

Characteristics of Romanticism in the History of Art.

To characterise Romanticism within the fine arts one must consider the historical background from which this movement manifested, as it plays such an influential role in the Romantic artist's development of subject matter and style. The movement itself began around the beginning of the 19th century, and is often dated 1775 – 1830 it is important to note that this was a period of change and revolution in human rights, and the main countries this movement manifested in were Germany, Britain and in France during the French Revolution of 1789. This political and cultural revolution had a major affect on all of the arts as well as the visual arts; as artists began to revolt against Neo-Classical and academic traditions and look inwards into their own experience and imagination. Imagination is one of the most prominent themes in the Romantic Movement as artists began to direct their attention towards subjects other than the rigid definitions of genres within the academic world of painting, and also to the simplicity of the Medieval artists. Instead, artists turned to literature (especially poetry), political and historical events as well as individual and imaginative styles of depicting this subject matter. This essay will aim to highlight and describe the manifestation of these themes, within this period, through the observation of the artist's work that is linked to the Movement.

The artists of the Romantic Movement, as suggested, no longer wanted to be constrained to the proscribed theories and practices of the Academies; who thought that everything that needed to be learned could be done so by observing the Roman Masters, and wished to create their own imaginative responses equalizing them with the authors and poets of the Romantic Literary Movement. One form of imaginative response, which manifested in this change of thinking about the visual arts, was the way in which many of these artists looked towards literature for inspiration; in effect creating paintings that depicted a new manner of pictorial narrating. One artist who combined these themes of literature and the visual arts, producing visions in the vein of poetic imagery was William Blake (1757-1827). These connections are especially distinct in paintings such as "The Ancient of Days" completed in 1794 as a visual image complementing his poem "America, a Prophecy", which depicts one of Blake's own visions of the Lord measuring the world with a compass. As well as the literary elements and pure imagination, which inspired his subject matter, Blake's portrayal has many other features that link it to the Romantic mood. For example, and most stunningly, Blake's use of vivid, exotic reds, oranges and yellows contrasted with the blacks and grays of the threatening and ominous storm clouds used to display Nature's ferocity and supremacy over mankind. Another characteristic that featured in Blake's work, and indeed also appealed to the inward and imaginative minds of the Romantics, was their use of form when depicting the human body or almost any object, this stems from a wish to look back to the simplicity of the Medieval artists and create forms that emphasize the mood they wish to communicate.

This unusual and individual depiction of his type of God figure stems mainly from Blake's own beliefs about the creator of the world being an evil spirit because he thought the world is such a cruel place to live, again reinforcing the theme of individual vision and idea. Blake's use of intense colour and powerful composition to display the domination of his God-like figure and Nature over human beings can also be observed in the work of J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) creating the same communication of ideas. When observing, "Snowstorm: Hannibal and His Army

Crossing the Alps", for example, Turner devotes two thirds of the canvas to the fierce, claw-like image of the storm, elevating its power through the almost abstract execution of his brushwork. This depiction of the storm totally engulfs the stark presentation of human nature and suffering happening in the foreground where the remains of the soldiers fight over clothes and supplies in a last attempt at survival. Another example of this kind of representation, which highlights the manifestation of depicting the power and importance of nature, is evident in Turner's "Steamer in a Snowstorm" completed at the later date of 1842 where the Romantic mood is still very much identifiable.

In this painting Turner uses a dramatic composition where the steamer is in the center of the canvas and the storm thrashes around it highlighting its defenselessness against the powerful waves. This enclosed and claustrophobic atmosphere has been emphasized through the way that Turner has employed layer upon layer of light paintwork to communicate the force and mass of the waves, creating an ominous mood of destruction and violence. In many paintings of a similar genre artists will alter their utilization of colour, brushwork techniques and dramatic composition to create the relevant emotive mood they wished to depict; therefore generating the appropriate emotional responses from their audiences, just like the works of a poet or musician. The image of a shipwreck was a popular inspiration for the Romantic's choice of subject matter as the composition and tones could be manipulated to achieve such dramatic effects; it is also very common with in the British Romantic scene due to the fact that there were so many tragedies at sea.

Another artist that used this emotive and dramatic subject was Théodore Géricault in the "Raft of the Medusa", in this depiction he did not find inspiration in literature but in a recent disaster at sea which would have been generally recognized as it was such a shocking story of human nature and suffering. In Géricault's painting we see a man-made raft full of sailors who were left behind by their captain after the ship had floundered. He depicts the shocking evidence of cannibalism as a sailor to the left of the painting holds the remaining bones of one of his fellow sailors; the other dead and dying men are left scattered across the raft in a chaotic and dramatic fashion displaying the suffering and evil of their fate. The main composition of the painting is in a dramatic pyramidal shape as the men lift up one of their fellow sailors who is desperately waving a shirt to capture the attention of a boat in the distance. In this painting the emotive imagery and its presentation creates the disturbing truth of the event and also elaborately communicates the weakness of man under the awesome power of nature. The reoccurring themes of nature in these paintings manifested partly from the Romantic belief that to understand themselves and mankind they must go back and learn from nature, this also applied to the Romantic painters of the Revolution.

It has been previously suggested that the Romantic artists looked towards nature, literature and contemporary tragedies for inspiration to create their individual responses to these themes, another subject, which greatly interested Romantic artists, was the mystical and exotic themes in Mythology. One of the most important artists of this period who was considered the leader of this movement by his peers was Eugène Delacroix born in 1798. Delacroix was influenced by Byron's poem "Death of Sardanapals" to create his own visual interpretation of the myth. The composition of this painting is reminiscent of Géricault's "The Raft of the Medusa" through the

unusual use of the pyramidal structure and also the way in which the bodies are splayed about the painting communicating the chaos of the event; the evil king at the tip of the apex leads the viewers eye straight to the cause of all this suffering, it is suggested that the painting also influenced Delacroix. Delacroix himself wrote that Byron's poetry "awoke in him the insatiable desire to create" summing up the general mood in which the Romantics felt free to trust their own creativity and talents after the age of the Revolution.

The two key topics to consider when defining Romanticism are both its themes and its dates. Romantic elements include themes that link to nature and the natural, exploring human psychology through the study of the individual and the natural order of the world. The visual images that manifested from these subjects included an equally powerful depiction of nature versus man, the forgotten suffering of historical events, indeed most subjects that had a strong impression and emotional influence on the artist's imagination.