Romanticism: The Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries

The Romantic movement, like Neoclassicism, swept through Western Europe and the United States in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The term Romantic is derived from the Romance languages (French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Romanian) and from the medieval tales of chivalry and adventure written in those languages. Romantic literature shares with the so-called “Gothic” novels and poems by English writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries a nostalgia for the past, which contributes to its haunting character. The Romantic aesthetic of “long ago” and “far away” is conveyed in works with locales and settings that indicate the passage of time, such as ruined buildings and broken sculptures. To the extent that Neoclassicism expresses a nostalgia for antiquity, it too may be said to have a “Romantic” quality. Whereas Neoclassicism has its roots in antiquity, the origins of Romanticism are no older than the eighteenth century. They can be found especially in the work of the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau [see Box]. The effect of the Romantic movement on early nineteenth-century culture is evident not only in the visual arts but also in politics, social philosophy, music, and literature [see Box].

In addition to their nostalgia for the past and their idealistic participation in current events, the Romantics were interested in the mind as the site of mysterious, unexplained, and possibly dangerous phenomena. For the first time in Western art, dreams and nightmares were depicted as internal events, with their source in the individual imagination, rather than as external, supernatural happenings. States of mind, including insanity, began to interest artists, whose studies anticipated Freud’s theories of psychoanalysis at the end of the nineteenth century and the development of modern psychology in the twentieth. In architecture, the Romantic movement was marked by revivals of historical styles. The Gothic revival had begun in the late eighteenth century evoking the English past. Likewise, the Neoclassicism was a revival of ancient Greek and Roman forms, which were ideologically appropriate for the newly founded democracies.

The Romantic vision of the Far East as a distant, exotic locale also became a source for nineteenth-century architecture.

Rousseau and the Return to Nature
Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) was a leading 18th century French philosopher. His writings inspired the French Revolution and also provided the philosophical underpinning of the Romantic movement. The artists and writers who subscribed to Rousseau’s views are known as “Romantics”. Rousseau advocated a “return to nature” He believed in the concept of the “noble savage” -that humanity was born to live harmoniously with nature, free from vice, but had been corrupted by civilization and progress. Such ideas led to the political belief that the people themselves should rule. In his works of fiction, Rousseau created elaborate descriptions of natural beauty, which were consistent with the Romantic aesthetic.

Romanticism in Music and Poetry
The various strains of Romanticism that evident in the visual arts are also found in 19th-century music and poetry.

In Romantic music, the expression of mood and feeling takes precedence over form and structure. Romantic music was often based on literary themes, and literary or geographical references evoked various moods. Some of Hector Berlioz’s overtures, for example, are based on Sir Walter Scott’s historical novels, set in the Middle Ages. Felix Mendelssohn’s “Italian” and “Scottish” symphonies were inspired by the composer’s travels in Italy and Scotland. The Polish mazurkas of Frederic Chopin and the Hungarian rhapsodies of Franz Liszt reflect the strong nationalistic strain in Romanticism. In opera, the emotional and nationalistic intensity of the Romantic movement found its fullest expression in the works of Richard Wagner.

In English poetry, the leaders of Romanticism were William Wordsworth (1770-1850) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834). In 1798 they jointly published a collection of poems, Lyrical Ballads, the introduction to which served as a manifesto for the English Romantics. Other English poets of the Romantic movement are Lord Byron (1788-1824), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), and John Keats (1795-1821). Byron’s nostalgic yearning for ancient Greece is evident in much of his poetry:

The isles of Greece, the isles of Greece! / Where burning Sappho loved and sung, Where grew the arts of war and peace, / Where Delos rose, and Phoebus sprung! Eternal summer gilds them yet, / But all, except their sun, is set.

(“Don Juan” III, lxxxvi)

In 1819 Shelley visited the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, where he saw a painting of Medusa’s head, then attributed to Leonardo da Vinci. The head lies on the ground, crawling with lizards, insects, and snakes. Shelley’s poem expresses the Romantic taste for the macabre, the appeal of death, and the theme of the aloof, unattainable woman:

It lieth, gazing on the midnight sky, / Upon the cloudy mountain-peak supine; Below, far lands are seen tremblingly; / Its horror and its beauty are divine.

(“On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery;” lines 1-4)

The aloof and unattainable woman, seen by the Romantics as cold and deathlike but nevertheless fascinating, is celebrated with a medieval flavor in Keats’s “La Belle Dame sansMerci”.

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Painting

There was a strong Christian strain in Romanticism. It was associated with a longing for a form of religious mysticism, which, from the Reformation onward, had been on the wane in Western Europe. This can be seen, for instance, in the work of the English visionary artist and poet William Blake (1757-1827), who used watercolor, gouache [see box] and manually printed his own books.

Watercolor

In watercolor, powdered pigments are mixed with water, often with gum arabic used as a binder and drying agent. Watercolor is transparent, and so one color overlaid on another can create a wash effect. The most common ground for watercolor is paper. Because the medium is transparent, the natural color of the paper also contributes to the image. Watercolor had been known in China as early as the third century, but it was used only occasionally in Europe before the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. At that point it became popular, particularly with English artists such as Constable and Turner, for landscape paintings on a small scale. In the second half of the nineteenth century, watercolor also became popular among American artists. It was favored by those who preferred to paint directly from nature rather than in a studio and needed a more portable, quickly drying medium.

Gouache is a watercolor paint that becomes opaque when dry. It is commonly used on its own or in combination with transparent watercolor.

Theodore Gericault (1791-1824) died at the age of only thirty-three, but his work was crucial to the development of Romantic painting, especially in France. His commitment to social justice is reflected in his acknowledged masterpiece, The Raft of the Medusa (fig. 127), which he began in 1818 and exhibited at the Salon [see Box] the following year. This picture commemorates a contemporary disaster at sea rather than a heroic example of Neoclassical patriotism. On July 2, 1816, the French frigate Medusa hit a reef off the west coast of Africa. The captain and senior officers boarded six lifeboats, saving themselves and some of the passengers. The 149 remaining passengers and crew were crammed onto a wooden raft, which the captain cut loose from a lifeboat. During the thirteen-day voyage that followed, the raft became a floating hell of death, disease, mutiny, starvation, and cannibalism. Only fifteen people survived.

The episode became a national scandal when it was discovered that the ship’s captain owed his appointment to his monarchist sympathies rather than to merit. Furthermore, the French government had covered up the worst details of the incident. It was not until the ship’s surgeon, one of the survivors from the raft, published his account of the disaster that the full extent of the tragedy became known. Gericault took up the cause of the individual against social injustice and translated it into a struggle of humanity against the elements.

The writhing forms, reminiscent of Michelangelo’s Sistine ceiling figures from the Flood, echo the turbulence of sea and sky. In the foreground a father mourns his dead son. Other corpses hang over the edge of the raft, while in the background, to the right, frantic survivors wave hopefully at a distant ship. The raft itself tilts upward on the swell of a wave, and the sail billows in the wind. As a result, the viewer looks down on the raft, directly confronting the corpses. The gaze gradually moves upward, following the diagonals of the central figures, and finally reaches the waving drapery of the man standing upright. In this painting Gericault incorporates the Romantic taste for adventure and individual freedom into an actual event, in which victims of injustice fight to survive the primal forces of nature.

The Salon

The Salon refers to the official art exhibitions sponsored by the French authorities. The term is derived from the Salon d’Apollon in the Louvre. It was here, in 1667, that Louis XIV sponsored an exhibition of works by members of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. From 1737 the Salon was an annual event, and in 1748 selection by jury was introduced. Throughout the eighteenth century, the Salons were the only important exhibitions at which works of art could be shown. This made acceptance by the Salon jury crucial to an artist’s career.

During the eighteenth century the influence of the Salon was largely beneficial and progressive. By the nineteenth century, however, despite the fact that during the Revolution the Salon was officially opened to all French artists, it was in effect controlled by Academicians, whose conservative taste resisted innovation.

Gericault’s interest in human psychology is evident in his studies of the insane, which he executed from 1822 to 1823. In these works he captured the mental disturbance of his subjects through pose and physiognomy. In the Madwoman with a Mania of Envy (fig. 128), for example, the figure hunches forward and stares suspiciously off to the left, as if aware of some potential menace. The raising of one eyebrow and the
lowering of the other, combined with the slight shift in the planes of her face, indicate the wariness of paranoia. Gericault’s loose brushstrokes create the textures of the texture of the woman’s face, which is accentuated by light and framed by the ruffle of her cap. By the conscious organization of light and color, and the visibility of his brushwork, Gericault unifies the composition both formally and psychologically. The sweeping light-brown curve below the collar echoes the more tightly drawn curve of the mouth. Reds around the eyes and mouth are repeated in the collar, and the white of the cap ruffle recurs in the small triangle of the white undergarment. The untied cap laces and disheveled strands of hair are a metaphor for the woman’s emotional state, as if she is “coming apart” and “unraveling” physically as well as mentally.

128. Theodore Gericault, Madwoman with a Mania of Envy, 1818-23. Oil on canvas, 72 X 58 cm. Musee des Beaux-Arts, Lyons. Gericault was a man of paradoxes—a fashionable society figure and a political and social liberal who was active in exposing injustice. The subject of this portrait, which is also known as L’Hyène de La Salpetriere, was a child murderer. La Salpetriere was a mental hospital in Paris where Freud studied under the celebrated neuropathologist JeanMartin Charcot and learned that hypnosis could temporarily relieve the symptoms of hysteria.

The most prominent figure in French Romantic painting was Eugene Delacroix (1798-1863), who outlived Gericault by nearly forty years. In painting, Delacroix stood for color, just as Ingres, his contemporary and rival, championed line. In this theoretical opposition, Delacroix and Ingres transformed the traditional aesthetic quarrel between colorito and disegno, the Rubenists and the Poussinists, the Moderns and the Ancients, into Romanticists versus Classicists. Delacroix’s paintings are characterized by broad sweeps of color, lively patterns, and energetic figural groups. His thick brushstrokes, like Gericault’s, are in direct contrast to the precise edges and smooth surfaces of Neoclassical painting.

In The Massacre at Chios (fig. 129) of 1822-24, Delacroix satisfied the Romantic interest in distant places and political freedom. In this he shared the views of Byron (see previous box), who died in 1824 while fighting for Greek independence from Turkey. Delacroix enlists the viewer’s sympathy for Greece by showing the suffering and death of its people in the foreground. They are individualized and thus elicit identification with their plight. At the same time, Delacroix has concentrated attention on the details of their exotic dress. Two Turks—one holding a gun, and the other on a rearing horse-threaten the Greeks, while scenes of burning villages and massacre are depicted in the distance.

129. Eugene Delacroix, The Massacre at Chios, 1822-24. Oil on canvas. 4.22 x 3.53 m. Louvre, Paris. Delacroix was rumored to be the illegitimate son of the French statesman Charles Talleyrand (whom he resembled physically), but he was brought up in the family of a French government official. His celebrated journal is a useful source of information on the social context of his life as well as on his philosophy.

Delacroix’s Liberty Leading the People (fig. 130), executed in 1830, applies Romantic principles to the revolutionary ideal. Delacroix’s rebels march directly toward the viewer. Delacroix “romanticizes” the uprising by implying that the populace has spontaneously taken up arms, united in yearning for liberty (see caption). The figures emerge from a haze of smoke—a symbol of France’s political emergence from the shackles of tyranny. Visible in the distance is the Paris skyline and the towers of Notre-Dame Cathedral. From here the rebels will fly the tricolor (the red, white, and blue French flag).

130. Eugene Delacroix, Liberty Leading the People, 1830. Oil on canvas, 2.59 X 3.23 m. Louvre, Paris. This painting refers to the July 1830 uprising against the Bourbon king Charles X, which led to his abdication. Louis Philippe, the “citizen-king,” was installed in his place, though his powers were strictly limited.

As in The Raft of the Medusa, Delacroix’s corpses lie in contorted poses in the foreground. The diagonal of the kneeling boy leads Upward to Liberty, whose raised hand, holding the flag aloft, forms the apex of a pyramidal composition. Her Greek profile and bare breasts recall ancient statuary, while her towering form and costume confirm her allegorical role. By incorporating antiquity into his figure of Liberty, Delacroix makes a nostalgic, “Roman-
tic” appeal to republican sentiment. Among Liberty’s followers are representatives of different social classes, who are united by their common cause. In their determined march forward, they trample the corpses beneath them. They are willing to die themselves, secure in the knowledge that others will arise to take their place.

A colorist in the tradition of Rubens, Delacroix integrates color with the painting’s message. In an image that is primarily composed of brown tones and blacks, the colors that appear most vividly on the flag are repeated throughout the picture. Whites are more freely distributed. In the sky, reds and blues are muted. Denser blues are repeated in the stocking of the fallen man at the left and the skirt of the kneeling boy. His scarf and belt, like the small ribbon of the corpse at the right, are accents of red. In echoing the colors of the flag, which is at once a symbol of Liberty and of French republicanism, Delacroix paints a political manifesto.

The leading Spanish painter of the late 18th and 19th centuries, Francisco de Goya y Lucientes (1746-1828) was attracted by several Romantic themes. His compelling images reflect his remarkable psychological insights, and many also display his support for the causes of intellectual and political freedom. In 1799 Goya published Los Caprichos (Caprices), a series of etchings combined with the new medium of aquatint [see Box]. In this series, he depicts psychological phenomena, often juxtaposing them with an educational or social message.

The Witches’ Sabbath (fig. 131) of 1798-99 satirizes the irrational belief in witchcraft by exaggerating the primitive quality of such thinking. Here, Goya indirectly attacks the Inquisition, which opposed the Enlightenment. He depicts the widespread fantasy that witches were old, ugly, deformed women who sucked the blood of children and fed infants to Satan. His witches form a circle around a devil in the guise of a goat, and one witch offers him a bloodless, skeletal infant. The lascivious implications of the goat and the bacchanalian grape leaves on his horns refer to popular notions of the witches’ sabbath as an orgiastic, cannibalistic ritual.

In his images of war Goya champions Enlightenment views of individual freedom against political oppression. In The Executions of the Third of May, 1808 (fig. 132) he dramatically juxtaposes the visible faces of the victims with the covered faces of the executioners. The firing squad is an anonymous but deadly force whose regular, repeated rhythms and dark mass contrast with the highlighted, disorderly victims. The emotional poses and gestures, accentuated by thick brushstrokes, and the stress on individual reactions to the “blind” brute force of the firing squad are characteristic of Goya’s Romanticism. The raised arms of the central, illuminated victim about to be shot recall Christ’s death. His pose and gesture, in turn, are repeated by the foremost corpse. The lessons of Christ’s Crucifixion, Goya seems to be saying, are still unlearned. By mingling reds and browns in this section of the picture, Goya creates the impression that blood is flowing into the earth. Somewhat muted by the night sky, a church rises in the background and towers over the scene.

Aquatint
The combination of etching with aquatint was new in the 19th century. In aquatint, the artist covers the spaces between etched lines with a layer of rosin (a form of powdered resin). This partially protects against the effects of the acid bath. Since the rosin is porous, the acid can penetrate to the metal, but the artist controls the acid’s effect on the plate by treating the plate with varnish. This technique expands the range of grainy tones in finished prints. Aquatint thus combines the principles of engraving with the effects of a watercolor or wash drawing.

Landscape painting
In England, the two greatest Romantic landscape painters, John Constable (1776-1837) and Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851), approached their subjects
quite differently. Whereas Constable’s images are clear and tend to focus on the details of English country life, Turner’s are likely to become swept up in the paint. In Constable’s *Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop’s Garden* (fig. 133), cows graze in the foreground as couples stroll calmly along pathways. The cathedral is framed by trees that echo its vertical spire. Nostalgia for the past is evident in the juxtaposition of the day-to-day activities of the present with the Gothic cathedral. Humanity, like the cathedral, is at one with nature, and there is no hint of the industrialization that in reality was encroaching on the pastoral landscape of nineteenth-century England. The atmosphere of this painting is echoed in toe poems of Wordsworth, who wanted to break away from 18th century literary forms and return to nature, to a “humble and rustic life.” In “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth evokes the Romantic sense of the sublime that is achieved by oneness with nature:

... And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me  
With the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a  
Sense sublime  
Of something far more  
Deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of  
Setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the  
Living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the  
Mind of man ...  
(lines 93-99)

In contrast to the calm landscapes of Constable, Turner’s approach to Romanticism is characterized by dynamic, sweeping brushstrokes and vivid colors that blur the forms. *His Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons* (fig. 134) is a whirlwind of flame, water, and sky, structured mainly by the dark diagonal pier at the lower right, the bridge, and the barely visible towers of Parliament across the Thames. The luminous reds, yellows, and oranges of the fire dominate the sky and are reflected in the water below. In this work, architecture is in the process of dissolution, enveloped by the blazing lights and colors of the fire. The forces of nature let loose and their destruction of man-made structures are the primary theme of this painting. In Constable, on the other hand, nature is under control and in harmony with human creations.


134. Joseph Mallord William Turner, *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons*, October 16, 1834, 1835. Oil on canvas, 0.92 x 1.23 m. Cleveland Museum of Art (Bequest of John L. Severance, 42.647). The painting is based on an actual fire of 1834. Turner spent the entire night sketching the scene. After the fire the new Houses of Parliament (still standing today) were built in the Gothic revival style, which was inspired by Romantic nostalgia for a medieval Christian past.

The Aesthetic of the Sublime

In 1757, the British philosopher Edmund Burke (1729-97) published *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. Certain artists and writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries took up his views on the sublime, which reflect the ambivalent character of the Romantic aesthetic. According to Burke, the passions and the irrational exert a powerful, awesome force on people. These, he believed, explain the subjective reaction to art. Burke’s aesthetic system describes the “irrational” attraction to fear, pain, ugliness, loss, hatred, and death (all of which are elements of the sublime), along with beauty, pleasure, joy, and love.