

## Romanticism and Art: An Overview

Sanghapal Uttam Mhaske<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Mandakini Sharma<sup>2</sup>, Richa Thapliyal<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Arts Graphic Era Hill University, Dehradun

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Visual Arts Graphic Era Hill University, Dehradun

<sup>3</sup>Humanities and Social Sciences, Graphic Era Deemed to be University, Dehraudn

---

### ABSTRACT

The present paper traces the Romantic movement which began in the late 18th century in Britain and its influence on literature and fine arts like music, sculptures, and paintings. For this purpose, it studies the origin of Romanticism in Britain and its stirrings that were found in Germany and France. It then explores the difference between Romanticism and its precursor, Neoclassicism which was visible in fine arts. Hence the researcher explores the influence of Romanticism on music, sculptures, and paintings. However, it focuses more on the paintings and attempts to show the various characteristics of Romanticism that are evident in the paintings of artists such as Théodore Gericault, Eugene Delacroix, J. M. W. Turner, and Henry Fuseli, etc.

**Keywords:** Romanticism, Romantic period, Paintings, Art

---

### INTRODUCTION

Romanticism, as a movement that began in the late 18th century in Britain through its stirrings, had been visible in Germany and France as well. While the shift away from the Neoclassical period could be seen even in the early 18th century in ‘pre-Romantic’ writers like J.W. von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller, the ‘Romantic Period’ in England is generally taken to extend either from the French Revolution in 1789 or from the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1798 till the 1830s. Furthermore, Romanticism first became visible in literature, and its buds and influence can be seen in other forms of art as well. Disillusioned with the values and ideals of the Neoclassical period, the Romantic movement in France and Britain gained momentum at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This influence can be seen in artistic forms such as music, sculptures as well as paintings.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a French philosopher and writer was a major precursor of Romanticism who emphasised free emotional expression in relationships rather than insisting on polite restraint and the freedom of creative expression instead of “strict adherence to formal rules and traditional procedures.” (“Pre-Romanticism”) Rousseau emphasised “the free expression of emotion rather than polite restraint in friendship and love, repudiated aristocratic elegance and recognized the virtues of middle-class domestic life, and helped open the public’s eyes to the beauties of nature.” (“Pre-Romanticism”)

The term 'Romanticism' is considered to be first used in Germany by Friedrich Schlegel who established the term *romantisch* in literary contexts. However, his definition of the term was vague and unclear. However, his brother, August implied that "romantic literature is in contrast to that of classicism, thus producing the famous antinomy" of classicism/romanticism (Cuddon 621). The term was then popularised by Madame de Staël in her publication of her accounts of her travel to Germany in 1813. However, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* remain a poetic manifesto for Romanticism since it states the revolutionary aim of the movement. The second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* published in 1800 in its Preface boldly declares poetry as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity" (Wordsworth 22). It denounced the use of upper-class subjects and poetic diction and proposed the use of materials from "humble and rustic life" and "a plainer and more emphatic language" to match the simplicity of rural life (Wordsworth 21). *Lyrical Ballads*, by focusing on the ordinary, lowly subjects of rural England and writing about them in ordinary language violated the Neoclassical rule of decorum which "asserted that the serious genres should deal only with the momentous actions of royal or aristocratic characters in an appropriately elevated style" (Abrams and Harpham 238). Thus, *Lyrical Ballads* became a symbol, a representative of the period that was to come.

The Romantic artists turned toward Nature, the landscape, and the flora and fauna within it instead of centering humans within a social organisation. The Romantics are concerned with human experiences and issues that are "stimulated by a natural phenomenon". The Romantics invite the audience to identify with the work of art. They used "solitary figures engaged in a long, and sometimes infinitely elusive, quest; [who] were also social nonconformists or outcasts" (Abrams and Harpham 240). The Romantic artists turned away from "the grandeur, austerity, nobility, idealization, and elevated sentiments of Neoclassicism" ("Pre-Romanticism"). Instead, they worked towards more natural and simpler forms of expression.

Romanticism or the Romantic period began as a revolt against the Neoclassical sensibilities of strong traditionalism and adherence to the rules established by the classical writers and artists of long ago. The Neoclassical artists showed "strong traditionalism" and a great "distrust of radical innovation" (Abrams and Harpham 236). They attempted to imitate the 'classics', hence the term 'neo-classical' since they believed that the classical artists- that is, artists of ancient Greece and Rome and their excellent works have become enduring models for art. According to the neoclassical artists, art was "a set of skills which, although it requires innate talents, must be perfected by long study and practice and consists mainly in the deliberate adaptation of known and tested means to the achievement of foreseen ends upon the audience". (Abrams and Harpham 237)

The neo-classical artists strove for the 'correctness' of their art and were careful to observe the rules and decorum established by ancient Greek and Roman artists. Their main focus was on human beings and their role in society. It emphasises and was laid in what humans have in common - "representative characteristics and widely shared experiences, thoughts, feelings, and tastes" (Abrams and Harpham 237). It became the subject matter and the appeal of art. Many works of the Neoclassical period were didactic and satiric. They adhered to the rules and "other limiting conventions in literary subjects, structure, and diction." (Abrams and Harpham 238)

The Romantic movement, however, broke away from the rules of the Neoclassical period, favoring innovation, originality, novelty, and particularity in a work of art. The Romantics saw art as a product of spontaneous emotions instead of artful manipulation as stressed by the neoclassical writers. Keats, a second-generation Romantic poet says, "If poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all" (qtd. in Abrams and Harpham 239). Samuel Taylor Coleridge, one of the major Romantic writers decried the insistence of an artwork's adherence to rules by saying that art must be "like a growing plant, evol[ing] according to its own internal principles into its final organic form." (Abrams and Harpham 239)

Ludwig van Beethoven and Franz Schubert became major figures and important models for nineteenth-century Romantic composers. Their formal musical technique combined with their personal feelings, expression, and experimentation paved the way toward Musical Romanticism. New musical forms such as "the lied, nocturne, intermezzo, capriccio, prelude, and mazurka" were created during this period ("Music"). The "concert overture and incidental music" was also another distinct feature of the music of the Romantic period ("Music"). The composers also experimented with the limits of their instruments, exploited the full range of chromatic scale, and explored "the linking of instrumentation and the human voice" ("Music"). The main composers of this period include Hector Berlioz, Antonín Dvorák, Edvard Grieg, Frédéric Chopin, Franz Liszt, Bedrich Smetana, etc. among others.

Many sculptors, too, began moving away from the Neoclassical restraints of classicism and baroque and instead moved towards art that was guided by emotion instead of pure reason. Sculptors began to create works of art that were not predetermined by rules or decorum, instead, were a result of the artists' attempts to capture particular feelings. Romantic sculptors worked with themes that were typical of the period- "nature, historic nostalgia, and social struggle" ("Neoclassical and Romantic Sculpture"). Romantic sculpture can be divided into two types- the works that concern the human world and the works that concern the natural world. Françoise Rude's masterpiece, *Departure of the Volunteers* a group sculpture that rests on the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, is an example of the works that concern the human world. Antoine-Louis Barye, a renowned animal sculptor of the Romantic period created works that concerned themselves with the natural world.

The Spanish painter Francisco Goya has often been dubbed the father of Romanticism. Early Romanticism was also shaped by painters like Baron Antoine Jean Gros, Anne Louis Girodet-Trioson, and Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres who were trained in Jacques Louis David's studio. David was known as one of the major neoclassical painters. However, while the painters that trained under him embodied his ordered classicism, they ultimately subvert his model and assert its originality. Though Ingres' *Apotheosis of Homer* draws from the Davidian tradition, it ends up asserting its individuality.

Romanticism was a reaction against the rapidly growing Industrialisation. Hence, painters created art using tubes of paints and artificial pigments that were available instead of mixing paint laboriously. They employed "small, close strokes of complementary colors" to generate vivid visual effects and used "unrefined outlines, unrestrained brushstrokes" and emphasised color over form. ("What is Romanticism?")

Like in most art forms in the Romantic period, Nature became an important theme in paintings. The painters began depicting the untameable, unpredictable, and cataclysmic power of nature in contrast to the ordered world of the neoclassic. This led to recurring images of shipwrecks representing man's struggle against nature across paintings in France and Britain. A striking example of such a painting is Théodore Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1819) which depicts a scene of a shipwreck in horrifying and explicit detail. The emotionally intense painting lacks a hero, a characteristic distinct from its neoclassical precursors. Eugene Delacroix's painting *The Barque of Dante* (1822) depicts the eighth canto of Dante's *Inferno*. It shows the poet Dante fearfully crossing the River Styx with Virgil, his baroque plowing through the waters heavy with tormented souls.



*The Barque of Dante, Eugene Delacroix, 1822,*

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Barque\\_of\\_Dante#/media/File:Eug%C3%A8ne\\_Delacroix\\_-\\_The\\_Barque\\_of\\_Dante.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Barque_of_Dante#/media/File:Eug%C3%A8ne_Delacroix_-_The_Barque_of_Dante.jpg)

J. M. W. Turner's 1812 painting depicting Hannibal and his army crossing the Alps "in which the general and his troops are dwarfed by the overwhelming scale of the landscape and engulfed in the swirling vortex of snow" depicts Romantic sensibility. ("Romanticism") Turner's *Rain, Steam and Speed* (1844) and *The Slave Ship* (1840) depicted pessimistic seascapes which became precursors of Impressionism. Landscapes of John Constable and Caspar David Friedrich also became famous during this period.

The Romantic painters created emotionally charged and intense paintings as a reaction to the restrained stoniness and stern nature of Neoclassicism. They also began to explore the intangible emotions and subconscious thoughts and feelings of the human mind. For the Romantic painters, "portraits became vehicles for expressing a range of psychological and emotional states". ("Romanticism") Francisco Goya's *Black Paintings* (1820-23) explore the innermost recesses of the human psyche and the dark terrors it hides. Théodore Géricault explored mental illnesses in psychiatric patients in his paintings as well as "the darker side of childhood" in his unconventional portraits of children. Henry Fuseli's *The Nightmare* (1781) is an iconic Romantic painting that depicts "darker, irrational forces" in a gothic style ("Henry Fuseli, The Nightmare"). One interpretation of the painting is that it shows "the futility of light to penetrate or explain the darker realms of the unconscious" ("Henry Fuseli, The Nightmare"). It is said to explore the "deepest and darkest recesses of the mind." ("Art Movements-Romanticism-The Power of Imagination")



*The Nightmare, Henry Fuseli, 1781,*  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Nightmare#/media/File:John\\_Henry\\_Fuseli\\_-\\_The\\_Nightmare.JPG](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Nightmare#/media/File:John_Henry_Fuseli_-_The_Nightmare.JPG)

Romanticism as a movement developed during the French Revolution and adopted the revolutionary and rebellious spirit of the times. Revolting against the mechanistic confines of Neoclassicism, the artists turned to "scenes of rebellion and protest" ("Romanticism Movement Overview"). There was an increase in the nationalistic and patriotic feelings among the artists, resulting in some of the best paintings of the time. Eugène Delacroix's *The Massacre of Chios* (1824) is packed with action and alludes to the Greek struggle for independence. His *Liberty Leading the People* (1830) was created "to support the uprising of the people of Paris against the restoration government of Charles X." ("Romanticism Movement Overview") Turner's *The Slave Ship* (1840) was also nationalistic,

intending "to influence the British government into a more active abolition policy." ("Romanticism Movement Overview")

While nationalistic and patriotic feelings increased within the Romantics, so did the curiosity for the orient. ("Romanticism Movement Overview") The Romantics rejected the didacticism of the neo-classical in favor of imaginary and exotic subjects. The "projected desires, fears, and the unknown into their depictions of African and Middle Eastern scenes" ("Romanticism Movement Overview"). Chassériau, one of the important French painters of the nineteenth century traveled to North Africa, particularly in Algeria where over one thousand sketches were made. His *Scene in the Jewish Quarter of Constantine* (1851) depicts two Jewish women rocking a baby in a cradle. Ingres' *Odalisque in Grisaille* (1814) reflects the Romantic painters' fascination with the Orient and the harem. Delacroix's paintings of the Arab world are more sober and realistic compared to his contemporaries primarily because he visited the Arab world and drew his subjects from first-hand knowledge. His *The Women of Algiers* (1834, 1849) depicts a harem of women in different settings and moods. The first painting separates the viewer from the woman. However, the second painting beckons the reader towards the warm and inviting gaze of the woman in the painting.

In the world of art, Romanticism provided a new way of looking at nature, nation, and humanity. It encouraged people to interact with emotions, feelings, and memories through art and not simply capture them in constrained reason and logic. Romanticism, however, did not last for more than 50 years and was taken over by Realism, a movement that focused on the average, working-class people in contemporary day-to-day settings in the mid-nineteenth century. Nonetheless, its importance and legacy can still be found in literature, art, music, television, and films.

### Works Cited

1. Abrams, M H, and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 10th ed., Cengage Learning, 2013.
2. Cuddon, J A. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. 5th ed., Penguin Books, 2014.
3. The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Pre-Romanticism." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 9 June 2014, [www.britannica.com/event/Pre-Romanticism](http://www.britannica.com/event/Pre-Romanticism).
4. The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Music." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 2 Feb. 2021, [www.britannica.com/art/Romanticism/Music](http://www.britannica.com/art/Romanticism/Music).
5. Galitz, Kathryn Calley. "Romanticism." *Metmuseum.org*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Oct. 2004, [www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/roma/hd\\_roma.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/roma/hd_roma.htm).
6. "Neoclassical and Romantic Sculpture." *Neoclassical/Romantic Sculpture*, Essential Humanities, [www.essential-humanities.net/western-art/sculpture/neoclassical-romantic/](http://www.essential-humanities.net/western-art/sculpture/neoclassical-romantic/).
7. Paulson, Noelle. "The Nightmare by Henry Fuseli." *The Nightmare by Henry Fuseli (Article)*, Khan Academy, [www.khanacademy.org/humanities/becoming-modern/romanticism/romanticism-in-england/a/henry-fuseli-the-nightmare](http://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/becoming-modern/romanticism/romanticism-in-england/a/henry-fuseli-the-nightmare).
8. Richman-Abdou, Kelly. "Romanticism: An Art Movement That Emphasized Emotion and Turned to the Sublime." *My Modern Met*, 29 July 2019, [mymodernmet.com/what-is-romanticism/](http://mymodernmet.com/what-is-romanticism/).

9. “Romanticism Movement Overview.” *Romanticism Movement Overview-The Art Story*, The Art Story, [www.theartstory.org/movement/romanticism/#:~:text=and%20worst%20traits,-,Romanticism%20in%20the%20Visual%20Arts,often%20darkly%20critical%20political%20awareness](http://www.theartstory.org/movement/romanticism/#:~:text=and%20worst%20traits,-,Romanticism%20in%20the%20Visual%20Arts,often%20darkly%20critical%20political%20awareness).
10. “What Is Romanticism? an Art Movement Defined in 8 Minutes.” *Invaluable*, 7 May 2017, [www.invaluable.com/blog/romanticism-defined/](http://www.invaluable.com/blog/romanticism-defined/).
11. Whitaker, Gillian. “Art Movements: Romanticism: The Power of Imagination.” *Art Movements | Romanticism | The Power of Imagination*, FLAME TREE PUBLISHING LTD, [blog.flametreepublishing.com/art-of-fine-gifts/art-movements-romanticism-the-power-of-imagination](http://blog.flametreepublishing.com/art-of-fine-gifts/art-movements-romanticism-the-power-of-imagination).
12. Wordsworth, William. “Preface to Lyrical Ballads.” *Poetry and Cultural Studies: A Reader*, edited by Maria Damon and Ira Livingston, University of Illinois Press, 2009, pp. 20–24.