



## ROMANTICISM



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Romanticism (art), in art, European and American movement extending from about 1800 to 1850. Romanticism cannot be identified with a single style, technique, or attitude, but romantic painting is generally characterized by a highly imaginative and subjective approach, emotional intensity, and a dreamlike or visionary quality. Whereas classical and neoclassical art is calm and restrained in feeling and clear and complete in expression, romantic art characteristically strives to express by suggestion states of feeling too intense, mystical, or elusive to be clearly defined. Thus, the German writer E. T. A. Hoffmann declared “infinite longing” to be the essence of romanticism. In their choice of subject matter, the romantics showed an affinity for nature, especially its wild and mysterious aspects, and for exotic, melancholy and melodramatic subjects likely to evoke awe or passion.

### **18th-Century Background**

The word romantic first became current in 18th-century English and originally meant “romancelike,” that is, resembling the strange and fanciful character of medieval romances. The word came to be associated with the emerging taste for wild scenery, “sublime” prospects, and ruins, a tendency reflected in the increasing emphasis in aesthetic theory on the sublime as opposed to the beautiful. The British writer and statesman Edmund Burke, for instance, identified beauty with delicacy and harmony and the sublime with vastness, obscurity, and a capacity to inspire terror. Also during the 18th century, feeling began to be considered more important than reason both in literature and in ethics, an attitude epitomized by the work of the French novelist and philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau. English and German romantic poetry appeared in the 1790s, and by the end of the century the shift away from reason toward feeling and imagination began to be reflected in the visual arts, for instance in the visionary illustrations of the English poet and painter William Blake, in the brooding, sometimes nightmarish pictures of his friend, the Swiss-English painter Henry Fuseli, and in the somber etchings of monsters and demons by the Spanish artist Francisco Goya.

### **France**

In France the formative stage of romanticism coincided with the Napoleonic Wars (1799-1815), and the first French romantic painters found their inspiration in contemporary events. Antoine Jean Gros began the transition from neoclassicism to romanticism by moving away from the sober style of his teacher, Jaques-Louis David, to a more colorful and emotional style, influenced by the Flemish Baroque painter Peter Paul Rubens, which he developed in a series of battle paintings glorifying Napoleon. The main figure for French romanticism was Theodore Gericault, who carried further the dramatic, coloristic tendencies of Gros's style and who shifted the emphasis of battle paintings from heroism to suffering and endurance. In his *Wounded Cuirassier* (1814) a soldier limps off the field as rising smoke and descending clouds seem to impinge on his figure. The powerful brushstrokes and conflicting light and

dark tones heighten the sense of his isolation and vulnerability, which for Géricault and many other romantics constituted the essential human condition.

Géricault's masterpiece, *Raft of the Medusa* (1818-1819), portrays on a heroic scale the suffering of ordinary humanity, a theme echoed by the greatest French romantic painter, Eugene Delacroix, in his *Massacre at Chios* (1824). Delacroix often took his subjects from literature, but he aimed at transcending literary or didactic significance by using color to create an effect of pure energy and emotion that he compared to music. Rejecting the neoclassical emphasis on form and outline, he used halftones derived not from darkening a color but from juxtaposing the color's complement. The resulting effect of energetic vibration was intensified by his long, nervous brushstrokes. His *Death of Sardanapalus* (1827), inspired by a work of the English romantic poet Lord Byron, is precisely detailed, but the action is so violent and the composition so dynamic that the effect is of chaos engulfing the immobile and indifferent figure of the dying king.

### **Germany**

German romantic painting, like German romantic poetry and philosophy, was inspired by a conception of nature as a manifestation of the divine. This led to a school of symbolic landscape, initiated by the mystical and allegorical paintings of Philipp Otto Runge. Its greatest exponent, and the greatest German romantic painter, was Caspar David Friedrich, whose meditative landscapes, painted in a lucid and meticulous style, hover between a subtle mystical feeling and a sense of melancholy solitude and estrangement. In *The Polar Sea* (1824), his romantic pessimism is most directly expressed; the remains of a wrecked ship are barely visible beneath a pyramid of ice slabs that seems a monument to the triumph of nature over human aspiration.

Another school of German romantic painting was formed by the group called the Nazarenes, who attempted to recover the style and spirit of medieval religious art; its leading figure was Johann Friedrich Overbeck. Notable among later artists in the German romantic tradition was the Austrian Moritz von Schwind, whose subjects were drawn from Germanic mythology and fairy tales.

### **England**

Landscapes suffused with romantic feeling became the chief expression of romantic painting in England, as in Germany, but the English artists were more innovative in style and technique. Samuel Palmer painted landscapes distinguished by an innocent simplicity of style and a visionary religious feeling derived from Blake. John Constable, turning away from the wild natural scenery associated with many romantic poets and painters, infused quiet English landscapes with profound feeling. The first major artist to work in the open air, he achieved a freshness of vision through the use of luminous colors and bold, thick brushwork. J. M. W. Turner achieved the most radical pictorial vision of any romantic artist. Beginning with landscapes reminiscent of the 17th-century French painter Claude Lorraine, he became, in such later works as *Snow Storm: Steam Boat Off a Harbor's Mouth* (1842), almost entirely concerned with atmospheric effects of light and color, mixing clouds, mist, snow, and sea into a vortex in which all distinct objects are dissolved.

## **The United States**

The major manifestation of American romantic painting was the Hudson River school, which found its inspiration in the rugged wilderness of the northeastern United States. Washington Allston, the first American landscapist, introduced romanticism to the United States by filling his poetic landscapes with subjective feeling. The leading figure of the Hudson River school was the English-born Thomas Cole, whose depictions of primeval forests and towering peaks convey a sense of moral grandeur. Cole's pupil Frederick Church adapted the Hudson River style to South American, European, and Palestinian landscapes.

## **Late Romanticism**

Toward the middle of the 19th century, romantic painting began to move away from the intensity of the original movement. Among the outstanding achievements of late romanticism are the quiet, atmospheric landscapes of the French Barbizon school, which included Camille Corot and Theodore Rousseau. In England, after 1850, the Pre-Raphaelites revived the medievalizing mission of the German Nazarenes.

## **Influence**

The influence of romanticism on subsequent painting has been pervasive. A line can be traced from Constable through the Barbizon school to impressionism, but a more direct descendant of romanticism was symbolism (see SYMBOLIST MOVEMENT), which in various ways intensified or refined the romantic characteristics of subjectivity, imagination, and strange, dreamlike imagery. In the 20th century expressionism and surrealism have carried these tendencies still further. In a sense, however, virtually all modern art can be said to derive from romanticism, for the modern assumptions about the primacy of artistic freedom, originality, and self-expression in art were originally conceived by the romantics in opposition to the traditional classical principles of art.

## **Romantic Painting**

Closely succeeding neoclassicism, the romantic movement introduced a taste for the medieval and the mysterious, as well as a love of the picturesque and sublime in nature (see ROMANTICISM). The play of individual imagination, giving expression to emotion and mood, superseded the reasoned intellectual approach of the neoclassicists. In general, romantic painters favored coloristic and painterly techniques over the linear, cool-toned neoclassic style.

## **French Romantic Painting**

A follower of David who ultimately turned more to the romantic style was his pupil Baron Antoine Jean Gros, noted for his portrayals of Napoleon in full regalia and for large canvases vividly depicting Napoleonic campaigns. Gros's colleague Theodore Gericault was especially renowned for his dramatic and monumental interpretation of an actual event. His masterpiece, the Raft of the Medusa (1818-1819, Louvre), endows the suffering of the survivors of a shipwreck with a heroic quality. This painting deeply impressed Eugene Delacroix, who pursued the theme of suffering humanity in such energetic, intensely dramatic works as

Massacre at Chios (1822-1824) and Liberty Leading the People (1830), both in the Louvre. Delacroix and other romantics also drew their subject matter from literature and from travels to the Middle East. Delacroix's divided-color technique (that is, color laid on in small strokes of pure pigment) was to influence the impressionists later in the 19th century.

During the romantic period, several French painters concentrated on picturesque landscape views and sentimental scenes of rural life. Jean Francois Millet was one of a number of artists who settled at the village of Barbizon, near Paris; taking a worshipful view of nature, he transformed the peasants into Christian symbols (see BARBIZON SCHOOL). Camille Corot, a painter of poetic, silvery-toned woodland scenes and landscapes, included visits to Barbizon among his extensive travels, portraying the lyrical aspects of nature there, as well as in other parts of France and Italy.

### **English Romantic Painting**

Romantic landscape painting also flourished in England; the trend began early in the 19th century and is exemplified in the works of John Constable and Joseph Mallord William Turner. Although distinctly different in their styles, both artists were ultimately concerned with depicting the effects of light and atmosphere. Despite Constable's factual and scientific approach—working outdoors, he painted numerous studies of cloud formations and made notes on light and weather conditions—his canvases are poetic, expressing the cultivated gentleness of the English countryside. Turner, on the other hand, sought the sublime in nature, painting cataclysmic snowstorms or depicting the elements—earth, air, fire, and water—in a sweeping, nearly abstract manner. His way of dissolving forms in light and veils of color was to play an important role in the development of French impressionist painting.

### **German Romantic Painting**

Of Germany's romantic artists, Caspar David Friedrich was the leading figure. Landscape was his favored vehicle of expression. He imbued his hypnotic pictures with religious mysticism, portraying the earth undergoing transformations at dawn and sunset, or in the fog and mists, perhaps alluding thereby to the transience of life. Philipp Otto Runge also devoted his brief career to painting mystical landscapes. Morning (1808-1809, Kunsthalle, Hamburg) is part of an otherwise unfinished allegorical landscape cycle, The Four Phases of the Day.

### **American Romantic Painting**

America's first truly romantic artist was Washington Allston, whose paintings are mysterious, brooding, or evocative of poetic reverie. Like other romantics, he was inspired by the Bible, poetry, and novels, as is evident in numerous works. Several artists working between 1820 and 1880 are now distinguished as the Hudson River school; their enormous canvases reveal their reverence for the beauty of the American landscape. Thomas Cole, the most noteworthy of these painters, charged his scenes with moral implications, as is evident in his epic series of five allegorical paintings, The Course of Empire (1836, New York Historical Society, New York City).

In mid-19th-century landscape painting there appeared a new trend, now defined as luminism, an interest in the atmospheric effects of diffused light. Among the luminist painters were John F. Kensett, Martin J. Heade, and Fitz Hugh Lane. A sense of “God in nature” is apparent in their pictures, as in the earliest works of the Hudson River school. In contrast to the smaller and more intimate luminist works—for example, Kensett's scenes along the Rhode Island shore—Frederick E. Church and Albert Bierstadt painted the spectacular scenery of South

American jungles and the American West on enormous canvases. See AMERICAN ART AND ARCHITECTURE.

### **19th-Century Nonromantic Painting**

Although romanticism was the dominant movement in the arts throughout much of the 19th century, other—completely opposite—tendencies existed, and certain painters worked outside any tradition. For example, Francisco Goya, Spain's foremost painter, cannot be defined by alliance with a particular art movement. His early works are in a modified rococo style, and his late works (exemplified by the remarkable Black Paintings on the walls of his home, the Quinta del Sordo) are expressionistic and hallucinatory. In portraits of the royal family—for example, Family of Charles IV (1800, Prado)—he emulated a device used by his earlier compatriot Velázquez (in Las meninas) and included himself at the easel. But, unlike the work of Velázquez, Goya's portraiture was never objective; his psychological acumen reveals the vapidness of his subjects, and his brilliant brushwork bluntly records their physical shortcomings.

### **Quellen:**

- Encarta 95/97, Microsoft

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