Romanticism (1790-1850)

Key Points:

- 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.

While 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, melancholic, and melodramatic subjects likely to evoke awe or passion.
- **It started as an artistic and intellectual movement that emphasized a rejection of established values (social order and religion).**

The beginnings of the Romantic movement correspond to the sense of rapid, dynamic social change that began with the Industrial Revolution and culminated in the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era.

It was partly a revolt against aristocratic social and political norms of the Age of Enlightenment and a reaction against the scientific rationalization of nature, and was embodied most strongly in the visual arts, music, and literature. Romanticism reached beyond the rational and Classicist ideal models to elevate medievalism and elements of art and narrative perceived to be authentically medieval, in an attempt to escape the confines of population growth, urban sprawl and industrialism, and it also attempted to embrace the exotic, unfamiliar and distant, by harnessing the power of the imagination to envision and to escape.

The ideologies and events of the French Revolution laid the background from which Romanticism emerged.

The confines of the Industrial Revolution also had their influence on Romanticism, which was in part an escape from modern realities.

- **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.

- **Romanticism exalted individualism, subjectivism, irrationalism, imagination, emotions and nature - emotion over reason and senses over intellect.**

Since they were in revolt against the orders, they favoured the revival of potentially unlimited number of styles (anything that aroused them).

The movement stressed strong emotion as a source of aesthetic experience, placing new emphasis on such emotions as trepidation, horror and awe—especially that which is experienced in confronting the sublimity of untamed nature and its picturesque qualities, both new aesthetic categories.
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 de Goya.

- **In visual art and literature, Romanticism found recurrent themes in:**
  1. the evocation or criticism of the past,
  2. the cult of "sensibility" with its emphasis on women and children,
  3. the heroic isolation of the artist or narrator,
  4. and respect for a new, wilder, untrammeled and "pure" nature.
  5. Furthermore, several romantic authors, such as Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, based their writings on the supernatural/occult and human psychology.

- **Romanticism elevated the achievements of what it perceived as misunderstood heroic individuals and artists that altered society.**

Our modern sense of a romantic character is sometimes based on Byronic or Romantic ideals.
It also legitimized the individual imagination as a critical authority which permitted freedom from classical notions of form in art. It formulated the idea that an individual was likely to express the *zeitgeist* or spirit of their times as a natural process.

It elevated folk art and custom to something noble and "natural".

Romantic artists were fascinated by the nature, the genius, their passions and inner struggles, their moods, mental potentials, the heroes. They investigated human nature and personality, the folk culture, the national and ethnic origins, the medieval era, the exotic, the remote, the mysterious, the occult, the diseased, and even satanic.

The Romantic artist had a role of an ultimate egoistic creator, with the spirit above strict formal rules and traditional procedures. He had imagination as a gateway to transcendent experience and spiritual truth.

**Literature**

Romanticism in British literature developed in a different form slightly later, mostly associated with the poets **William Wordsworth** and **Samuel Taylor Coleridge**, whose co-authored book *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) sought to reject *Augustan poetry* in favour of more direct speech derived from folk traditions. Both poets were also involved in utopian social thought in the wake of the **French Revolution**. The poet and painter **William Blake** is the most extreme example of the Romantic sensibility in Britain, epitomised by his claim "I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's." Blake's artistic work is also strongly influenced by Medieval illuminated books. The painters **J. M. W. Turner** and **John Constable** are also generally associated with Romanticism. **Lord Byron**, **Percy Bysshe Shelley**, **Mary Shelley** and **John Keats** constitute another phase of Romanticism in Britain.

In France, the movement is associated with the nineteenth century, particularly in the paintings of **Théodore Géricault** and **Eugène Delacroix**.

![Eugène Delacroix, Liberty Leading the People 1830](image)

In the United States, romantic gothic literature made an early appearance with **Washington Irving's The Legend of Sleepy Hollow** (1820) and **Rip Van Winkle** (1819), followed from 1823 onwards by the **Leatherstocking Tales** of **James Fenimore Cooper**, with their emphasis on heroic simplicity and their fervent landscape descriptions of an already-exotic mythicized frontier peopled by "noble savages", similar to the philosophical theory of **Rousseau**.
exemplified by Uncas, from *The Last of the Mohicans*. There are picturesque "local color" elements in Washington Irving's essays and especially his travel books. Edgar Allan Poe's tales of the macabre and his balladic poetry were more influential in France than at home, but the romantic American novel developed fully in Nathaniel Hawthorne's atmosphere and melodrama.

Early Romantic nationalism was strongly inspired by Rousseau, and by the ideas of Johann Gottfried von Herder, who in 1784 argued that the geography formed the natural economy of a people, and shaped their customs and society.

- One of Romanticism's key ideas and most enduring legacies is the assertion of nationalism, which became a central theme of Romantic art and political philosophy.

From the earliest parts of the movement, with their focus on development of national languages and folklore, and the importance of local customs and traditions, to the movements which would redraw the map of Europe and lead to calls for self-determination of nationalities, nationalism was one of the key vehicles of Romanticism, its role, expression and meaning.

The nature of nationalism changed dramatically, however, after the French Revolution with the rise of Napoleon, and the reactions in other nations. Napoleonic nationalism and republicanism were, at first, inspirational to movements in other nations; self-determination and a consciousness of national unity were held to be two of the reasons why France was able to defeat other countries in battle. But as the French Republic became Napoleon's Empire, Napoleon became not the inspiration for nationalism, but the object of its struggle.

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, Jacques-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 Théodore Géricault, 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.

![Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1819.](image1)

This theme was echoed by the greatest French romantic painter, Eugène Delacroix, in his *Massacre at Chios* (1824).

![Eugène Delacroix, *Massacre at Chios*, 1824.](image2)
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.