never be separated ... from suitability for use." In their buildings therefore they tempered "splendor" with "frugality," not allowing utility to be sacrificed to opulence, but creating a balance between "comfort and grace." The result was an architecture surpassing that of all other nations, and only adding to Italy's other superior virtues. In a burst of pride, Alberti cries:

"Need I mention the porticoes, temples, ports, theaters, and vast baths, which caused such amazement that experienced architects from abroad denied that some of those works could ever be built, although they saw

them with their very eyes. Should I go on? They did not fail even to have their drains beautifully built."

Alberti, nor any of the Italian architects who created the Renaissance, ever laid eyes on an ancient Greek building, but as we can tell from Alberti, they didn't feel they needed to. For the next three centuries they went on to create an architecture based on an idealized view of their own Roman past, compellingly presented in Alberti's treatise. At the same time this idealized view was made possible by an imperfect understanding of the physical remains of that past. On the screen are sketches from the 15th century that show just how difficult it was at that time to view and understand the ancient ruins in Rome.

The situation changes in the 18th century with the so-called "discovery" of Greece by the English and the French. Stuart and Revett were the first to get to Athens, in 1742, and were there for more than two years carefully studying and drawing the antiquities--activities that were deemed so suspicious and they were thrown into prison. Here are images of the Parthenon from their much delayed 1789 publication of the monuments of the Acropolis. Back in Rome, the same new scientific standards were applied to the study of Roman antiquities, reaching a new height with the engravings of Giovanni Battista Piranesi, which you see here.

What we have in the 18th century is the development of an archaeological knowledge of Greek and Roman antiquities that intensified the nature of the Greek-Roman debate. On one side was the Frenchman Marc-Antoine Laugier who argued for the superiority of Greek architecture based upon its origins in the primitive hut, shown on the left. Created out of nature, it has three essential elements based on structural necessity--the column, entablature, and pediment. Thus the simplicity and purity of the ancient Greek temple was the result of rational principles, and should be the model for architecture today. You might be wondering why there is a slide of the Maison Carree in Nimes on the right. This in fact was Laugier's favorite building and the exemplar of his

theory. Unfortunately for him it is a Roman, not Greek temple, but he never traveled outside of France, he was working with what he had available.

On the other side from Laugier was Piranesi, who condemned the simplicity of the architecture of the Greeks in favor of the ornateness of the Etruscans, who were for him the true precursors of Roman architecture. In the center of the plate on the left, Piranesi illusionistically unfurls a sheet from a publication of one of his French, Greek-loving rivals. Isn't it clear, he is asking, how the Roman examples, on either side and on the many pages that follow, are much more ornate, and thus more perfect and superior to the Greek?

What is interesting about this 18th century episode is how the debate is not only linked to national honor, but also to the aesthetic categories that developed during this period---the beautiful and the sublime. We have the French, who uphold the beauty of Greek architecture--a simplicity that is as a sign of rationality and origins in nature. Then we have the Italians, who uphold the sublimity of Roman architecture--an ornateness that is a sign of superior Etruscan origins and creativity, not mere imitation. Indeed, in Piranesi's etchings we can get a sense of the awesome, almost terrifying qualities of Roman architecture.

Beyond their aesthetic qualities, archaeological knowledge made it clear that despite their common use of the classical orders, Greek and Roman antiquities were distinct from one another in terms of their treatment of structure. The Greeks, as we see on the left in the Parthenon, used megalithic post-and-lintel construction to design buildings that were less about interior space and more about creating an ensemble of three-dimensional objects experienced along an irregular path. The Romans, as we see on the right in the Pantheon, used concrete arch and vault construction to design buildings that certainly did have monumental exteriors, but were more about creating complex and sublime volumes of interior space.

In the 20th century the architects of the Modern Movement, despite their avowed rejection of past architecture, embraced these two models and attempted to adapt them to contemporary materials. Furthermore, they attempted to fuse them in unexpected ways.

In his architecture Mies van der Rohe created Greek temples, like the National Gallery in Berlin from 1962 which we see here. Like a Greek temple it is simple and regular in its geometry, precisely proportioned in all of its parts, and symmetrical. The classical orders have been replaced by eight cruciform steel columns that create a skeleton that rises to support a rigid plate steel roof. Inside is a "universal space" as Mies called it--a huge sweep, enclosed in glass, on the scale of ancient Roman interiors.

Louis Kahn's architecture is noted for how it captures the spirit of the ancient Roman ruins. For him design was about creating a "room." At the Kimball Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas from 1972, he created a series of rooms, each covered by a barrel vault. But these are not the kind of barrel vaults used by the Romans. Instead they are thin concrete shells, split at the top by light diffusers. Each curved half acts structurally as a long beam resting on a skeleton of concrete columns. That is, the building is visually and spatially more Roman, but structurally more Greek.

Here are some of Kahn's travel sketches from Athens where we can see his vision of the Acropolis. In the Greek-Roman debate in architecture, whether it concerns national pride, aesthetics, or structural and formal principles of design, there are no fixed points. Everything, even the actual ancient examples that remain, is subject to interpretation, as we can see for example on the screen. Perhaps this is the reason why this debate has provided such rich fuel for the development of architecture.