

Romanticism **as Embodied by** Goya and Turner

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The Romantic movement in art spanned roughly the first half of the nineteenth century. As such, it was heavily influenced by the social and political revolutions that began in the previous century as an outgrowth of the so-called Age of Enlightenment. This influence extended to style, content, and subject matter of the art of this era. Stylistically, the Romantic movement was more open and free form than its predecessors, while the subject matter tended toward the everyday but in a powerful, out-of-control sense.

Francisco de Goya y Lucientes (1746-1828) was the most important Spanish painter of this movement. Goya represents the characteristics of the Romantic movement, particularly in subject matter but also in artistic style as well. Many of his works examined the human psyche, a popular area of artistic interest during the Romantic movement. His *Los Caprichos* (1799) etching series is one example, as shown in the third plate in the textbook. This etching illustrates childhood fears of the unknown, represented by the dark, frightening Bogeyman looming over the terrified children in the arms of their mother. *The Witches' Sabbath* (1798-99) expands upon this idea as well, by depicting the popular negative conceptions of witches and witchcraft in an exaggerated, almost mocking manner. Goya's later "black paintings," as exemplified by *Kronos Devouring One of His Children* (c. 1820-1822) are even more powerful examinations of psychological attitudes, illustrating the worst of human fears, that of parental betrayal.

Goya also examines the political and social views of the Enlightenment in his paintings. His portrait of *The Family of Charles IV* (1800) is mocking, satirical, portraying the Spanish royal family as ornately dressed puppets rather than as real, meaningful individuals. Though Spain had not yet overthrown and abolished its

monarchy in the manner of France and America, the eventuality is clear in the portrait. The subject matter of *The Executions of the Third of May* (1808) is a definite breakaway from the heroic subjects typical of Neoclassical works, depicting as it does the shameful massacre of close to a thousand Spanish civilians by the French military during Napoleon's occupation of Spain.

Compositionally, Goya's works lack the symmetry and balance of more Classically influenced pieces. Depth and use of space do not receive the detailed treatment seen in Renaissance works. The hills in the background of *The Witches' Sabbath* are merely indistinct forms lacking in any detail. *The Witches' Sabbath* is very vaguely pyramidal in form, with the apex of the pyramid being the goat horns atop the devil's head, but the pyramid loses its distinct form lower down in the picture. The steeple of the church in *The Executions of the Third of May* could have been the apex of a pyramid, but the form is blocked, overshadowed by the hill behind the victims. The arrangement of figures in both *The Family of Charles IV* and *The Executions of the Third of May* is very horizontal and very much limited to the foreground of the paintings.

Stylistically, we see the free, painterly brushstrokes characteristic of the Romantic movement in Goya's paintings in the indistinct figures behind the devil in *The Witches' Sabbath*, in the implied but indistinct details of the embellished clothing in *The Family of Charles IV*, and in the wild, frenzied hair and body of Kronos as he tears off a piece of his child's body. The use of light and shadow evokes a Baroque-like feeling, particularly in *The Executions of the Third of May* with the spotlighting of the central figure contrasting with the dark, hidden features of the firing squad. However, the Baroque use of spotlighting never evoked the emotional response of this painting, as the viewer sees

an ordinary man staring violent death in the face, with his compatriots around him knowing that they are surely next to die.

Finally, Goya's use of color, particularly the blood as seen in *The Executions of the Third of May* and in *Kronos Devouring His Children*, is very typical of the Romantic era. The vivid red in both paintings serves to emphasize the violence and emotion depicted.

Though Goya's approach to Romantic ideals was a common one, it was not the only one seen in the art of this era. English landscape painter Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851) shows another view of Romanticism in his depictions of nature. The Romantic era tended to view nature as potentially dangerous, untamed and untamable, rather than the tranquil portrayals of previous eras. *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons, October 16, 1834* (1835) shows a raging, out-of-control fire devouring everything in its path. Man-made structures are shown as no match for the forces of nature.

Turner's brushwork in both *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons* and in *Stonehenge* (1828) is very typical of the Romantic movement. In the former, the viewer does not see the details of flame, yet the expansive freedom of brushstrokes leads to no doubt that this is a major fire. Furthermore, most of the painting is hazy, almost monotone in color, but the vivid, dramatic oranges and yellows of the fire seize the viewer's eye and do not let it go. In fact, though the fire is actually in the background of the picture, the use of color and brush make the background primarily important – the foreground only serves to enhance the setting by reflecting the fire in the waters.

In *Stonehenge*, once again the viewer sees hazy, indistinct images, particularly in the sky and clouds. The impression is that of boiling, threatening stormclouds behind the sunlight, but nothing is clear. Stonehenge itself is misty, mystical, and mysterious, with unknown dangers lurking among the tilted pillars. The sheep in the foreground add to the impression of menace from nature by milling about uncertainly. The images of several foundering sheep¹ in the left foreground of the painting further enhance this impression. Finally, there is a human, perhaps the flock's shepherd, lying on the ground in the right foreground. It is not at all clear what has happened to this man, emphasizing the feeling that something is very wrong in this seemingly pastoral setting.

Though some years as well as an ocean separated Goya and Turner, and they lived under two different political systems, they shared many of the same influences of Romanticism and thus represent two different aspects of the art of this movement.

¹ Note: sheep do NOT normally lie down in that awkward fashion unless there is a problem.