

Baroque and Romantic Painting

Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor, JS Bach

Caravaggio, *The Calling of St. Matthew*, 1599-1600, oil on canvas, 10'8" x 11'

During the 16th century in Europe the Catholic Church which was the dominant religious power of the time, split. Protesting what they called the corruption of the Papacy, a group led by religious leader Martin Luther. Later known as the Protestants, Martin Luther and his followers stressed a more decentralized religious structure that emphasized a personal relationship with the divine rather than one mediated by priests. This was considered by many to be an outgrowth of Renaissance Humanism and its tendencies towards rationalism and independent thought.

In the 17th century the Catholic Church responded with what is known as the Counter reformation, a well funded coordinated response that introduced a new level of personal and psychological drama in the arts. Artists were encouraged to depict biblical scenes of such emotional and personal intensity that the viewers "were to feel the burning fires of hell, or the bliss of heaven, the lashing of the whips, and the flesh piercing crown of thorns" that make up the life of Jesus Christ, the central religious figure of Christianity.

One of the most accomplished and influential painters of this time was Michaelangelo Merisi, called Caravaggio (1571-1610) after his home in Northern Italy. Caravaggio introduced a powerfully frank realism and dramatic, theatrical lighting and gesture to Italian Baroque Art. His use of strong light and shadow is known as **chiaroscuro**. A technique developed during the Italian Renaissance, the word itself is comprised of the Italian words Chiaro, meaning light, and Scuro, meaning dark. This transition from light to dark, from highlight to shadow, creates the illusion of 3 dimensionality. His work here entitled *The calling of Saint Matthew* utilizes this in a dramatic effect as the Figure of Jesus points to one of his soon to be disciples, the diagonal lighting and deep shadows emphasizing the gesture of his arm.

Caravaggio, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, 1598 - 1599, Oil on canvas, 57" x 77"

Orphaned at 11 by the bubonic plague, Caravaggio was taken in by a painter whom he was apprenticed to. While a youth he joined a gang comprised of painters and sword fighters whose motto was, "without hope, without fear." His life was marked by a pattern of violence that we see reflected in his work.

Caravaggio, *David with the Head of Goliath*, 1610, Oil on canvas, 49" x 40"

His violent temper repeatedly got him in trouble. During the last decade of his life he was frequently arrested, initially for minor offenses - throwing a plate of artichokes at a waiter, carrying arms illegally, or street brawling. However in May of 1606 he killed a man in a duel over a disputed tennis match and had to flee from Rome a fugitive. He completed this work, *David with the Head of Goliath* shortly before his death of a fever in 1610.

Diego Velazquez, *Las Meninas (The Maids of Honor)*, 1656, Oil on canvas 10'6" x 9'

One of Spain's most notable painters of this time was Diego Velazquez. Influenced strongly by the formal qualities of Caravaggio, Velázquez is recognized not only for his striking ability to render objects and people but also for his innovative compositions, arranged with a mathematical rigor. Here we see his most well known work, *las Meninas* or the *Maids of honor*, painted near the end of his life in 1656.

Velázquez draws the viewer directly into the scene, depicting not just the Princess Margarita with her attendants, but the room in its entirety, including himself painting the scene. In his characteristic painting style Velázquez built up his forms with layers of loosely applied paint and finished off the surfaces with dashing highlights, capturing the appearance of light reflecting from surfaces when viewed from a distance, while on close inspection his forms dissolve into a complex maze of brush strokes.

Rembrandt, The night watch, 1642, Oil on Canvas, 12' x 14'6"

This type of group portraiture was especially popular in Netherlands, where the artist Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) dominated the artistic landscape. Establishing a busy studio in Amsterdam, Rembrandt produced paintings and etching involving mythological and religious themes as well as landscapes and the aforementioned portraiture. Depicting the local militia here a scene that serves more as a dramatic scene rather than a simple group portrait, this painting that was initially entitled The Company of Captain Frans Banning Cocq, later became known as the The night Watch due to the layers of dirt and again varnish that so obscured the colors that it seems as though this scene is taking place at night.

Rembrandt, Self Portrait, 1658, oil on Canvas, 53" x 41"

Throughout his life Rembrandt painted many self portraits, and as the artist aged, these personal images became more searching and, like many of his paintings, expressed an internalized spirituality and psychological honesty new in the history of art. Here in his self portrait of 1658 the artist assumes an almost regal pose, at ease, with arms and legs spread, holding a staff as if it were a royal scepter. Yet his eyes seem weary and introspective. We know he had reason to worry, since he declared bankruptcy in the same year, a product of his extravagant lifestyle. A few well placed brush strokes are sufficient to capture the tension in his fingers and the weariness in the deepest eyes, half in shadow. Mercilessly analytical, the portrait depicts the furrowed brow, sagging flesh and aging face of one who has suffered pitfalls but managed to survive while retaining their dignity.

John Henry Fuseli, The nightmare, 1781, Oil on canvas, 40" x 50"

The 18th century mode of expression that art historians call Romanticism, features loose, fluid brushwork, strong colors, dramatic contrasts of light and dark (chiaroscuro), complex compositions, and expressive poses and gestures, all reminiscent of the more dramatic aspects of the baroque work of the previous century.

Paintings and sculptures were often based in literary fantasies set in remote times or exotic places and infused with a spirit of sensationalism or melancholy. Romanticism was an imaginative approach to art, centering itself in the strong feelings of artists and their attempts to inspire those same feeling in viewers. The period of scientific thought and rational thought known as the Enlightenment, with its faith in reason and the empirical knowledge of the scientific method served as the cultural counterpoint to Romanticism's celebration of the emotions, subjectivity, and the dark corners of the mind. This often manifested in a supernatural themed subject matter such as in this work by John Henry Fuseli known as the Nightmare.

The Swiss painter glorified the irrational side of human nature that the Enlightenment sought to deny. Fuseli was raised in an intellectual household that celebrated originality, freedom of expression, and the imaginative power of the irrational. After studying the classically themed works of the Renaissance, Fuseli settled in London where developed a reputation as painter of the irrational and the erotic. Here, Fuseli depicts a sleeping woman, sprawled across a divan, oppressed by a dream brought on by the gruesome demon sitting on her chest. The asymmetry of the woman's pose was considered particularly unsettling. The glowing eyes of the horse which thrusts its head into the scene from behind the darkly rendered veil is meant to heighten the effect of terror. *Speak about Sleep Paralysis and Night terrors. Haggard, haggard.*

Francisco Goya, The Witches Sabbath, 1798, oil on canvas

Many of the works of the renowned romantic Spanish painter and printmaker Francisco Goya also depicted supernatural subject matter such as his depiction here of a Witches Sabbath. Shown here a group of witches gather around the devil in the guise of a garlanded and human like goat in a barren moonlit landscape. A number of bats can be seen flying overhead, their placement echoing the shape of the crescent moon.

Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus, Mary Shelley, 1818, Wife of Romantic Poet Percy Bysshe Shelley

Francisco Goya, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* no 43, 1796-1798, etching and aqua-tint, 8.5" x 6"

The theme of bats and other flying creatures was a recurring one in Goya's work as seen here in his print entitled *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*. Having gone deaf in the latter part of his life, it is recorded that even after losing his hearing Goya was haunted by the sound of flapping wings for the rest of his life.

Here we see one of the series of prints he produced under the title *The Sleep of Reason produces monsters* this supernaturally tinged work was meant as an attack on the Spanish morals and manners of the time. The print shows a slumbering personification of Reason, behind whom lurk the dark creatures of the night that are let loose when reason is not present.

The accompanying text for this work describes the scene thusly:

"Imagination abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters, united with her, she is the mother of the arts and the course of their wonders."

Meant to describe specific follies of Spanish life, Goya hoped that these prints would alert the people to the error of their foolish ways and call them to return to reason, rather than superstition and irrationality. While hopeful in their intent, Goya's depiction of human folly was grounded in the belief that the violence, greed, and foolishness of his time had to be mercilessly examined if there was any hope to change it.

Francisco Goya, *Third of May, 1808*, 1814-1815, oil on canvas, 8'9" x 13.5"

Nowhere is this sentiment more evident than in the painting shown here, *Third of May, 1808*. In 1805 Napoleon conquered Spain and placed his brother on the throne. While initially welcoming of the reforms the new government brought, his opinion changed quickly when as the occupying forces became despotic and oppressive. On May 2nd, 1808 a rumor spread that the Royal family was going to be killed. The people of Spain revolted at this prospect and at the end of the unrest that day hundreds of Spanish people were arrested, herded into a convent, and executed by a French firing squad.

Goya commemorated this event in the nightmarish painting we now see. One man, spotlighted in a brilliant white shirt confronts his executioners with outstretched arms, recalling the crucified form of Jesus. This work encapsulates much of the essence of Romanticism: the sensationalizing of a current event, the loose brushwork, the unbalanced composition, and theatrical lighting.

Theodore Gericault, *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1818-1819, oil on canvas, 12' x 23.5'

French painting in the Romantic style was equally political in its subject matter. The painting we are now looking at marks one of the high points of French Romantic period. Created by Theodore Gericault and entitled *The Raft of the Medusa*, this painting depicts a particularly scandalous and sensational scene based on a contemporary event.

In 1816 a ship carrying colonists headed for Madagascar ran aground near its destination. Its captain was an incompetent aristocrat who received the well paying position due to his political ties. Because there were insufficient lifeboats for the entire crew, the captain commandeered what escape boats that were present for upper class officers, leaving 152 of the passengers to a quickly and poorly built raft. Unable to support the full weight of the passengers the raft itself was submerged in over a foot of water initially. After being set adrift by the lifeboats that were initially towing them, the occupants quickly succumbed to exposure and dehydration due to the lack of supplies. The 15 passengers who survived the two week ordeal did so only by resorting to cannibalism and were left permanently psychologically scarred. Here we see the moment they first caught sight of the ship that rescued the survivors.

Initially exhibited at a state sponsored exhibition under the title A Shipwreck Scene so as to downplay the specific subject matter, the painting was presented not so much as political critique as a depiction of the larger philosophical theme of the eternal struggle of humanity against the elements, a theme we will see more of shortly. However critics of the day quickly discerned the true intent with liberal factions praising it for exposing the travesty of the scandal while more conservative elements condemned it as sensationalist journalism rather than art. Since the monarchy refused to buy it, as was the custom of state sponsored exhibitions, Gericault toured the work throughout Ireland and England, where it was a great commercial success attracting more than 50,000 paying visitors. It was the equivalent of a summer blockbuster movie, not unlike the new Avengers movie.

Caspar David Friedrich, Sea of Ice, 1823-24, Oil on canvas, 38" x 50"

Continuing in the theme of the ill fated ship against the powers of nature, we have here the work of the German landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich entitled The Sea of Ice, also known as The wreck of Hope. Depicting the shipwreck of William Perry's expedition to the North Pole, Friedrich creates a fantastic and entirely invented scene of the HMS Griper shattered and partially encased in an icy tomb at the edge of the known world.

The underlying theme of the work is best characterized in the romantic idea of the sublime. An aesthetic theme outlined by the British writer Edmund Burke, the sublime is the transcendent mix of the feelings of fascination and fear that occurs when humanity is confronted with the presence of something far larger than itself and outside the realm of daily life. The awe inspiring aspect of savage beauty outside the comprehension of humanity was meant to evoke the transcendent power of God and creation.

Caspar David Friedrich, Monk by the Sea, 1809, Oil on canvas, 43" x 68"

Friedrich considered the landscape as a vehicle through which one could achieve spiritual revelation. Influenced by Christian thinkers and poets of the time who taught that the divine was visible through a deep personal connection with nature, he believed just as the bible was taken to be God's Book, the landscape was God's word manifested through creation itself. While he sketched from nature, Friedrich's works were completed in his studio, where he combined both his observational studies with his own subjective thoughts and experiences.

In his work here, Monk by the Sea, Friedrich shows us a long expanse of a dark and moody beach, differentiated from the sky by no more than a vague suggestion of horizon. The tiny figure of the monk contemplates the vastness and sublime nature of the landscape from the edge of the water. The coastline itself is mysteriously quiet, and fog has drawn a veil over most of the details of the landscape, creating a mood that is both silent and solemn.