

# 1 The Origins of Modern Art

*“I have seen, and heard, much of cockney impudence before now; but never expected a coxcomb to ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public’s face.”*

John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera*, 1877

**W**ith this affront, John Ruskin (1819–1900) touched off a firestorm in the staid art world of late Victorian Britain. Ruskin was Britain’s most influential art critic. The target of his attack: **James McNeill Whistler’s** painting, *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* (fig. 1.1). Ruskin’s acidic review—in which he essentially accused the painter of being a charlatan whose only aim was to bilk art collectors of their money—provoked Whistler (1834–1913) to sue the critic for libel. The case went to court in 1878. The trial drew many spectators, eager to watch the eminent critic spar with the famously witty artist. Few observers were disappointed: according to newspaper accounts Whistler’s testimony was loaded with irony and sarcasm. For instance, when Ruskin’s attorney, John Holker, questioned the success of *Nocturne in Black and Gold*, asking of Whistler: “Do you think you could make me see beauty in that picture?” Whistler replied dryly: “No ... I fear it would be as impossible as for the musician to pour his notes into the ear of a deaf man.”

As amusing as these theatrics were, there were nonetheless important issues at stake for the history of modern art. In many ways, the defendant in the case was not simply the art critic John Ruskin, but art—especially modern art—itself. What was in the balance here? One weighty question concerned the role of art in society. Ruskin believed that art possessed the power to improve society. For him, this was accomplished chiefly through an artwork’s ability to represent nature faithfully. To encounter nature in its purity and grandeur, for Ruskin, was to contemplate the divine. Artists who adhered to his doctrine of “truth to nature” could, he thought, promote moral virtue as well as aesthetic pleasure. In Whistler’s *Nocturne in Black and Gold*, Ruskin found neither the moral nor the pictorial clarity he desired. Whistler’s attempt to capture the dazzling effects of a fireworks display over the Thames through startling, explosive brushwork defied the critic’s understanding of nature as a product of divine creation.

Whistler subscribed to a very different understanding of art’s purpose. An adherent of the doctrine of “Art for Art’s Sake,” Whistler believed that true art served no social purpose whatsoever. Followers of the Art for Art’s Sake doctrine (see *Gautier, Preface to Mademoiselle de Maupin*, p. 2) held social utility under suspicion if not contempt, believing that a work’s usefulness threatened to detract from its purely aesthetic purpose. “Art,” Whistler explained, “has become foolishly confounded with education.” For supporters of Art for Art’s Sake, beauty was simply the measure of a work’s ability to stimulate a pleasing aesthetic sensation. The



**1.1** James McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket*, c. 1875. Oil on panel, 23 × 18" (60.3 × 46.4 cm). Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit.

**Théophile Gautier**Preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835)

*The first statement of Art for Art's Sake appeared in Gautier's preface to a novel. Critics and censors found the preface objectionable for its seeming hedonism.*

...Someone has said somewhere that literature and the arts influence morals. Whoever he was, he was undoubtedly a great fool. It was like saying green peas make the spring grow, whereas peas grow because it is spring.... Nothing that is beautiful is indispensable to life. You might suppress flowers, and the world would not suffer materially; yet who would wish that there were no flowers? I would rather give up potatoes than roses.... There is nothing truly beautiful but that which can never be of any use whatsoever; everything useful is ugly, for it is the expression of some need, and man's needs are ignoble and disgusting like his own poor and infirm nature. The most useful place in a house is the water-closet.

trial of Whistler vs. Ruskin pitted not just two men against each other, but provided a forum for the debate between those who looked to art as essential to social progress and those who insisted that art transcended social concerns. This debate would continue long after the conclusion of the trial, with various modernist movements allying themselves to one or the other viewpoint.

## Making Art and Artists: The Role of the Critic

Ruskin's insistence on the ability of art to improve society led him to develop ways of bringing fine arts education to members of the working class. In addition to sponsoring art exhibitions and lectures for working-class audiences, Ruskin published a newsletter he hoped would appeal to working-class readers. It was in this newsletter, *Fors Clavigera*, that he published his provocative review of Whistler's painting. Ruskin's advocacy for the working class and his efforts to provide laborers with access to forms of culture typically beyond their experience likewise colored the clash between critic and artist. On the one hand, Ruskin's condemnation of Whistler's painting speaks to his interest in supporting art that offers an immediate and accessible social message. On the other hand, Ruskin drew on class-based stereotypes in his denigration of the artist. By attributing to Whistler a "cockney impudence," Ruskin delivers an insult that turns on class differentiation: the adjective "cockney" was used in the nineteenth century to designate a Londoner who lacked the refinement of the gentry. In this way, Ruskin not only tapped into Whistler's well-known sensitivity about his social status but also exposed the persistence of class as a means of differentiating artists from their patrons. As subsequent chapters will show, this divide between artists and patrons, between those who create art and those who consume it, troubled many modern artists.

Along with such artists, many critics of modern art sought to bridge the divide between culture and its diverse potential audiences. Art criticism as a distinct literary or journalistic activity emerged in the eighteenth century in response to the proliferation of public venues for exhibiting art. Prior to that, artworks had remained largely confined to the private galleries of the nobility or other wealthy collectors. For the most part, only religious art was regularly viewed by the general public. By the early eighteenth century, this had changed. Not only were art dealers and even auctioneers beginning to stage public displays of their wares, but large-scale exhibitions were being mounted throughout Western Europe, following the French model of public exhibitions sponsored by the monarchy. In France, these exhibitions were known as **Salons** because of the name of the room in which they were originally held at the Louvre Palace: the Salon Carré or "Square Parlor." The Paris Salon took place regularly, usually every two years, and would feature hundreds of artworks, mostly by members of France's Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. Works by promising Academy students as well as prominent foreign artists were also shown. An official, public event, the Salon was open to anyone who wished to view the works on display. Other European countries soon followed France's example, leading to a proliferation of regular public exhibitions in all the major European capitals by the early nineteenth century.

In the early years of the Salon, the unprecedented access to artworks brought viewers face to face with an often confusing variety of subjects, styles, and media. To help guide visitors through the exhibitions, self-appointed arbiters of aesthetic quality began to write reviews, which would then be disseminated as pamphlets, in newspapers, or by private subscription. It did not take long for the art critics to have an effect on public taste. Even artists occasionally followed the advice of critics in their pursuit of public approbation.

Of great interest to early critics of the Salon was the specific genre pursued by different artists. "**Genre**" refers generally to the type of subject represented in a painting. There were five main genres: history (depicting biblical, mythological, or historical subjects), landscape, portrait, **still life**, and (slightly confusingly) "**genre painting**" (scenes of everyday life). The French Royal Academy, at the time of its foundation in 1648, held that **history painting** was the greatest achievement for a painter because historical subjects demanded erudition as well as the highest degree of technical skill. Based on subjects from ancient or modern history, classical mythology, or the Scriptures, history painting required a thorough knowledge of important literary and historical texts. What is more, most history paintings were expected to present one or more heroic figures, often depicted nude, so anatomy and life drawing were an essential part of a history painter's education. Finally, history paintings are often set in real or imagined towns, on battlefields, or in other landscapes, and thus required the ability to execute works in that genre as well. As vaunted as history painting was by the Academy, early critics, such as Denis Diderot, often guided their readers toward other genres

such as landscape, still life, and genre painting. Among the most attentive readers of art criticism were art dealers and collectors. This remains the case today.

### A Marketplace for Art

As mentioned above, many of the earliest public exhibitions of artwork were organized by dealers and auctioneers. This phenomenon marks an important shift in the role of art in society. Economic changes in Western Europe—the seventeenth-century expansion of mercantilism, which depended on favorable international trade balances and sales of manufactured goods, and the eighteenth-century development of capitalism, which encouraged the further spread of manufacturing beyond the limits of state control to encompass private investment as well—contributed to the ascendance of the bourgeoisie, a class of citizens with newly acquired economic strength and a taste for the fashions and habits of the nobility (see *Modernity and Modernism*, opposite). Collectors from the middle as well as upper registers of society now sought to fill their homes with beautiful things, including artworks, creating a demand especially for small paintings and tabletop sculptures that would fit comfortably in a townhouse or apartment. Thus, during the eighteenth century, a market force was introduced into the art world, leading to a proliferation in the nineteenth century of smaller works with themes suited to a bourgeois domestic interior. It is precisely this market, in fact, to which Whistler hoped to appeal with the modest scale and striking effects of his *Nocturne in Black and Gold*, a painting that measures less than two feet high and a foot and a half wide.

All of these currents—art’s role in society, increasing class tension, proliferating art exhibitions, the growing influence of art critics, and the expanding market for art—converged in the Whistler vs. Ruskin trial. And all of these phenomena contributed to the development of modern art. But perhaps more than any of these pressures, the real issue motivating Whistler’s confrontation with Ruskin involved a problem fundamental to modernism: What is art? Whistler in fact offered an answer to this question during the trial. When attorney Holker attempted to clear his client of libel by indicating that Whistler really was a charlatan committing fraud, he pointed out that *Nocturne in Black and Gold* could not possibly be a finished artwork because there simply had not been sufficient labor or time invested in the piece. Holker asked, “Did it take you long to paint the *Nocturne in Black and Gold*? How soon did you knock it off?” Whistler replied, “Oh, I knock one off in a couple of days.” The barrister then asked Whistler if it was merely “the labour of two days” for which he charged more than £200? To this question Whistler responded, “No, I ask it for the knowledge of a lifetime.”

Whistler won the case. Though it was a pyrrhic victory for the painter, whose receipt of only a farthing—less than a penny—in damages cast him into bankruptcy, Whistler’s statement nonetheless announces the establishment of one of modernism’s central tenets: that art is first and foremost the manifestation of an individual’s emotional and intellectual will.

## CONTEXT

### Modernity and Modernism

With industrialization in Western Europe and North America came modernity: cities grew as dwindling agricultural jobs prompted workers to seek employment in manufacturing. The population booms in cities such as Paris and London led to an expansion of businesses aimed at serving the needs of these new citizens: restaurants, bars, theaters, music halls, boarding houses, and inns proliferated. These businesses created more jobs while also introducing new social habits and expectations. Rooted in urban culture, where leisure activities as well as daily necessities are available commercially, modernity refers to the condition of post-industrial, capitalist society. Modernism is simply the cultural expression of this form of social organization. Associated with ideas of progress and novelty, modernism reflects the dominant ethos of a society in which consumption—of new forms of entertainment along with the necessities of life—plays a central role in one’s daily activities. One of the signal markers of the rise of modernism in the West was the advent of the department store and the idea of shopping as a leisure activity. Just as indicative of modernism was a pervasive ambivalence toward modernity itself. Many welcomed the technological advances and economic prosperity that modernity seemed to foster. Others, however, were wary of its emphasis on change and continual improvement, noting capitalism’s tendency to exploit workers murderously and to contribute to the deplorable living conditions of the poor. Modern art, like all forms of modernism, is a response to the diverse political, economic, and cultural pressures of modernity.

### The Modern Artist

The notion that an artwork is fundamentally the expression of a particular artist’s thoughts or desires seems obvious today. But this has not always been the case. The idea that Whistler put forward is rooted—like many sources of modernism—in the eighteenth century. Until the late eighteenth century, artists in the West since the Renaissance had understood their work as part of a tradition going back to classical antiquity. Though each artist was expected to contribute uniquely to this tradition, the practice of emulation remained central to any artist’s training. Young artists would learn to create by first copying works acknowledged as superior examples of their genre, style, or **medium**. Only after a student fully understood the work of earlier artists and was able to reproduce such examples faithfully could he or she go on to create new forms. But even then, new works were expected to contribute to established traditions. This was the method of training used at art academies throughout Western Europe from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. Artists achieved success by demonstrating their inventiveness *within the tradition* in which they worked.

For instance, one of the consummate achievements of eighteenth-century French academic art is **Jacques-Louis**

David's Neoclassical painting *The Oath of the Horatii* (fig. 1.2). The subject is taken from classical sources and had been treated earlier by other painters. For his version, David (1748–1825) emulates the crisp linearity, rich colors, and sculptural treatment of figures by earlier painters such as Nicolas Poussin, relying on him for the clear, geometrical arrangement: the bold pentagon holding old Horatio and his sons, the oval grouping of despondent women on the right. David has radically compressed the clear, stage-like architectural setting in emulation of ancient relief sculpture. Of course, David's treatment of the theme as well as his rendering of figures and space was heralded for its freshness and novelty at the time of its initial exhibition in 1785. At this time, however, novelty and originality were subsumed within the conventions of artistic tradition.

### What Does It Mean to Be an Artist?: From Academic Emulation toward Romantic Originality

The emphasis on emulation as opposed to novelty begun to lose ground toward the end of the eighteenth century when a new weight was given to artistic invention. Increasingly,

invention was linked with imagination, that is to say, with the artist's unique vision, a vision unconstrained by academic practice and freed from the pictorial conventions that had been obeyed since the Renaissance. This new attitude underlies the aesthetic interests of **Romanticism**. Arising in the last years of the eighteenth century and exerting its influence well into the nineteenth, Romanticism exalted humanity's capacity for emotion. In music, literature, and the visual arts, Romanticism is typified by an insistence on subjectivity and novelty. Today, few would argue that art is simply the consequence of creative genius. Romantic artists and theorists, however, understood art to be the expression of an individual's will to create rather than a product of particular cultural as well as personal values. Genius, for the Romantics, was something possessed innately by the artist: It could not be learned or acquired. To express genius, then, the Romantic artist had to resist academic emulation and instead turn inward, toward making pure imagination visible. The British painter and printmaker **William Blake** (1757–1827) typifies this approach to creativity.

Producing prophetic books based in part on biblical texts as well as on his own prognostications, Blake used his training as an engraver to illustrate his works with forceful, intensely emotional images. His depictions of familiar



1.2 Jacques-Louis David, *The Oath of the Horatii*, 1784. Oil on canvas, 10' 10" × 14' (3.4 × 4.3 m). Musée du Louvre, Paris.

 [View the Closer Look for \*The Oath of the Horatii\* on mysearchlab.com](#)



1.3 William Blake, *Nebuchadnezzar*, 1795. Color print finished in ink and watercolor on paper, 21 × 28" (54.3 × 72.5 cm). Tate, London.

biblical personages, for instance, momentarily evoke for the viewer conventional representations before spinning away from the familiar into a strange new pictorial realm. His rendering of *Nebuchadnezzar* (fig. 1.3) shows the Babylonian king suffering the madness described in the Book of Daniel. The nudity and robust muscularity of the king might initially remind the viewer of the heroic Old Testament figures who people Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling, but the grimacing expression and distortions of the figure—which emphasize the king's insanity as he “did eat grass as oxen”—quickly dispel thoughts of classical prototypes or quiet grandeur.

With Jacques-Louis David and William Blake, we have representatives of the two dominant art styles of the late eighteenth century: Neoclassicism and Romanticism. Both of these styles—along with the growing influence of art criticism, a proliferation of public art exhibitions, and an expansion in the number of bourgeois patrons and collectors—helped to lay the foundations of modern art. David's Neoclassicism carried into the nineteenth century an awareness of tradition along with a social conscience that enabled art to assume a place at the center of political as well as cultural life in Europe. Blake's Romanticism poured a different strain into the well from which modern art is drawn. With its insistence that originality is the mark of true genius, Romanticism demands of modern art an unceasing pursuit of novelty and renewal.

## Making Sense of a Turbulent World: The Legacy of Neoclassicism and Romanticism

Neoclassicism, which dominated the arts in Europe and America in the second half of the eighteenth century, has at times been called a derivative style that perpetuated the classicism of Renaissance and Baroque art. Yet in Neoclassical art a fundamental Renaissance visual tradition was seriously opposed for the first time—the use of perspective to govern the organization of pictorial space. Perspective refers to a system for representing three dimensions on a two-dimensional surface, creating the illusion of depth. Artists since the Renaissance have used two main techniques for accomplishing this: **linear perspective** and **atmospheric perspective**. Linear perspective suggests the recession of space through the use of real or implied lines, called “orthogonals,” which seem to converge at a point in the distance. Atmospheric perspective imitates the tendency of distant objects to appear less distinct to give the illusion of depth. It may be argued that David's manipulation of perspective was crucial in shaping the attitudes that led, ultimately, to twentieth-century **abstract art**.

David and his followers did not actually abandon the tradition of a pictorial structure based on linear and atmospheric perspective. They were fully wedded to the idea that

a painting was an adaptation of classical relief sculpture: they subordinated atmospheric effects; emphasized linear contours; arranged their figures as a **frieze** across the picture plane and accentuated that plane by closing off pictorial depth through the use of such devices as a solid wall, a back area of neutral color, or an impenetrable shadow. The result, as seen in *The Oath of the Horatii*, is an effect of figures composed along a narrow stage behind a proscenium, figures that exist in space more by the illusion of sculptural modeling than by their location within a pictorial space that has been constructed according to principles of perspective.

The clearest formal distinction between Neoclassical and Romantic painting in the nineteenth century may be seen in the approaches to **plastic** form and techniques of applying paint. Neoclassicism in painting established the principle of balanced frontality to a degree that transcended even the High Renaissance or the seventeenth-century classicism of Nicolas Poussin. Romantic painters relied on diagonal recession in depth and indefinite atmospheric–coloristic effects more appropriate to the expression of the inner imagination than the clear light of reason. The Neoclassicists continued the Renaissance tradition of glaze painting to attain a uniform surface unmarred by the evidence of active brushwork, whereas the Romantics were more experimental, sometimes reviving the richly **impastoed** surfaces of Baroque and **Rococo** paintings. During the Romantic era there developed an increasingly high regard for artists’ sketches, which were thought to capture the evanescent touch of the artist, thereby communicating authentic emotion. Such attitudes were later crucial for much abstract painting in America and France following World War II (see Chapters 17 and 18).

Printmaking likewise experienced a resurgence. Eager to exploit the capacity of prints to produce multiple copies,

Romantic artists sought techniques that would endow prints with the spontaneity of drawings (see *Printmaking Techniques*, below). Blake created experimental relief **etchings** to pursue this interest. Romantic artists also quickly embraced the new process of **lithography** in order to achieve their goals. Among the earliest Romantic artists to utilize this medium was **Théodore Géricault** (1791–1824). His *Horse Devoured by a Lion* from 1820–21 (fig. 1.4) uses lithography to explore a favorite Romantic theme: the nobility of animals in the face of un pitying nature. The immediacy of the lithographic line contributes to the subject’s drama, while Géricault’s manipulation of tone delivers velvety black passages that recede ominously in the background, framing the terrifying jaws of the lion.

## History Painting

David and his followers tended toward history painting, especially moralistic subject matter related to the philosophic ideals of the French Revolution and based on the presumed stoic and republican virtues of early Rome. Yet painters were hampered in their pursuit of a truly classical art by the lack of adequate prototypes in ancient painting. There was, however, a profusion of ancient sculpture. Thus, it is not surprising that Neoclassical paintings such as *The Oath of the Horatii* (see fig. 1.2) should emulate sculptured figures in high relief within a restricted stage, which David saw in Rome, where he painted *The Oath*. The “moralizing” attitudes of his figures make the stage analogy particularly apt. Although commissioned for Louis XVI, whom David, as a deputy of the Revolutionary government, later voted to send to the guillotine, this rigorous composition of brothers heroically swearing allegiance to Rome came to be seen as a manifesto of revolutionary sentiment.

## Printmaking Techniques

Prior to the invention of photography, the easiest way to reproduce images was through printmaking. Some artists were particularly drawn to this, often preferring the intimate scale and wide circulation afforded by prints. Two techniques—aquatint and lithography—became especially popular among Romantic artists. Aquatint offered printmakers the ability to create passages of rich tone, ranging from pale grays to deep blacks. Early printmaking techniques—such as engraving—tended to rely on line only, which made it difficult to render shading. Engraving involves incising a line into a metal plate using a sharp instrument called a “burin.” Once the design is inscribed onto the plate, ink is applied to the surface. The ink settles into the lines and the surface of the plate is wiped clean. A piece of paper is then placed atop the design and, to receive the ink resting in the incised lines, the plate and paper are run through a printing press that exerts enough pressure to force the paper into the line where it receives the ink. But how to reproduce areas of tone, like a wash, rather than just line? With aquatint a fine powdered resin is sprinkled onto the metal printing plate, which is heated so the resin melts and adheres

## TECHNIQUE

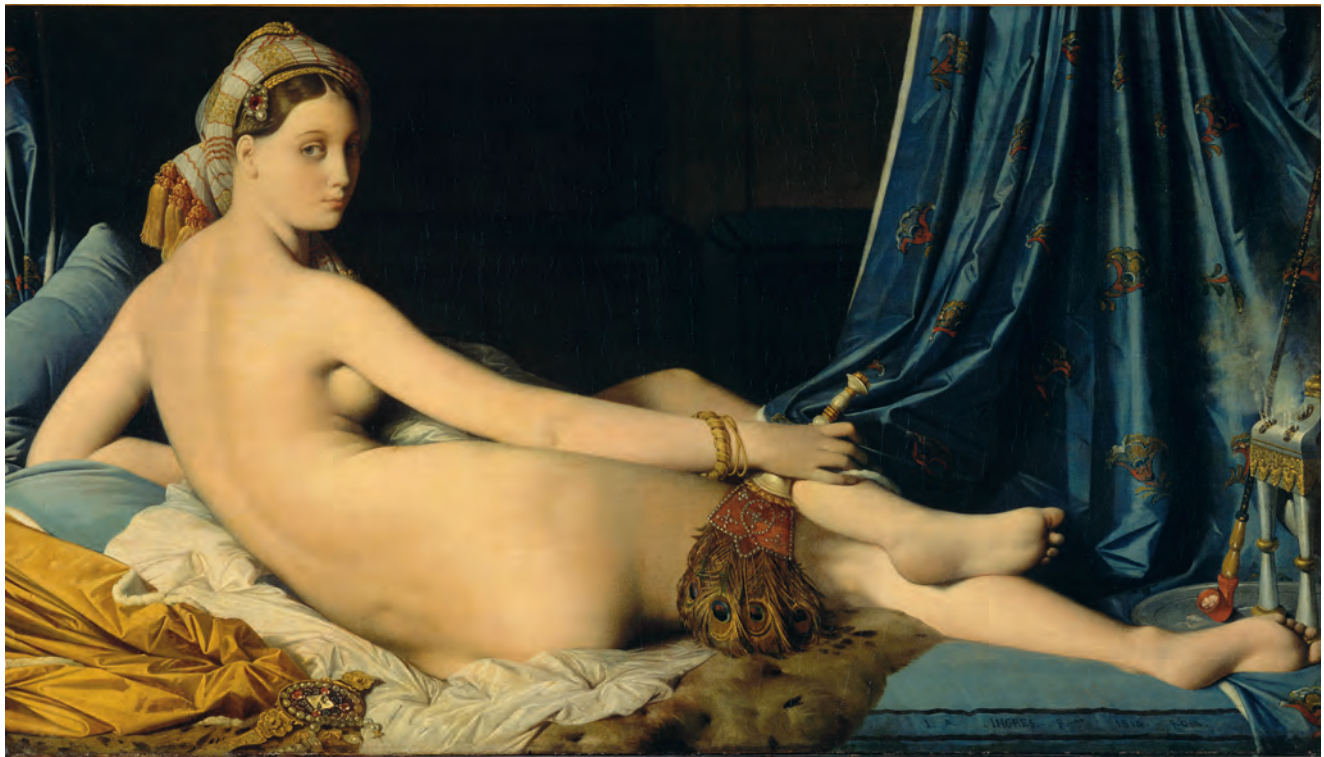
in a pebbled pattern. By dipping the plate into a pan of acid, the parts of it not covered by the resin are eaten away by the acid. This area, like the line of an engraving, holds ink for transfer onto a print. By using different patterns and thicknesses of resin along with varying strengths of acid, the tonal range of an aquatint can be manipulated. Lithography is a different technique altogether, and does not require the metal plate used in engraving and aquatint. With lithography, the artist uses a crayon or other grease-based medium to draw a design onto a specially prepared block of porous limestone. Water applied to the surface is absorbed by the porous stone but repelled by the greasy ink. An oil-based ink is then applied to the surface: because of the natural repulsion between oil and water, the ink remains only on the areas marked by the artist. This surface can then be covered by a sheet of paper and run through a press using much less pressure than for an engraving or an aquatint. Lithography, because it does not require incising into a metal plate or the use of noxious acids, allows artists to work much as they would when drawing, which accounts for the often free and spontaneous character of lithographs.



**1.4** Théodore Géricault, *Cheval Devoré par un Lion* (*Horse Devoured by a Lion*), 1820–21. Lithograph; black lithographic ink on prepared “stone” paper, 10<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 14<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub>” (27.4 × 37 cm). British Museum, London.

Of course, not all Neoclassical painters used the style in support of overtly moralizing or didactic themes. **Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres** (1780–1867), a pupil of David who during his long life remained the exponent and defender of the Davidian classical tradition, exploited Neoclassicism for its capacity to achieve cool formal effects, leaving political agitation to others. His style was essentially formed by 1800 and cannot be said to have changed radically in works painted at the end of his life. Ingres


represented to an even greater degree than did David the influence of Renaissance classicism, particularly that of Raphael. Although David was a superb colorist, he tended to subordinate his color to the classical ideal. Ingres, on the contrary, used a palette both brilliant and delicate, combining classical clarity with Romantic sensuousness, often in liberated, even atonal harmonies of startling boldness (fig. 1.5). His *Grande Odalisque*, though not a figure from any specific historical or mythological text, maintains the



**1.5** Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Grande Odalisque*, 1814. Oil on canvas, 36 × 64” (91 × 162 cm). Louvre, Paris.



**1.6** Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Roger Delivering Angelica*, 1818. Graphite on white woven paper, 6¾ × 7¾" (17.1 × 19.7 cm). Harvard University Art Museums, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, MA. Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop.

 [View the Closer Look](#) to see another of Ingres's paintings on [mysearchlab.com](http://mysearchlab.com)

monumentality and idealization typical of history painting. Ingres's preoccupation with tonal relationships and formal counterpoints led him to push his idealization of the female body to the limits of **naturalism**, offering abstractions of the models from which he worked.

The sovereign quality that Ingres brought to the classical tradition was that of drawing, and it was his drawing, his expression of line as an abstract entity—coiling and uncoiling in self-perpetuating complications that seem as much autonomous as descriptive—that provided the link between his art and that of Edgar Degas and Pablo Picasso (fig. 1.6).

One of the major figures of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Romantic history painting, who had a demonstrable influence on what occurred subsequently, was the Spaniard **Francisco de Goya y Lucientes** (1746–1828). In a long

career Goya carried his art through many stages, from penetrating portraits of the Spanish royal family to a particular concern in his middle and late periods with the human propensity for barbarity. The artist expressed this bleak vision in monstrously fantastical scenes of human depravity. Like Géricault and Blake, he pursued printmaking, exploiting the relatively new medium of aquatint to endow his etchings with lush **chiaroscuro** effects. His brilliant cycle of prints, *The Disasters of War* (fig. 1.7), depicts the devastating results of Spain's popular uprisings against Napoléon's armies during the Peninsular War (1808–14), triggered by Napoléon's determination to control the ports of Portugal and Spain. Facing certain invasion, the Spanish monarchy agreed to an alliance with the French emperor who nevertheless gave his army free rein to pillage Spanish towns as they marched to



**1.7** Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, "This Is Worse," Plate 37 from *The Disasters of War*, 1810–11. Etching, 1863 edition, image 5 × 6½" (12.8 × 15.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.





1.8 Eugène Delacroix, *The Lion Hunt*, 1861. Oil on canvas, 30 $\frac{1}{8}$  × 38 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (76.5 × 98.4 cm). The Art Institute of Chicago.

 [View the Closer Look](https://mysearchlab.com) to see another of Delacroix's paintings on mysearchlab.com

Portugal. In one of the most searing indictments of war in the history of art, Goya described, with reportorial vividness and personal outrage, atrocities committed on both sides of the conflict. While sympathetic to the modern ideas espoused by the great thinkers of the Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason, Goya was simultaneously preoccupied with the irrational side of human nature and its capacity for the most grotesque cruelty. Because of their inflammatory and ambivalent message, his etchings were not published until 1863, well after his death. During his lifetime Goya was not very well known outside Spain, despite his final years in voluntary exile in the French city of Bordeaux. Once his work had been rediscovered by Édouard Manet in the mid-nineteenth century it made a strong impact on the mainstream of modern painting.

The French Romantic movement really came into its own with **Eugène Delacroix** (1798–1863)—through his exploration of exotic themes, his accent on violent movement and intense emotion, and, above all, through his reassertion of Baroque color and emancipated brushwork (fig. 1.8). He brought the same qualities to more conventional subjects drawn from literature and history. Not surprisingly, Delacroix felt drawn to scenes taken from Shakespeare, whose characters often succumb to their passions for power or love. Delacroix's intensive study of the nature and capabilities of color derived not only from the Baroque but also from his contact with English painters such as John

Constable, Richard Bonington, and Joseph Mallord William Turner. His greatest originality, however, may lie less in the freedom and breadth of his touch than in the way he juxtaposed colors in blocks of mutually intensifying complementaries, such as vermilion and blue-green or violet and gold, arranged in large sonorous chords or, sometimes, in small, independent, “divided” strokes. These techniques and their effects had a profound influence on the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, particularly Vincent van Gogh (who made several copies after Delacroix) and Paul Cézanne.

### Landscape Painting

Fascinated with the awesome power of nature, Romantic artists were, not surprisingly, drawn to the genre of landscape painting. For some painters, the landscape offered a manifestation of the sublime, the rational workings of a deity; for others, a symbol of humanity's helplessness in the face of an irrational fate. Either way, the landscape served as a forceful vehicle for Romantic meditations on the limits of human understanding and the fragility of civilization. Landscape paintings were also much sought after by early nineteenth-century patrons, who could accommodate scenes of familiar as well as distant lands in their homes more easily than they could hang large-scale history paintings depicting arcane subjects from classical texts.

Although the main lines of twentieth-century painting are traditionally traced to French art, Romantic treatments of



1.9 Richard Parkes Bonington, *A Scene on the French Coast*, c. 1825. Watercolor and pencil on paper, 8¼ × 13⅜" (21.3 × 34.2 cm). Tate, London.

the landscape found their most characteristic manifestation in Germany. Indeed, there were critical contemporary developments in Germany, England, Scandinavia, and the Low Countries throughout much of the nineteenth century. One may, in fact, trace an almost unbroken Romantic tradition in Germany and Scandinavia—a legacy that extends from the late eighteenth century through the entire nineteenth century to Edvard Munch, the Norwegian forerunner of Expressionism, and the later German artists who admired him. Implicit in this Romantic vision is a sense that the natural world can communicate spiritual and cultural values, at times formally religious, at times broadly pantheistic.

Although landscape painting in France during the early nineteenth century was a relatively minor genre, by mid-century certain close connections with the English landscapists of the period began to have crucial effects. The painter **Richard Parkes Bonington** (1802–28), known chiefly for his watercolors, lived most of his brief life in France, where, for a short time, he shared a studio with his friend Delacroix. Bonington's direct studies from nature exerted considerable influence on several artists of the Romantic school, including Delacroix, as well as landscape painters associated with the Barbizon School, which will be discussed below. Although he painted cityscapes as well as genre and historical subjects, it was the spectacular effects of Bonington's luminous marine landscapes (fig. 1.9) that directly affected artists such as Johan Barthold Jongkind and Eugène Boudin, both important precursors of Impressionism (see fig. 2.27). Indeed, many of the English landscapists visited France and exhibited in the Paris Salons, while Delacroix spent

time in England and learned from the direct nature studies of the English artists. Foremost among these were **John Constable** (1776–1837) and **Joseph Mallord William Turner** (1775–1851). Constable spent a lifetime recording in paint those locales in the English countryside with which he was intimately familiar (fig. 1.10). The exhibition of several of his works, including his *The Hay Wain*, at the Paris Salon of 1824 brought him greater acclaim in France than he received in Britain. Delacroix, in particular, took to heart Constable's evocative brushwork and personal engagement with nature.

Though his paintings and the sketches he made from nature were the product of intensely felt emotion, Constable never favored the dramatic historical landscapes, with their sublime vision of nature, for which Turner was justifiably famous in his own day. Ambitious, prolific, and equipped with virtuosi technical skills, Turner was determined to make landscapes in the grand tradition of Claude Lorrain and Poussin, whose carefully constructed, Italianate landscapes defined classical landscape painting for over two centuries. Though both were French, each decided to pursue painting in the *campagna*, or countryside around Rome. Turner's first trip to Italy in 1819 was an experience with profound consequences for his art. In his watercolors and oils he explored his fascination with the often destructive forces of nature and the ever-changing conditions of light and atmosphere in the landscape. His dazzling light effects could include the delicate reflections of twilight on the Venetian canals or a dramatic view across the Thames of the Houses of Parliament in flames (fig. 1.11). Turner's painterly style could sometimes



**1.10** John Constable, *The Hay Wain*, 1819–21. Oil on canvas, 51¼ × 73" (130.2 × 190 cm). The National Gallery, London.

 **Watch** a video about Constable on [mysearchlab.com](https://mysearchlab.com)

verge on the abstract, and his paintings are especially relevant to developments in twentieth-century art.

The degree to which Turner's subjective exploration of nature led him toward abstraction did not deter John Ruskin from heralding the painter as the most significant of "modern" artists. Viewers looking today at Turner's *The Burning of the Houses of Parliament* alongside Whistler's

*Nocturne in Black and Gold* might wonder at Ruskin's rejection of the latter. Like Turner, Whistler gives the majority of his canvas to the striking play of light and color against the sky. Both painters appeal to technical experimentation to achieve the dramatic incendiary effects at the center of their paintings. One place where the two differ, however, is in their handling of space. Turner remains true to the classical



**1.11** Joseph Mallord William Turner, *The Burning of the Houses of Parliament*, 1834–35. Oil on canvas, 36½ × 48½" (92.7 × 123.2 cm). The Cleveland Museum of Art. Bequest of John L. Severance. 1942.647.

 **Explore** more about Turner on [mysearchlab.com](https://mysearchlab.com)

construction of pictorial space as divided into a clearly discernible fore-, middle-, and background. Despite its violent subject, his painting retains the balance and symmetry characteristic of classical works by Claude and Poussin. Whistler, on the other hand, abandons these conventions, plunging the viewer into an uncertain position *vis-à-vis* the flash of fireworks and their reflection on the surface of the river. What is more, Whistler's subject—the regular fireworks display over an amusement park popular among the working as well as middle classes—evokes the cheap and artificial pleasures of urban life. Turner's work instead conveys the awesomeness of nature—here, represented by the fire—which threatens to destroy a consummate symbol of civilization.

The principal French Romantic landscape movement was the Barbizon School, a loose group named for a village in the heart of the forest of Fontainebleau, southeast of Paris. The painters who went there to work drew from the seventeenth-century Dutch landscape tradition as well as that of England. Works by Bonington and Constable rather than Turner, however, had the greatest influence on the Barbizon painters. Thus, the emphasis continued to be on unified, tonal painting rather than on free and direct color. It was the interior of the forest of Fontainebleau, rather than the brilliant sunlight of the seashore, that appealed to them. This in itself could be considered a Romantic interpretation of nature, as the expression of intangibles through effects of atmosphere.

Among the artists most closely associated with the Romantic landscape of the Barbizon School was **Théodore Rousseau** (1812–67). Instead of following the classical

approach by visiting Italy and painting an idealized version of the *campagna*, Rousseau deliberately turned to the French landscape for his subjects. What is more, he refused to endow his landscapes with mythological or other narrative scenes. He painted pure landscapes, believing that nature itself provided more than sufficient thematic content. In the forests around Fontainebleau Rousseau distilled the essence of French culture and nationality; not surprisingly, the period of his greatest popularity coincided with the establishment of France's brief Second Republic (1848–52). In his *Edge of the Forest of Fontainebleau, Sunset* (fig. 1.12), Rousseau endows the scene with great intimacy by framing the view with trees that appear to bow as if acknowledging the presence of the viewer. The vegetation—especially the lone, backlit tree in the middle ground—seems more animated, more alive than even the cattle who staff the scene.

Other painters associated with the Barbizon School depended instead on a more literal human presence in order to animate their landscapes. **Jean-François Millet** (1814–75) peopled his landscapes with laborers, often treating them with a grandeur customarily reserved for biblical or classical heroes (fig. 1.13). As if to redeem the grinding poverty of unpropertied farm life, he integrated his field laborers into landscape compositions of Poussinesque grandeur and calm. Because of this reverence for peasant subjects Millet exerted great influence on Van Gogh (see Chapter 3).

In the end, both Neoclassicism and Romanticism (and, ultimately, modernism) can be seen as products of the Enlightenment. The eighteenth-century valorization of rationality, the faith in reason exhibited by such *philosophes*



1.12 Théodore Rousseau, *Edge of the Forest of Fontainebleau, Sunset*, 1850. Oil on canvas, 55 $\frac{7}{8}$  × 77 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (142 × 198 cm). Louvre, Paris.



**1.13** Jean-François Millet, *The Angelus*, 1857–59. Oil on canvas, 21½ × 25⅞" (55 × 66 cm). Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

 **Watch** a video about Millet on [mysearchlab.com](https://mysearchlab.com)

as Voltaire and Denis Diderot, undergirds the Neoclassical penchant for archeological accuracy, pictorial clarity, and even moral virtue. Through reason, the social as well as the natural order can be understood and, perhaps, even improved. Hence, rigorous academic training with its years of practice and emulation offered the most reliable guide to young painters. Yet, the Enlightenment had another face, a face that turned toward the emotional side of life. The *philosophe* Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that natural, unpoluted human emotions offered the surest means of understanding truth. For Rousseau, only by feeling something could one truly know it. This strand of the Enlightenment finds itself at the center of Romanticism, where truth is sought by turning inward, where subjective experiences are the surest markers of genius. Just as, for Rousseau, conventional schools offered only corruption and lies, academic

practices struck some Romantic artists as similarly contrary to their aims.

It can fairly be said, however, that both Neoclassicism and Romanticism nourish the roots of modernism. In fact, modernism might be best understood as a struggle between the forces of objective rationality and subjective expression. At certain points in the history of modern art, one or the other might seem to gain the advantage. But the tension between the two continues to exert its influence, and the other side is never far from revealing itself. This condition makes itself felt early in the nineteenth century with the appearance of another artistic mode of representation that contributed to the evolution of modernism: Realism. A literary as well as visual style, Realism pushed the Enlightenment penchant for dispassionate rationality and social improvement to its zenith.