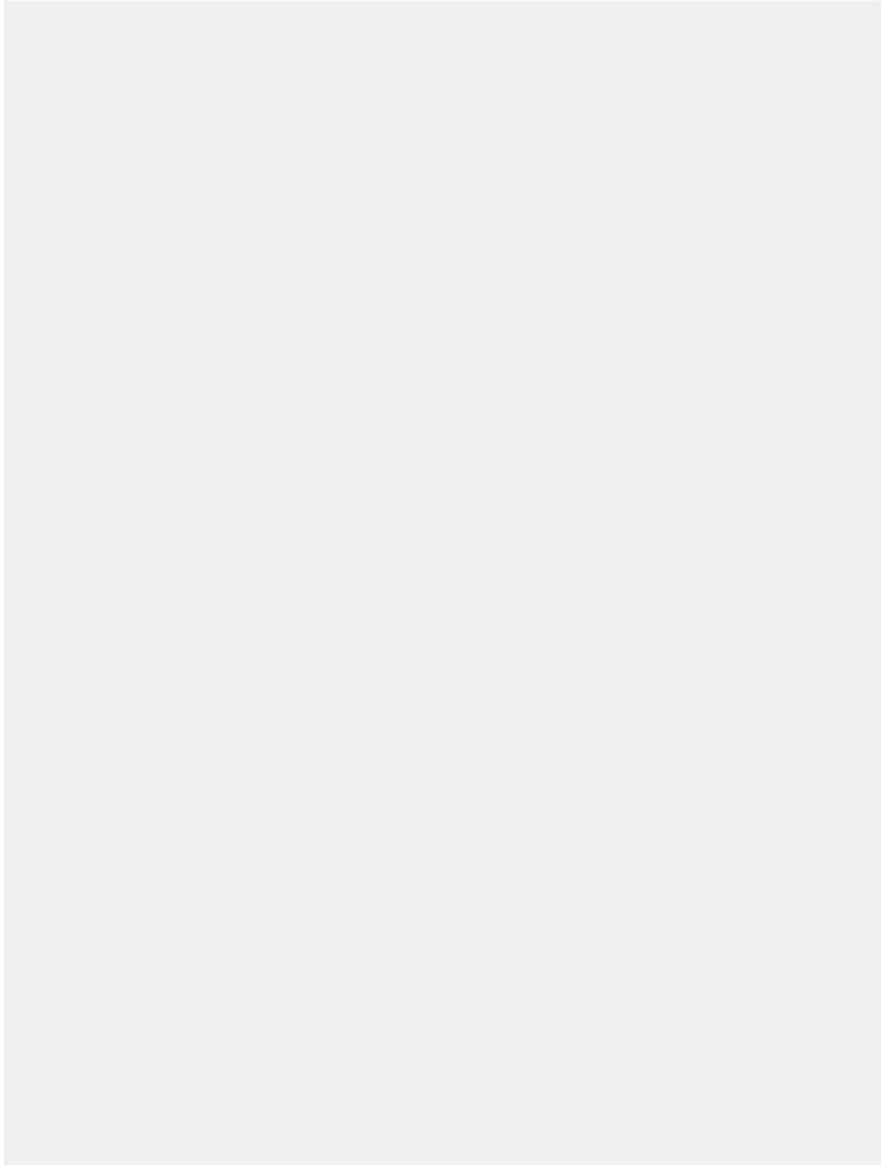


Romantic Art, 1760-1860 [starts below]



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“The Critique of Reason: Romantic Art, 1760–1860,” at the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, Connecticut, frames the Romantic break from Enlightenment order, balance and restraint not as a simple repudiation of



Joseph Mallord
William Turner
*Wreckers—Coast of
Northumberland, with
a Steam-Boat Assisting
a Ship Off Shore*, c. 1834
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reason and science, but as a bold expansion of human curiosity into wilder nature, darker fantasies and more daring social, political and spiritual experiments. The Augustan poet Alexander Pope argued in one of his neatly turned couplets: “Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;/The proper study of mankind is man” (*An Essay on Man*, 1734). By contrast, William Blake took an eschatological view, finding truth in often violent contradictions: “Damn braces. Bless relaxes,” he wrote in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790–93). Among the three hundred works on display in the exhibition are many plates from Blake’s illustrated poems, his radical reimagining of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (1824–27), *America: A Prophecy* (1793) and *Jerusalem* (1804–20).

This is the first joint exhibition for the Yale University Art Gallery and the Yale Center for British Art (closed for renovation and reopening in February 2016). Understandably, English artists dominate. Joseph Mallord William Turner and John Constable revolutionized the landscape genre, and they are well represented at Yale. Both painters relished the changeability of nature and tapped into that vital energy through adventurous paint-handling, but they chose different subjects.

Turner sought out extreme topography and weather, as in his marvelous watercolors of the Alps, the citadel of the sublime (*Upper Fall of the Reichenbach: Rainbow*, 1810), and the fiery *Vesuvius in Eruption* (1817–20). Turner explored theories of color to capture the merging of light and water in storms, finding beauty in the maelstrom (a biblical reunion of the waters above and below, chaos come again) in oils such as *Staffa, Fingal’s Cave* (1831–32) and *Wreckers—Coast of Northumberland, with a Steam-Boat Assisting a Ship Off Shore* (c. 1834).

Constable never left England and rarely travelled from his home in the Stour River Valley. *Hadleigh Castle, the Mouth of the Thames—Morning after a Stormy Night* (1829) features a ruined medieval tower instead of his usual farms



George Stubbs, *A Lion Attacking a Horse*, 1770

YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY, NEW HAVEN, CONNECTICUT

and waterways, but the real drama—as always with this artist—hangs in the turbulent skies. In *Ploughing Scene in Suffolk* (1824–25), the turning of the earth and the wet breath of the clouds nourish the cycle of decay and regeneration. Constable's cloud studies—a clutch of stunning oil sketches, from c. 1821 and 1822, are in this show—are miraculous feats of color, gesture and luminosity, and have made him a hero to abstractionists. They also illustrate one theme of the exhibition: that the Romantics did not find rigorous analysis incompatible with imaginative freedom. Constable carefully studied the science of meteorology and the classification of cloud types, then transformed his research into art.

The naturalist impulse emerges in a number of ways. George Stubbs's *A Lion Attacking a Horse* (1770) represents a high point in mammalian anatomy. Of the artist's several versions, the one in this show features a pure white horse silhouetted against the dark, stormy sky and rocky landscape. It is more Romantic bombast than objective observation. In contrast, Samuel Palmer makes exquisite drawings, such as *Foxgloves* and *Brambles* (undated), in preparation for his mystic paintings of country piety, such as *The Harvest Moon* (c. 1833) and *A Shepherd and His Flock under the Moon and Stars* (c. 1827).

Romanticism is clearly a complex phenomenon, as the organizers of this show indicate with the titles of their thematic sections: "Nature: Spectacle and Specimen," "Landscape and the Perceiving Subject," "Religion and the Age

of Reason,” “Distant Lands, Foreign People,” “The Artist as Social Critic,” “Beyond Likeness,” “The Changing Role of the Sketch” and “The Literary Impulse.” The riches of the English contingent run deep, with half a dozen of Richard Parkes Bonington’s picturesque scenes shimmering in diaphanous light (*A Fish-market near Boulogne*, 1824) and a couple of John Martin’s apocalyptic fantasies (*Belshazzar’s Feast*, 1820, and *Joshua Commanding the Sun to Stand Still*, c. 1840), which influenced Thomas Cole.

Yale does not neglect the Continent, however. The Romantic era was a period of revolution, and the exhibition includes the full suite of Francisco de Goya’s powerful etchings, *The Disasters of War* (c. 1810–20), as well as two critiques of Napoleonic ambition, Ary Scheffer’s bleak oil painting *The Retreat of Napoleon’s Army from Russia in 1812* (1826) and Théodore Géricault’s lithograph *Retour de Russie* (1818).

Exoticism, while often disparaged these days as tainted by colonialism, demonstrates its fascinating range in this context. Eugène Delacroix’s lithographs, such as *Femmes d’Alger* (1833), combine the sensual and the picturesque; John Fredrick Lewis’s watercolors, such as *A Frank Encampment in the Desert of Mount Sinai*, 1842—*The Convent of Saint Catherine in the Distance* (1856), expanded knowledge of ethnography and non-Western cultures. David Roberts’s watercolors of ancient Egypt (*The Great Temple of Amon Karnak, the Hypostyle Hall*, 1838) are still among the finest images of monumental antiquity. Early photography—made by heroic artists managing cumbersome equipment in difficult locations—has a wealth of detail and lustrous beauty that has never been equaled. Good examples here are Francis Frith’s *Tomb under the Gebel El-Mukattam, Cairo* (1857), *Colossus at Memnon* (1855–60) by Felice A. Beato, which inevitably evokes Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” and Antonio Beato’s *Medinet Habu: Coptic Church in Center of Ramses III Temple* (undated).

Romantic artists documented the physical world around them—a world that had greatly expanded geographically and culturally, even microscopically—yet they also found the world of imagination an equally valid field of study. Literary illustration plays a significant role in the exhibition. The organizers have cannily focused on Delacroix’s chiaroscuro-rich lithographs visualizing Goethe’s *Faust* (c. 1828), added some comparable literary scenes by Géricault and topped up the selection with a few oils by the eccentric Swiss painter Henry Fuseli—*Danaë and Perseus* (c. 1785–90), *Dido* (1781) and *Scene of Witches, from “The Masque of Queens” by Ben Jonson* (c. 1785). Despite his frequent choice of classical subjects, Fuseli was a connoisseur of the weird and the sensational.

“The Critique of Reason: Romantic Art, 1760–1860” is on view March 6–July 26, 2015, at Yale University Art Gallery, 1111 Chapel Street, New Haven, Connecticut 06510. artgallery.yale.edu

—Gail Leggio