

## Emerging Romantic Ideas in Landscape Art in the 19th Century

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Pre-romanticism in art has focused primarily on the distinction of man. The neo-classical era was about perfect human figures, heroic historic events, humanitarian themes of love and war, lust, and courage, and it idealized mankind controlling and conquering his surrounding environment which were primarily displayed in the genres of portrait and history, including mythological and biblical scenes. This changed, however, as the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed, and it is easy to notice that Romanticism has shifted largely not only stylistically, but the themes and ideas behind the art differ as well. The theme of nature and the contrast between man and nature, in which case nature is often displayed as more majestic, emerges in the Romantic era. It is a theme that is contradictory to the earlier ideas presented in Neo-classical Art, and began to incorporate more landscape art, biology art (wild animals), natural disasters and the littleness of man. It evoked a feeling of *sublime*, a sense of nature overpowering man. A number of prominent romantic painters have enlightened to these ideas, including John Constable, Joseph Mallord William Turner, Caspar David Friedrich, and Thomas Cole.

While many painters during this era travelled in search of Sublime scenery, John Constable painted the countryside landscapes near his childhood home. It was *démodé* to be painting the scenes of ordinary daily life and casual countryside scenery in a time when art searched for romantic visions, awe-inspiring expressions, and newborn ideas. Constable, however, justified himself when he wrote “I should paint my own places best” and “painting is but another word for feeling”. Constable tried to project new feelings that would arise in the viewer. Constable wanted to show that the beauty and sublime emotions are available to anyone, and can be found anywhere in the natural setting, even a scenery as simple as the countryside. This was the central idea in his works. Works such as *Wivenhoe Park* (1816) and *Cornfield* (1826) are prime examples of Constable’s simple agricultural scenery. His art style uses a lot of green, including numerous shades and crispness to portray not only the realistic aspects such as the lighting, but to evoke feeling through the balance of the colors as well. It is interesting to see the minor differences in Constable’s art. For example, *Dedham Vale* (1802) is similar to his very late works like *Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop’s Grounds* (1825) and *The Opening from the Waterloo Bridge as seen from Whitehall Stairs* (1832). The style presents more precise colors of green and different shading/lighting, giving it a more realistic view. This differs much greatly to *Hampstead Heath with Bathers* (ca 1821-22), which uses broad brushstrokes and very thick highlights.

An important aspect in identifying a Constable-painting, is visualizing the grandness of the sky. He described the sky as a “chief organ of sentiment” and has always made the sky a clear element in his painting, one that initiates a lot of the painting’s mood and expression. In around 1821-22, Constable entered his sky period, in which he painted the sky in numerous mediums including watercolor. It was during this time, where he used scientific methods and precision, studying the sky, clouds, and atmosphere, recording everything including date, time, wind, air-pressure, and weather conditions that his paintings were painted in. This was also an unusual thing that Constable unlike other artists. But Constables main goal was to paint the sky

expressively.

The many differences in Constable's painting coincides with his view--an idea that art is about feeling. Constable feels different things at different times (which explains why his paintings get very dark after his wife's death in 1828), and therefore he sees the world around him differently each time. He even wrote in a letter: "no two days are alike, nor even two hours; neither were there ever two leaves of a tree alike since the creation of all the world; and the genuine productions of art, like those of nature, are all distinct from each other."

Despite painting humble scenery of agricultural labor, cultivated land, and simply countryside scenery, Constable's view of art through his eyes, changed the view of art for the whole world.

Along with John Constable, British painter Joseph Mallord William Turner was a very controversial painter at this time. He oftentimes painted oil paintings but was also a well-renowned watercolor painter. His early works include a style of painting that can be generally summated in *Raby Castle, the Seat of the Earl of Darlington* (1817) and *Bonneville, Savoy, with Mont Blanc* (exhibited 1803). Although the texture and lighting are not the same, the latter being a little darker and more broad brushwork along with more contrasting shades, they do however display a general theme and express it with similar techniques. As displayed in these two paintings, Turner adds one side of the painting to be darker, or in the shade. It is common for Turner to use huge mountains or vast land in his landscape art, especially in comparison to the people in the painting, or man-made things (such as the Raby Castle). It is an idea that coincides with the Sublime. Emphasizing the grandeur of nature, especially in comparison to man. He almost always applies that concept when painting the sky, similarly to John Constable. (Turner also made a Study of the sky). The sky being an important aspect to this Sublime idea.

Besides the vast land and sky however, Joseph Mallord William Turner used the sea as well. In fact, the sea was a common scene in his works. Turner uses the sea to evoke the Sublime once again, and to express the nature's dominance over man. This is evident in his numerous paintings of storms at sea including *Shipwreck of the Minotaur* (ca. 1810) and *Calais Pier* (1803).

Similar to John Constable, Turner changed in technique drastically towards the end of his career. Comparing his earlier works such as *Shipwreck of the Minotaur* to a sea-themed painting like *Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth* (1842), one would be surprised to find that these were by the same artist. Tough-to-see, very non-descriptive and foggy, one may even describe Turner's later works as "messy". He was heavily criticized, having his later art described as "soapsuds and whitewash". Nonetheless, Turner's friend and art critic John Ruskin claimed that it is "one of the very grandest statements of sea-motion, mist and light, that has ever been put on canvas". The mix of grey, white and black parts painted with large brushwork caused Turner's style to be disliked by many. But Turner's central ideas remained the same throughout. He continued to paint the sea. Like or dislike Turner's style, no one can deny Turner's effort in expressing emotional meaning and a feeling of the sublime from nature. From that, Turner has even been considered as the pioneer of impressionism. As Ruskin once said, "He is the painter that can most truthfully measure the moods of Nature".

Although German artist Caspar David Friedrich painted his work in numerous genres, landscape scenery was a popular one amongst them. And while John Constable saw meaning in the sky, Joseph Mallord Turner in the sea, so did Caspar David Friedrich in the mountains. Of course, Friedrich's expressions lie in all parts of the nature-setting that he is painting, but many of his landscape paintings simply are painted in a way that Friedrich's effort in give a sense of magnificence in the mountains is evidently visible. His early works that indicate this include *Landscape in the Riesengebirge* (1810-11), *Morning in the Riesengebirge* (1811), and *Riesengebirge Landscape with Rising Fog* (1819-20). Unlike Constable and Turner, Caspar remained more consistent and continued painting mountains, while still incorporating the same techniques, in the later part of his career including *The Giant Mountains* (1830-35). An important aspect that Friedrich uses is the far distance of the mountains, and their relative size to the surrounding nature. *Landscape in the Riesengebirge* (1810-11) is particularly expressive of that. Another interesting identification of Friedrich's mountains are the use of a blend of purple with the bright sky behind the mountains. The rising fog is another common element that Friedrich adds to his paintings. These are common elements in all the mountain paintings previously listed.

The reason for Friedrich's common use of mountainous landscape deals with Friedrich's understanding in the Sublime. Friedrich provides a perspective in his art. In some instances, like the *Morning in the Riesengebirge* (1811) or the *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen* (ca. 1818), Friedrich places the viewer on top of the mountains. This gave the scenery a far distance towards an "endless sky", a common sublime theme. In other cases, the viewer felt the world's grandeur in the huge mountains that were in-line with them. In other words, the mountains were very big in comparison to everything else and gave the viewer a large distance in the landscape, such as *Landscape in the Riesengebirge*. Caspar even had paintings that put the viewer beneath the mountains, looking upwards such as in *The Cross in the Mountains* (1807-08). Awe and amazement are certainly felt through Friedrich's monumental mountains. *The Cross in the Mountains* is one of the many paintings that incorporates Friedrich's Christianity into the natural setting. This was done by a few painters during this time.

Endlessness in Friedrich's art appears in numerous mountainous landscapes. Like Turner, Friedrich viewed the sea as something endless, an aspect of nature that carried similar expressions as those that the mountains gave. *The Monk by the Sea* (1808-10) and *The Wanderer above the Sea Fog* (1817-18) were his most famous works and represent an ideal view of what the Sublime is. *The Monk by the Sea* displays primarily the colors purple, blue and white, but with different shading. One can see the use of purple in contrast to the bright white sky in this painting as he does with many mountain paintings. The sea is very dark, completely opposite to the sea in *The Wanderer above the Sea Fog*, which has the sea as light blue and is white and rushing water. Both paintings have a man facing their back to the viewer, looking outwards into the distance. Friedrich's intent for doing so was to make the viewer feel as though he is in the painting (and perhaps with the artist himself, as many claim that the Monk by the Sea and the Wanderer is Friedrich himself). His style in painting these were similar to Turner's early works, but with a little more thickness in the brushes and a little messier and erratic. The feeling of weakness and littleness of people is still conveyed through these paintings.

One writer summarized Friedrich and his Sublime and spiritualism in a paragraph: “How wonderful it is to sit completely alone by the sea under an overcast sky, gazing out over the endless expanse of water. It is essential that one has come there just for this reason, and that one must return. That one would like to go over the sea but cannot; that one misses any sign of life, and yet one senses the voice of life in the rush of the water, in the blowing of the wind, in the drifting of the clouds, in the lonely cry of the birds ... No situation in the world could be more sad and eerie than this—as the only spark of life in the wide realm of death, a lonely center in a lonely circle... Nevertheless, this definitively marks a totally new departure in Friedrich's art...”

Another German painter during this time was a completely different painter from Friedrich, Turner, or Constable. A most unusual painter, yet common during his time was Philipp Otto Runge. Runge was a Christian, and a Christian perspective is immediately seen incorporated into his art. Incorporating many more aspects such as biblical ideas, themes in nature, mythology, and classical and romantic artistic elements, Runge tried to combine many styles of arts together. *Morning* (1809-10) was the first of the planned series of paintings *Times of the Day*. However, it was the only one finished. His style of painting was very sharp, overwhelming, and full of symbolism. Nothing seems to be in a logical order, nor does the parts of his paintings seem to flow with one another, but rather as though they are all separate images. He uses a lot of common (basic) colors with not a lot of shades. In particular, he most often uses blue, yellow, and green. Lighting is also very important for Runge. A very light and bright setting is present in *Morning*. One can see that Runge incorporated many elements from renaissance painting such as the babies in the corners as well as romantic elements including the flowers, the broad wide sky, and the distant horizon. The border frame also makes the painting look as though it was completed in an earlier era of art. In particular, *Morning* is largely similar to Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* (1512). The borders and the babies at the bottom are very comparable to that as well. This interesting combination was not only about art styles, but in the themes and symbolism as well. Everything carried a symbol in *Morning*. Runge was particularly interested in colors and created the Color Sphere. Colors were symbolic to Runge. The colors blue, yellow and red were symbols of the Holy Trinity, blue was related to God and the night while red was the morning, evening was Jesus, and yellow was the Holy Spirit. Flowers is a nature's element that Runge was particularly interested in. He found symbolism in flowers as well as he believed that flowers symbolized human states. It is evident that he found them important due to his common use of them all around and inside the landscape scenery in *Morning*.

In summary, Philipp Otto Runge searched for harmony in nature and expressed this through symbolism and mysticism of religious ideas in visual elements such as forms, colors, and patterns. Runge combined religion and nature through many artistic styles, which together is considered his own. This is all expressed in his most famous painting *Morning*. He began late as an artist and died young, and so was not able to finish many artworks, including the other three of the *Times of the Day*.

Thomas Cole was an American landscape painter who reached success as an artist. He is best known for his romantic portrayals of American wilderness and incorporating what he sees with some Romantic ideas and themes. He painted a number

of paintings, but his paintings part of the series *The Voyage of Life*, and *The Course Empire*, can be considered his most remarkable paintings. They are all painted with the same style, but with different symbols in each one. *The Voyage of Life* is more blurry, smooth and a lot more darkness. *The Course Empire* is crisper and more decisive in the details of the landscape. It also carried less dramaticism in the nature itself, in particularly the sky. For example, the sky in *The Voyage of Life* is extremely powerful and different, not as simple, consistent and more ordinary in *The Course Empire*. The two series use the same colors and same balance when discussing the layout of the landscape. The lighting and shading is common in both as well.

*The Voyage of Life* consists of five paintings which were all painted in 1842. These include *Childhood*, *Youth*, *Manhood*, and *Old Age*. *Childhood* is a beautiful scenery in which a boat is floating across a narrow river, symbolizing a period of shelter and peace. *Youth* evokes an emotion of happiness and energy. It is a time when the young are full of imagination and dreams (represented by the white distant castle). *Manhood* is a darker setting, portraying the reality of life. A man in a boat is travelling across rapid waters with plenty of dark and bright areas contrasting one another (in life as well as in the painting). *Old Age* is showed by a light in the sky representing heaven, and the man on the boat is ready to leave the darkness that surrounds him.

*The Voyage of Life* is a somewhat darkening theme. In better terms, it leaves the viewer a sense of desolation. "Desolation" is the title of the last painting in *The Course Empire* (1834-36). It consists of five paintings that demonstrate the development of a civilization. *The Savage State* (1834), then *The Arcadian or Pastoral State* (1834), followed by *The Consummation of the Empire* (1836), leading to *The Destruction* (1836), and in the end-- *Desolation* (1836). These paintings told a story of the end of humanity and what the world would be like when all humans are gone. Moreover, it revealed humans as the cause of first building an empire and then destroying it. It is a very devastating romantic idea, but it is a Sublime idea, nonetheless. It is not portrayed in the same way as Turner, Constable, or Friedrich in terms of the distant magnificent natural setting, but rather it imposes a feeling of the Sublime through time. In fact, the hourglass was a symbol of time in *Childhood*. Cole expressed time as an important romantic idea in his art, and conveyed the theme of nature lasting over man, returning to its same state even after humans and their big changes on nature itself. Thomas Cole tried to make a "higher style of landscape" by adding in narratives seen in these two series.

The Romantic era presented new ideas of what art means. All these painters had something to say behind the scenery they painted. They all inclined towards feelings and expression and the sublime that nature could provide. Some artists claim that the sublime can be found a step outside your door-- anywhere, while others express their feelings in beautiful scenery or grand oceans. Some ideas expressed the undefeatable overpowering nature, while others demonstrated the destructions that humans are causing nature, and yet some search for the harmony viewed in the natural world. Whatever these artists inclined to convey, they all depict nature as the divine creation, but they always leave room for the viewers interpretation, and that's where lies their artistry.

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