

Lesson 2 of an enquiry of 6

Enlightenment Society

Worksheet

Enquiry: *Did the Enlightenment fuel the American revolution?*

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Salons

Enlightenment ideas spread quickly through these meetings where it became fashionable to discuss how to improve how people were governed. These meetings were known as the **salons** and importantly they were led by women. Madame Geoffrin was an example of a wealthy Parisian who held these salons. In previous centuries, it would have been unusual for women to play such a public role. However in enlightenment France some people, like Montesquieu, began to question why women did not play a role in politics. The freedom women enjoyed in the salons also permitted them to develop new skills of flirting and seduction.



Enlightenment change

For anyone who could read and write, it became fashionable to discuss Enlightenment ideas. So another feature of the Parisians salons was that there was a mixture of different social groups. A new class of people was growing called the **bourgeoisie**. They had made their money from trade or industry and some of them were richer than members of the **aristocracy**. So, in the salons the traditional social divisions began to break down as different types of people met each other.

However, France was ruled as an **absolute monarchy** and there was little interest in applying Enlightenment ideas. As a consequence, life for the peasants (who could not read) did not change much during this Age of Reason.



Enlightened Despots

In other countries, rulers did try to apply Enlightenment ideas. Catherine the Great was the Empress of Russia and was another absolute monarch. Catherine was very interested in Enlightenment ideas and believed Russia needed to be reformed. She became known as an Enlightened **Despot** because she tried to use her power for the good of her country (without giving away her power). She tried to make sure everyone in Russia followed the same laws. She hoped this would make it clearer what rights subjects had. Catherine also exchanged letters with Voltaire about her reforms. Catherine also embraced other enlightenment liberties and famously had several romantic affairs.



Glossary

Salons: fashionable meetings which took place in the living rooms of wealthy Parisians. In these meetings Enlightenment ideas or new art was discussed.

Bourgeoisie: a social class which is sometimes known as the middle class. Members of the bourgeoisie are relatively wealthy and have acquired their wealth through their own work

Aristocracy: a social class which traditionally acquired its wealth through inheritance and land ownership. Aristocrats could also be known as 'nobles'.

Absolute monarchy: a system of government where the king or queen can rule alone. This contrasts with a constitutional monarchy like Britain where the monarch rules with parliament.

Despot: a ruler with absolute power. (Often a despot uses their power cruelly.)



Comprehension Questions

1. What types of activity took place in salons?

Sentence starter: *One activity that took place in salons was.....*

2. In what ways did the salons show the Enlightenment was changing attitudes?

3. Which groups were unaffected by the new Enlightenment ideas?

4. Why was Catherine the Great known as an Enlightened Despot?

5. Challenge question: Which Enlightenment thinkers would have disagreed with Catherine's attempts to reform Russia?

