Thomas Jefferson was seven years old in 1750 when Denis Diderot published in Paris his prospectus for the Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire universel des arts et des sciences, which during the next thirty years was to run into seventeen folios of text and three thousand engravings illustrating science, art, and manufacturing. Diderot, following in Bacon’s footsteps, said he aimed to demonstrate “the sequence and interplay of man’s attainments and to describe the essential details of every art and science, both liberal and mechanical.” By charting all man’s creative efforts as the branches and leaves of one great “encyclopaedic tree;” he leveled the antique distinction between the liberal arts, whose practice did not dishonor a free man, and the mechanic trades, which had to be left to the sweat of slaves. This emancipation, by directing the best minds to technology, favored the classic nineteenth-century invention—the technique of inventing.

In a similar attempt at unity Diderot and his colleagues derived the present strictly from the past and relegated institutions formerly respected as absolute, such as Christian dogma and the privileges of the nobility, to relative places in the perspective of history. In a world where values were threatening to collapse they clung to the rock of logical necessity and substituted the ideal of historical exactitude for crumbling assumptions.

This predominating movement in eighteenth-century France found its most versatile New World exponent in Jefferson, whose library included the thirty-six volumes of the “Encyclopaedia” in the cheap Lausanne reprint of 1778-1781. Its effect on Jefferson’s mind must in some ways have been the opposite of its effect on contemporary French minds. While it was a novelty in France to include the trades in the learned considerations of an encyclopaedia, in eighteenth-century America, where “artist” meant what it had meant in the Middle Ages—any skilled workman such as a bricklayer, surveyor, or sailor—it must have come as a surprise to find sculptors and easel painters given room as useful members of society. It was Jefferson’s sympathy with foreign ideas that led one of his friends to say that “he panted after the fine arts and discovered a taste in them not easily satisfied with such scanty means as existed in a colony.
It constituted a part of Mr. Jefferson's pride to run before the times in which he lived."

He ran a full century before his times in trying to plant the encyclopaedic tree in universities by teaching civil architecture, gardening, sculpture, and the theory of music. He did not go so far as to include painting, for reasons to be discussed later. These courses would not have been "snaps," for Jefferson always studied straight from the great source books used by the professional architects and designers of his day, and owned almost none of the short-cut manuals, like The Young Builder's Rudiments or The Carpenter's Compleat Instructor, so popular in that golden age of amateur architects. While his art library, which he had started by the time he was twenty-one, was probably the most intelligently selected one of his day in America, it was not sumptuous, for he stretched his money by buying the cheapest editions. His love of his books, which was like a workman's love of his tools, did not prevent his ripping out an illustration now and then to further some job in hand. The damage to the books was essential to the studies by which Jefferson made himself such a master of all trades that he could say, in his fifties, "My workmen cannot proceed an hour without me."

His art books both gave him a good knowledge of classical and renaissance architecture and kept him abreast with the latest fashions in decoration, two things which the coming of the Empire made almost one thing. By expressing his veneration for antiquity in designs he anticipated the Empire style as early as 1790, when he wrote to Paris to order a mantel clock. This clock, which still exists, has a dial supported between two black obelisks that Jefferson was at pains to have shaped with archaeological correctness "in plain marble cut off obliquely, as is always done in the obelisk."

"The section of an obelisk, you know, is square. I mean its ichnography," he explained.

The furnishings of his Paris house, which were shipped to Monticello in eighty-six crates, must have been the first big lot of Louis XVI furniture to reach North America. The few pieces that can now be identified, out of the houseful that included fifty-nine chairs and six sofas in white and gold, are of plain but excellent Parisian design. The published extracts from the packer's list show that Jefferson bought handsome upholstery of damask, leather, even velvet, but wasted no money on needlepoint or tapestry. He chose his furniture like his books, to get the essentials in inexpensive form. This thrift in princeliness was as French a trait as his relish for the Louis XVI and the Empire style. Indeed he must have been like those Americans who arrive in Paris without enough French to ask their way to their hotels and yet sense an expansion of understanding and a freedom of spirit that they never enjoyed where they were born.

Jefferson's French furniture, remarkable as it must have been on his Virginia mountaintop, was only a setting for the first extraordinary art collection in the United States. Other Americans, to be sure, owned good paintings, but what we know of their reasons for acquiring works of art is commonplace, like George Washington's ordering pictures by mail to fit given wall spaces. Jefferson, on the contrary, who has been called the first American connoisseur and patron of the arts, collected and commissioned works of art to fit into a historical scheme. He wanted portraits of his intellectual ancestors and kinsmen, the men who expanded or were still expanding the horizons of his world. He therefore hung paintings of five explorers, Columbus, Americus Vespucius, Cortez, Magellan, and Raleigh. These were balanced by three conquistadors of thought—Jefferson's "trinity"—Bacon, Newton, and Locke. For his revolutionary contemporaries he had remarkable paintings of Washington, Franklin, John Adams, Thomas Paine, Madison, and Lafayette. As if this were not enough, he owned Ceracchi's bust of Hamilton and seven of Houdon's masterpieces of sculpture—portraits of Voltaire, Turgot, Lafayette, Washington, Franklin, John Paul Jones, and Jefferson himself. He stated at least part of his plan for collecting when he wrote to his agent in Paris that his pictures of American characters would be "absolutely incomplete" without a Lafayette.

When he was not guided by an intellectual
plan his collecting was haphazard. The figure arts, while meriting attention as a conspicuous fruit on the encyclopaedic tree of knowledge, were not an apple that tempted him to any deep sin of curiosity. Yet even so his confused and partial inventory of paintings, presumably hanging at Monticello, lists over sixty subjects. That over half should be religious does not so much indicate Jefferson's tastes as it does the choice of old paintings available on the Paris market of that day. In choosing the profane subjects his classical learning must have swayed him when he acquired "Diogenes with his lanthorn seeking a man" and "Daphne metamorphosing into a Laurel." Though there are copies after Leonardo, Raphael, Titian, and Rubens (the last bearing the wistful note "has been good"), most of the paintings are attributed to baroque painters such as Baroccio, Guido Reni (six pictures), Pordenone, Coypel, Le Sueur, Vouet, Ribera. Some of the titles are marked "original"—but original what? for often no painter's name is given.

Jefferson habitually consulted experts on the figure arts. It is likely that he appealed to his friendly "oracle of taste," the Baron Grimm, when he bid on four paintings at an auction only half a year after arriving in Paris. During his last two years abroad he entrusted some of his picture buying to John Trumbull, whom he quoted in 1787 when he wrote to George Washington about the statue to be made by Houdon: "I am happy to find that the modern dress for your statue would meet your approbation. I found it strongly the sentiment of West, Copley, Trumbull and Brown in London. I think a modern in an antique dress as just an object of ridicule as a Hercules or Marius with a periwig and a chapeau bras."

(But thirty years later, when he was projecting Canova's marble of Washington, Jefferson reverted to his ingrained literary leanings toward the Graeco-Roman: "As to the style of costume, I am sure the artist and every person of taste in Europe would be for the Roman.")

The frequency with which Jefferson sought advice on the figure arts shows how inadequate he felt to judge for himself. After growing up in a new country that was struggling for bare existence and in a region that was sculptureless and all but pictureless, the wonder is not that his eye for sculpture and painting was uncertain, but that he was able to develop any eye at all. In his mid-forties, when he had been absorbing for four years everything that Europe had to offer, he still called the Vanderwerffs at Düsseldorf—those slick inanities—"sublime." The taste of the time cannot excuse such banality since it was not shared by acute contemporaries like P. J. Mariette and Denon. If in appreciating the figure arts Jefferson was far behind these Frenchmen, bred of generations of connoisseurs, he was as far ahead of all his countrymen. The fact is that his typically American devotion to the practical and the logical tended to blind him to all but the applied arts, which serve a definite use and do not waste effort by demanding emotions. He had the usual American taste that composes good furniture charmingly and is not offended by pictures that are at best neutral. He rationalized his distrust of an emotional art in his "Objects of attention for an American," which he wrote in Paris. "Painting, Statuary. Too expensive for the state of wealth among us. It would be useless, therefore, and preposterous, for us to make ourselves connoisseurs in those arts. They are worth seeing, but not studying."

This sounds a little like self-deception, for no art is so expensive as architecture, which was Jefferson's deepest love among the visual arts. It was a love, however, to which he felt free to give himself only after he had rationalized it into a benefit for humanity, after the manner of the Encyclopaedists. In his same advice to Americans he wrote: "Architecture worth great attention. As we double our numbers every twenty years, we must double our houses. Besides, we build of such perishable materials, that one half of our houses must be rebuilt in every space of twenty years. It is then among the most important arts; and it is desirable to introduce taste into an art which shows so much." But Jefferson betrays this sound reasoning as afterthought by a note of headlong passion whenever he writes about architecture. The most lovesick of his letters
Aquatint portrait of Jefferson after a drawing by Thaddeus Kosciusko, 1798
The Maison Carrée at Nîmes, possibly built by Agrippa, 20-15 B.C.

corns a building: “While in Paris, I was violently smitten with the Hôtel de Salm, and used to go to the Tuileries almost daily, to look at it. The loueuse de chaises, inattentive to my passion, never had the complaisance to place a chair there, so that, sitting on the parapet, and twisting my neck round to see the object of my admiration, I generally left with a torti-colli.” This building is the exquisite Palace of the Legion of Honor, which Jefferson recommended as one of three models for the White House and himself adapted for Monticello. His lifelong work on his Palladian “little mountain”—designing and redesigning, building and rebuilding—gave him the pleasure that is the secret of the slaves of love. “All my wishes end,” he said, “where I hope my days will end, at Monticello.” His love labored to such beautiful effect that one of his most cultivated French guests felt moved to remark: “This house, of which Mr. Jefferson was the architect and often one of the workmen, is rather elegant. . . . We may safely aver that Mr. Jefferson is the first American who has consulted the fine arts to know how he should shelter himself from the weather.” Jefferson, who was anything but stingy, made a free gift of so much consideration when designing buildings for his friends and for the government that Fiske Kimball has called his buildings “the first in the United States (except for Harrison’s) whose every effect was studied in advance.”

Mr. Kimball has also noticed Jefferson’s highly characteristic manner of working: “The inevitable mathematical processes, instead of coming last, came first. He gave preference to mathematical over graphical methods of deriving his designs.” It would seem as though his keenest enjoyment, to be attacked first, must have lain in the calculations that are neatly penned all around his tidy diagrams, such as: “The pediments should be in height two ninths of their span.” As long as he used ruler and compass he never needed to erase, even when no pencil sketch underlay the ink, but in freehand drawing for curtains or for the corn capitals of the “American order” the timidity of his attempt is surprising for a spirit so prompt and bold. As might perhaps be expected from a man relatively obtuse to painting, he seems to have left but one perspective rendering among his hundreds of surviving plans and elevations. His house plans in endless combinations of octagon and rectangle must have emanated from a kind of mathematic rage, a Procrustean cleaver for lopping life to make it fit, come what may, into the odd geometry of his rooms.

Architecture fascinated him both because it is the only really abstract visual art, although it grapples most closely with the exigencies of life, and because the structural limitations of wood, brick, and stone made it the most traditional art until the mass production of steel. Jefferson, with an intelligence disciplined by the study of law to derive action from the necessities of the immediate problem and from precedents that time has hardened into rules, evidently enjoyed pitting his wits not only against the problem of discovering the clearest and therefore most practical solution for a human need but also against what he imagined to be the absolute and immemorial rigidity of the canons of Graeco-Roman architecture as codified by Vignola and ratified by the centuries. In 1786 he sent from Paris his designs for the national Capitol, adapted from
the Pantheon in Rome, with this recommendation: “They are simple & sublime, more cannot be said, they are not the brat of a whimsical conception never before brought to light, but copied from the most precious, the most perfect model of antient architecture remaining on earth; one which has received the approbation of near 2000 years. It will be less expensive, too, than the one begun.”

Where French architects freely adapted suggestions from the antique to modify their own style, Jefferson followed the antique somewhat literally. He was not swept along by the momentum of a long-established native taste, and like most Americans he wanted to scrap his past—the “rude, misshapen piles” of colonial Williamsburg—in order to plump for the new idea abroad. Wishing to make visible the then current comparison between the aspirations of the young republic and the political wisdom of Rome, he built the Virginia State Capitol on the model of the Maison Carrée at Nimes. Though this was the first large-scale close imitation of an antique building erected in modern times, he did not feel committed to the antique except when that style seemed to be dictated by use. He wrote to L’Enfant about the city of Washington: “For the Capitol I should prefer the adoption of some one of the models of antiquity which have had the approbation of thousands of years; and for the President’s house I should prefer the celebrated fronts of modern buildings which have already received the approbation of all good judges. Such are the Galerie du Louvre, the Gardes meubles, and two fronts of the Hôtel de Salm.” He stated the distinctions imposed by use even more forcibly when he wrote to a friend about his own house: “In my middle room I mean to mix the faces and ox-sculls, a fancy which I can indulge in my own case, although in a public work I feel bound to follow authority strictly.” It would have outraged his deepest sense of propriety to see his national monument built in imitation of his home in the country.

As one might expect in a man who was born before David and died after Byron, Jefferson was by turns a classicist and a romantic. It might even be said that he could be both at once; for on those occasions when he followed the antique the utterness of his adherence prevented him being a complete classicist, who must observe moderation even in his classicism. During his romantic moods only lack of means kept him from surrounding Monticello with fanciful approaches through gushing springs, copies of all the Roman statues that were triple starred for the Grand Tour, a miniature Pantheon, a Chinese garden house, and a small Gothic building in the graveyard. His park, had he been able to follow his bent, would probably have looked like one he admired in Germany in which there was a ruin which was “clever.” “It presents the remains of an old castle . . .”, he wrote. “There is a hermitage in which is a good figure of a hermit in plaster, coloured to the life, with a table and a book before him, in the attitude of reading and contemplation.”

While he might have made his grounds seem to a tourist like a medley of gadgets, what he planned was more like an outdoor encyclopaedia of architecture. He detested superfluities and even in his archaeological excavation of an Indian mound he did not dig to get knick-knacks, but to discover an aspect of Indian life from a detailed study of the finds.
After starting to scratch the surface here and there as archaeologists have ever done until a bare generation ago, he promptly recognized the futility of such lack of method and cut trial ditches across the mound down to the undisturbed soil, which enabled him to interpret the finds by their stratification. Dr. Lehmann-Hartleben has recently observed that this excavation of the 1770's "anticipates the fundamental approach and the methods of modern archaeology by about a full century. The excavation is made, not to find objects, but to resolve an archaeological problem."

Whatever Jefferson's necessity, it always begat an invention. Scarcity of bricks produced garden walls only one brick thick that manage to stay up by wriggling like a snake fence. The tripartite articulation of our government suggested a Jeffersonian plan for housing the judiciary, legislative, and executive functions in three distinct buildings, which still remains to be thoroughly carried out. New ideas on the treatment of prisoners called forth suggestions that contributed to prison plans in which America led the world. By elaborating the colonnades where Greek philosophers used to teach into an "academical village," he evolved for the University of Virginia a unity whose convenience, economy, and elegance are only just beginning to be appreciated by our college planners after they have spent over a generation reproducing architectural drawbacks that prove nothing except the ability of Oxford and Cambridge to survive in spite of the tradition that produced Mr. Pugin.

Jefferson's vitality, which has kept his memory so alive that the people of Charlottesville to this day speak of him as Mr. Jefferson, molded Monticello exactly to his odd way of life. The house would be uninhabitable for anyone else, but what did Jefferson care if the guest rooms were more like coat closets? Too many guests came anyway. What did it matter if his stairs were rat ladders? He hardly ever climbed them. He tailored the whole house so that he could live exclusively on the ground floor, as though he were in a Paris apartment, and have only one door to lock in order to be alone with his books, his desk, his drawing board, and his bed.

The dreams he lavished on Monticello finally shaped it into a symbol of his very spirit. He chose to construct his urbane pavilion on a mountaintop that dominates a wilderness of hills rolling out on every hand toward the blue. Yet to gaze into his "sea view" he had to walk to his garden's edge, for the rooms he lived in open on a trim, tree-bounded lawn. He was too intensely himself to tolerate endlessness forever beating at the panes of his French windows.