

French Connections



1. Lisa and Liberty

February 19, 2025

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MONA LISA AND THE STATUE OF LIBERTY: two icons of French culture—but one is by an Italian who just happened to be in France, and the other was made for a country at the other side of an ocean. By the same token, they make a convenient starting point for this preview of some of the themes that will follow. *rb.*

A. Import and Export

The *Mona Lisa* and *Statue of Liberty* represent the two main ways in which French culture interacts with other countries: the *import* of other styles into France, and (later in its history) the *export* of French styles abroad. A brief menu of classes to follow.

Leonardo: *Mona Lisa* (Louvre, c.1593–19)

Bartholdi: *Liberty Enlightening the World* (NY Harbor, 1877–86)

B. Moving on from Mona

Leonardo de Vinci did not paint the *Mona Lisa* for France, but he was working on it *in* France when he died, occupying a grand house as a guest of the King. In effect, the French Renaissance, which began around then, was jump-started by the import of Italian artists.

Rosso Fiorentino: Frescoes at Fontainebleau (c.1530–40)

C. The Medici Girls

The Italian influx was not confined to artists. Two French Kings married women of the Medici family; both came to wield considerable political power, both were notable patrons of the arts, and both left striking memorials to their lives.

♫ **Film:** *Catherine de Médicis* (video by Howard Goodall)

Pilon: Monument to Henri IV and Catherine (Saint Denis, c.1570)

Rubens: *Marie de Médicis*, portrait (Madrid, Prado, 1622)

♪ **Rubens**: *Life of Marie de Médicis* (Louvre, 1622–25), montage with music by Heinrich Praetorius

Van Dyck: *Marie de Médicis in Exile* (Lille, 1641)

D. The Busker Makes Good

When a cadet member of the royal family plucked busker **Giovanni Battista Lully** from the Florence streets as an Italian tutor for his niece, he little realized that the boy would become ballet partner and court composer to Louis XIV, and gain total monopoly over music in France.

♪ **Lully**: *Menuet des Trompettes* (Hervé Niquet conducting *Le Concert Spirituel*; dancers unknown)

♪ **Corbiau**: *Le Roi dance* (film, 2000), *L'idylle sur la paix*

E. Another Gift from France

Lady Liberty, France's gift to America, commemorated the centenary of its first gift: aid during the American Revolution. But her sponsors may also have been motivated by political conditions in their own country.

Delacroix: *Liberty Leading the People* (Paris, Louvre, 1830)

Leutze: *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (NY Met, 1851)

Lazarus: *The New Colossus* (poem, 1883)

Moran: *Unveiling of the Statue of Liberty* (NYC Museum, 1886)

♪ **Gounod**: *La Liberté éclairant le monde*, extract

F. Oldest Ally, Ancient Enemy

France was the earliest ally of the United States. By contrast, its present good relationship with Britain reverses almost a millennium of intermittent conflict.

Trumbull: *Surrender of Cornwallis* (US Capitol, 1820)

The Bayeux Tapestry (Museum of Bayeux Abbey, 1070s)

G. Le Mot Juste

What do the French words we use and the ways we pronounce them say about Anglo-American attitudes to France? Not much, as it turns out, but it an interesting question nonetheless.

♪ **Cartoon**: *French Words in American and English* (Dave Huxtable)

H. The Father of American Ballet

New York is the dance capital of the world. At least two of its many companies are devoted to the classic ballet tradition, and the man most responsible for bringing that from Paris to New York is the choreographer **George Balanchine**.

♪ **Balanchine/Stravinsky**: *Apollo*, end (Mikhail Baryshnikov, NYCB)

♪ **Film**: *In Balanchine's Classroom* (2021), trailer

♪ **Documentary**: *NYCB Turns 75* (CBS Sunday Morning, 2023)

George **Balanchine** (1904–83, *Georgian-American choreographer*), Frédéric Auguste **Bartholdi** (1834–1904, *French sculptor*), Eugène **Delacroix** (1798–1863, *French painter*), Gustave **Eiffel** (1832–1923, *French engineer*), Emma **Lazarus** (1849–87, *American poet*), **Leonardo da Vinci** (1452–1519, *Italian artist*), Emanuel **Leutze** (1816–68, *German-American painter*), Jean-Baptiste **Lully** (1632–87, *Italian-French composer*), Edward **Moran** (1862–1935, *English-American painter*), Germain **Pilon** (1525–90, *French sculptor*), Michael **Praetorius** (1571–1621, *German composer*), Francesco **Primaticcio** (1504–70, *Italian artist*), **Rosso** Fiorentino (1494–1540, *Italian painter*), Peter Paul **Rubens** (1577–1640, *Flemish painter*), Igor **Stravinsky** (1882–1971, *Russian-American composer*)

The course website is www.brunyate.com/FrenchConnections

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