

Architecture

Monticello: Thomas Jefferson’s Masterpiece



When architects design homes, they consider many things. They might consider the family who will live in the home. They might consider how the home fits in with the rest of the buildings in the neighborhood. In the countryside, architects might think about how the home blends in with the **landscape**.¹ That is a lot to think about! Often, an architect’s building will reflect his or her ideas. Monticello, designed by its owner, Thomas Jefferson, is one good example of American architecture.

If any building could be considered an autobiography, Monticello is it. Autobiographies tell about a person’s own character, and so does Monticello. This home of Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States, gives us many **insights**² into Jefferson himself.

In Piedmont, Virginia, the plantation owned by Jefferson was huge. It was 5,000 acres, to be exact. Jefferson built irrigation systems to bring water to his farmland, but much of the land was still beautiful wilderness.

As a politician, Jefferson served as Ambassador to France during the American Revolution, a war fought by the American colonies to gain independence from Britain. Paris was a beautiful, **cultured**³ city, but it was not to Thomas Jefferson’s liking. While in Paris, Jefferson wrote, “I am savage enough to prefer the woods, the wilds, and the independence of Monticello, to all the brilliant pleasures of this gay capital...for tho’

¹ **landscape** - natural scenery

² **insight** - understanding

³ **cultured** – sophisticated

there is less wealth there, there is more freedom, more ease, and less misery” (September 6, 1785).

The architectural style of Monticello is Roman Neoclassicism. Roman Neoclassicism draws inspiration from the classical art and architecture of ancient Rome. Jefferson chose this style because it **reflected**⁴ his political values. During the American Revolution, many colonists, Jefferson included, looked to the citizens of ancient Greece and ancient Rome for inspiration. They identified with the ideals of these old civilizations where men voted on many public issues – a right the colonists were denied under the British monarchy. The great columns of Monticello are similar to the columns of buildings in ancient Rome. They are structured and sturdy.

The shapes of Monticello represent balance. This notion of balance also helped to guide the American Founding Fathers, including Jefferson, as they designed the three branches of government upon a system of checks and balances so that no one branch would become too powerful. The dome of Monticello, shaped like a circle, also symbolizes the republican form of government that Jefferson and the colonists studied so fervently. To Jefferson, his house was a world full of possibility and beauty.

Thomas Jefferson also designed part of the University of Virginia. Today, Monticello and the University of Virginia are recognized worldwide as hallmarks of American architecture. They are both protected as World Heritage Sites.

The Rotunda at the University of Virginia



⁴ **reflect** – to mirror an image or an idea

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. According to the passage, architects may consider all of the following when designing a home EXCEPT
 - a. how the home blends into the landscape.
 - b. how the home fits in with the neighborhood.
 - c. the placement of the furniture in the home.
 - d. the needs of the family.

2. Why does the author describe the architectural details of Monticello to the reader?
 - a. to teach facts about the American Revolution
 - b. to describe how architectural details of Monticello reflect Jefferson’s political values and interests
 - c. to discuss the autobiography of Thomas Jefferson
 - d. to describe how the architectural details of Monticello are also found in Paris

3. Why does the author most likely include the quote about Monticello from Jefferson’s writing?
 - a. to contrast Monticello and Paris
 - b. to illustrate Jefferson’s preference of freedom over money
 - c. to convey why Jefferson liked Monticello so much
 - d. to show that Jefferson was not impressed by Paris

4. Read the following sentences: “The great columns of Monticello are similar to the columns of buildings in ancient Rome. They are structured and sturdy.”

The word **sturdy** most nearly means

 - a. unbalanced
 - b. destroyed
 - c. expensive
 - d. strong

5. This passage is mainly about
 - a. the role Jefferson played in building Monticello
 - b. what architects must consider when designing homes
 - c. how Jefferson’s political views are reflected in Monticello’s architecture
 - d. the influence of ancient civilizations on colonists during the American Revolution

6. How does the architectural style of Monticello reflect Thomas Jefferson’s political values?

7. Based on the passage, explain why Jefferson is sometimes called “a man of many talents.”

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word or phrase that best completes the sentence.

_____ Jefferson wanted Monticello to reflect his political values, the house was built in the architectural style called Roman Neoclassicism.

- a. Therefore
- b. Because
- c. Even though
- d. Finally

9. Read the following sentence.

In order to bring water to his farmland, Thomas Jefferson built irrigation systems on his plantation in Virginia.

Answer the questions below based on the information provided in the sentence you just read. One of the questions has already been answered for you.

1. Who is the main subject of the sentence? Thomas Jefferson

2. What did Thomas Jefferson do? _____

3. Where? _____

4. Why? _____

10. **Vocabulary Word:** fervently: done in a very passionate or enthusiastic way.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: _____

Teacher Guide and Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 840

Featured Text Structure: Descriptive - the writer explains, defines, or illustrates a concept or topic

Passage Summary: The author describes Thomas Jefferson’s home, Monticello and examines how its Roman Neoclassicism architecture reflects the third American president’s political philosophy.

1. According to the passage, architects may consider all of the following when designing a home EXCEPT

- a) how the home blends into the landscape.
- b) how the home fits in with the neighborhood.
- c) the placement of the furniture in the home.**
- d) the needs of the family.

2. Why does the author describe the architectural details of Monticello to the reader?

- a) to teach facts about the American Revolution
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- a) the role Jefferson played in building Monticello
- b) what architects must consider when designing homes
- c) how Jefferson’s political views are reflected in Monticello’s architecture**
- d) the influence of ancient civilizations on colonists during the American Revolution

6. How does the architectural style of Monticello reflect Thomas Jefferson’s political values?

Suggested answer(s): The architectural style (Roman Neoclassicism) of Monticello reflects Jefferson’s respect for the political ideals of ancient Rome and ancient Greece where men voted on many public issues.

The shapes of Monticello represent balance, which reflected Jefferson’s belief in a system of checks and balances within government.

The dome of Monticello, shaped like a circle, symbolizes the republican form of government that Jefferson and the colonists studied so fervently.

7. Based on the passage, explain why Jefferson is sometimes called “a man of many talents.”

Suggested answer: Jefferson is best known for being the President of the United States, but he was an important American architect as well. He was also a farmer and an ambassador. To be able to do all those things requires many talents.

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word or phrase that best completes the sentence.

_____ Jefferson wanted Monticello to reflect his political values, the house was built in the architectural style called Roman Neoclassicism.

- a. Therefore
- b. Because**
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9. Read the following sentence.

In order to bring water to his farmland, Thomas Jefferson built irrigation systems on his plantation in Virginia.

Answer the questions below based on the information provided in the sentence you just read. One of the questions has already been answered for you.

1. Who is the main subject of the sentence? Thomas Jefferson

2. What did Thomas Jefferson do? **built irrigation systems**

3. Where? **on his plantation in Virginia**

4. Why? **in order to bring water to his farmland**

10. **Vocabulary Word:** fervently: done in a very passionate or enthusiastic way.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: answers may vary.