The Large Bathers

**These nude figures** have such timeless grandeur that they seem to be “sliced out of mountain rock.” The memorable phrase comes from the great English sculptor Henry Moore, who first saw the painting in 1922, when he was a student. It made an indelible mark on him,

and 40 years later he recalled, “For me this was like seeing Chartres Cathedral.” Many other artists and critics have expressed similar feelings of awe about this picture—the largest Cézanne ever painted and one of the culminating works of his career. In it he combined majesty of form with subtle beauty of color and atmosphere, achieving his goal—in his own much-quoted words—“to make of Impressionism something solid and enduring, like the art of the museums.”

**Figures in a landscape**

The young Cézanne had a fiery temperament, and his early work included highly emotional scenes of violence and suffering. In the 1870s, however, he abandoned such subjects as he came under the influence of Impressionism. From this time his art was based almost entirely on the people and places of the world around him, but there was one imaginative theme that he did not give up—groups of nude figures in a landscape setting. He depicted such figures, generally called “Bathers,” throughout his career, in well over a hundred oils, watercolors, and drawings. The groups are usually exclusively male or female. Originally the scenes of female bathers were slightly erotic in feeling, but—as with his other subjects—they became mainly a vehicle for stylistic exploration.

Most of these works are fairly small, but in the final decade of his life Cézanne painted three large oils of female bathers that rank among his most ambitious works. The other two are in the Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pennsylvania, US, and the National Gallery, London. These two were possibly begun as early as about 1895 and were still being worked on by Cézanne just before his death in 1906 (it is often difficult to date his paintings because he worked slowly and sometimes intermittently, putting them aside for a time and then taking them up again).

The Philadelphia painting, on the other hand, may belong entirely to the final year of Cézanne’s life and was unfinished when he died.

**Subtle brushwork**

It is the grandest of the three paintings, the most serene and exalted in feeling, and the most beautiful and subtle in brushwork (in spite of its unfinished state). The whole surface is alive with vibrant touches, and the figures are wonderfully harmonized with their setting, as if sky, trees, and human flesh were all made of the same mysterious substance. This concern with the overall feel and balance of the picture surface was at the heart of Cézanne’s great legacy to modern art. It led the way from naturalism to such developments as Cubism and abstract art.

Van Gogh’s ChairVan Gogh’s Chair

**Looks can be deceptive.** At first glance, van Gogh’s painting of a simple rustic chair appears to be a straightforward still life—the kind of picture that

might have been created in a calm atmosphere, with no emotional or symbolic overtones. In reality, it was painted just a few weeks before van Gogh’s breakdown, at a time when his friendship with Paul Gauguin (see pp.182–85) was disintegrating.

When van Gogh moved to Arles, in the south of France, in February 1888 he hoped that it might become the center of an artists’ colony. Gauguin’s arrival that year seemed a promising start. Van Gogh was delighted. He bought furniture for the house and started painting in a frenzy, to show the Frenchman how far his art had progressed. Unfortunately, it was not long before the dream turned sour. Gauguin had come mainly for practical reasons, as van Gogh’s brother was helping him financially, and he rapidly regretted his decision. He disliked the town, feeling “very much a stranger in Arles,” and soon quarreled with his host: “Vincent and I generally agree on very little, above all when it comes to painting….”

Van Gogh painted two pictures of chairs—his own and Gauguin’s—in early December 1888, when it seemed likely that his visitor would leave. It is possible that he thought they might persuade Gauguin to stay, but more probable that they were a sad acknowledgment of the two men’s irreconcilable differences.

**A coded portrait**

Van Gogh may well have borrowed the idea of using an empty chair as a form of symbolic portrait from a wellknown illustration by the British artist Luke Fildes, showing the chair in which Charles Dickens died. The objects on Van Gogh’s chairs were definitely designed

I cannot help that my pictures do not sell. Nevertheless the

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| time will come when people will see that they are worth more than the price of the paints and my own living |
| **VAN GOGH** LETTER, 1888 |

VINCENT **VAN GOGH**

1853–90

Neglected during his lifetime, van Gogh has since become celebrated as one of the world’s most popular painters and a major influence on modern art.

Vincent van Gogh was born in the Netherlands, but spent much of his brief career in France. He worked as a clerk, a teacher, and a lay preacher, before devoting himself to art in 1880. His early work was dark and naturalistic, but his style was transformed after he moved to Paris in 1886. There, he came into contact with the Impressionists and other progressive artists. His palette lightened and he absorbed the influence of Japanese prints. In 1888, van Gogh moved to Arles, his “Japan of the South.” Most of his greatest masterpieces date from this final period, when he worked at a furious pace, completing hundreds of canvases. The strain, coupled with a disastrous visit from Gauguin, triggered a breakdown. Van Gogh made a partial recovery, but committed suicide the following year.

SCALE

to identify the sitters. It is also likely that van Gogh had intended the pictures to be a vindication of his art. Gauguin had encouraged him to paint from imagination, rather than from nature. Van Gogh had tried, but found the results unsatisfactory. So, while Gauguin’s chair was depicted in dark, artificial conditions, his own was plain and simple, but fulfilled all his needs. As such, it echoed his artistic philosophy: “I cannot work without a model… I exaggerate, sometimes I make changes, but I do not invent the whole picture…I find it all ready in nature.

The Dancing Class

**This beautiful painting** is full of movement, color, and charming details. From a position in the left-hand corner of the room, just behind the piano, you see the ballerinas of the Paris Opera in rehearsal. This unusual viewpoint helps to create the illusion that you are standing next to Degas, sharing his privileged access to the ballet class. From the piano, you look along the line of dancers right to the back of the room and, like the artist, can observe each ballerina in turn.

Degas produced several paintings of the young ballerinas of the Paris Opera performing on stage, but he much preferred to depict them in the more relaxed setting of the rehearsal room, where he was a frequent visitor. He spent many hours observing and drawing the dancers as they practiced, and it is this sense of being present during the ballerinas’ daily routine that gives The Dancing Class such an intimate quality. Although the painting appears relaxed and informal, Degas constantly refined and perfected his work once he was back in his studio. In its apparent spontaneity and realism, the painting resembles a snapshot—and Degas was familiar with the latest advances in photography—but its seemingly casual composition was meticulously arranged. X-rays of the painting indicate that some

figures were moved from one position to another until Degas achieved the perfect degree of balance and the right atmosphere.

**Respect for the classics**

The Dancing Class is a contemporary scene that pays homage to the style of the old masters, whose techniques and draftsmanship Degas greatly admired.

As a young man, he spent a great deal of time in the Louvre, studying and copying masterpieces by painters such as Velázquez. It was not until his late twenties, however, that Degas stopped depicting historical or mythological themes in his own work and turned his attention to painting scenes of 19th-century Parisian society, from horse racing to theater and ballet. In emulating the style of great classical works but applying it to less elevated subjects, such as young

girls practicing their dancing skills, Degas was breaking with convention and his work came under strong criticism from the French art establishment.

Degas was the one Impressionist who was successful from the beginning and, although he remained rather aloof from them, he did exhibit in group shows. Like the other Impressionists, he sought to convey a sense of movement and spontaneity in his work. In The Dancing Class, the girls appear to have been captured unawares and their gestures and expressions appear completely natural, an effect Degas achieves with his superb drawing skills and confident sense of composition. He also employs other devices to suggest movement, such as the bright red accents in the painting that lead from the girl’s hair decoration and the fan in the foreground to the collar of the teacher, and then to the sashes of the two dancers towards the back of the room.

Watching rehearsals, Degas

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| had an opportunity of seeing bodies from all sides in the most varied attitudes |

Arrangement in Grey

and Black, No. 1

**Grave and pensive,** the elderly woman sits in a rigidly formal pose, her hands clasping a white lace handkerchief. Her grey hair is flat and neat, her dark clothes are plain and puritanical. The feeling of austerity is underlined by the subdued color scheme and the strong horizontals and verticals of elements such as the picture frames, the long curtain, and the deep skirting board. Yet for all its severity, a sense of fragile but dignified humanity glows through the painting. Its full title is Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1: Portrait of the Artist’s Mother, but it is familiarly known as Whistler’s Mother and has become enduringly popular as an archetypal image of a sober but sincere matriarch.

**Art for art’s sake**

The artist’s mother, Anna McNeill Whistler (1804–81), was widowed in 1849. She left America in 1863 to escape the Civil War and moved to London to live with her son. A few years after this, he began using musical terms—such as symphony, nocturne, or, as here, arrangement—in the titles of his paintings. This practice expressed his belief that painting was more concerned with formal qualities—lines, shapes, colors— than the ostensible subject. Other artists of the time shared this view, but Whistler was a particularly strong and influential spokesman for the “art for art’s sake” doctrine because of his personal magnetism and his way with words. “As music is the poetry of sound, so is painting the poetry of sight, and the subject matter has nothing to do with the harmony of sound or of color,” he wrote in 1878; and at the same time he commented on this work, “to me it is interesting as a picture of my mother; but what can or ought the public to care about the identity of the portrait?”

Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. 1 was first exhibited at the Royal Academy, London, in 1872. Initially the selection committee rejected it, but Sir William Boxall, the Director of the National Gallery,

London, and a friend of Whistler, used his influence to have it accepted. In general the portrait was poorly received, but it also had admirers, notably the great writer Thomas Carlyle, who thought it had “massive originality.” Soon afterward, Whistler painted a portrait of Carlyle in a similar vein, Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. 2 (1872–73). In 1891, it was bought by the City of Glasgow in Scotland, making it the first Whistler painting to be acquired by a public collection. This was a milestone in Whistler’s fortunes, and later that year the portrait of his mother was bought by the French state, which had made him a knight of the Légion d’Honneur in 1889.

Olympia

**Dating to the most controversial part** of Manet’s career, this provocative picture helped to establish him as a major force on the French art scene, introducing a new slant on traditional themes. There was nothing unusual about nudity itself—mildly erotic scenes of ancient nymphs and goddesses were a common sight in French exhibition halls. However, Olympia did not fall into this category. The model in the painting might be emulating the pose of Titian’s Venus of Urbino (see p.163), but she was far less respectable. In the eyes of the critics, she was too modern, too ugly, too real and, as such, an affront to public morality.

**The revolt against academic art**

For much of the 19th century, standards in French art were rigidly controlled. Artists wishing to display their work at the Salon—the official public exhibition in Paris—had to submit their entries to a jury. By the 1860s, resentment was growing against this scrutiny. In 1863, permission was granted for a Salon des Refusés (Salon of Rejected Works). Manet’s Déjeuner sur l’herbe, 1863, was the star of the show. The critics ridiculed it, but it brought the artist overnight fame.

Manet painted Olympia at roughly the same time but did not submit it until 1865. The picture was accepted but, as with Déjeuner sur l’herbe, reaction was hostile, largely due to Manet’s subversion of the academic process. Both images were loosely based on famous Renaissance paintings. But Manet was also influenced by the Realist trends pioneered in the 1850s by Gustave Courbet (see pp.156–59). Courbet had argued that art could only represent “real and existing objects.”

So, Manet translated his Renaissance fantasies into modern idioms. For Olympia, he could not depict a naked, reclining goddess, so he transformed his nude into the nearest, present-day equivalent.

EDOUARD **MANET**

1832–83

One of the key figures of 19th-century art, Manet gained a scandalous reputation with his unique brand of Realism. His adventurous methods endeared him to the Impressionists, though he was never an official member of their group.

Manet came from a well-heeled, middle-class background, and trained under Thomas Couture, a successful academic artist. Couture made a careful study of the old masters and craved recognition at the Salon, the most prestigious exhibiting body in France. In spite of such conventional roots, Manet produced works that were controversial and original. In the early 1860s, he gained considerable notoriety when Déjeuner sur l’herbe and Olympia were pilloried as immoral spectacles. As the decade wore on, Manet became something of an elder statesman figure for the young Impressionist circle. He did not share their enthusiasm for painting in the open air, but his memorable scenes of modern Parisian life proved an inspiration for the movement.

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| It wasn’t just the fact that…she’s a lower class nude, but also…she was painted in…an almost childish or unskilled fashion |
| **ANNE MCCAULEY** THE SHOCK OF THE NUDE, 2010 |

162 1800–1900

Visual tour

**KEY**

4 **TORSO** To modern audiences, it may seem surprising that the form of the model’s torso came in for particularly hostile criticism. The art lovers of the time

were used to seeing sculptural, well-rounded, and idealized figures. Olympia’s body, on the other hand, was far too realistic for their tastes. In addition, a number of critics commented unfavorably on Olympia’s coloring. One noted that her “flesh tones were grubby,” while another described her as an “odalisque with a yellow stomach.”

1 **VICTORINE-LOUISE MEURENT**

Manet used his favorite model, Victorine Meurent, to convey his vision of Olympia. She was no stranger to controversy, having already gained notoriety as the naked picnicker in Manet’s breakthrough picture, Déjeuner sur l’herbe. Meurent was not a conventional beauty, but her spirited personality created the desired effect. Her self-assured gaze shocked the Parisian public, reinforcing the impression that Manet’s subject was a hardened prostitute. Meurent herself was a painter, and several of her works were exhibited at the Salon.

1 **BOUDOIR SLIPPERS** One of the silk shoes that the girl is wearing has slipped off her foot. Although apparently nothing more than a casual detail, the wearing of a single slipper was a conventional symbol of lost innocence. Accordingly, this tallied with the immoral interpretations of the model’s nudity.

2 **HAND OVER GENITALIA** In both standing and reclining versions of the female nude, this coy gesture is a standard feature of the Venus pudica (modest Venus). The pose was extremely common in classically inspired academic art, but its effect is jarring in Manet’s picture, as the woman’s candid stare is anything but modest.

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OLYMPIA  EDOUARD MANET 163

1Venus of Urbino, Titian, 1538, oil on canvas, 46¾ × 65in (119 × 165cm),

The Artist’s Studio

**This enormous picture** is probably the most elaborate piece of self-advertisement ever painted. Courbet shows himself at work in a cavernous studio, in the midst of a

varied and enigmatic crowd of people. It is a dramatically arresting scene, painted with magnificent breadth and assurance, but while the individual figures are vividly

SCALE

THE ARTIST’S STUDIO  GUSTAVE COURBET 157

portrayed, collectively they make no obvious sense. Who are all these people and why have they gathered here? Courbet wrote a lengthy description of the painting, but his language is often unclear and open to varied interpretations. What is not in doubt is that this is one of the central masterpieces of 19th-century painting.

The picture was created for the great Exposition Universelle held in Paris in 1855. However, it was rejected by the selection committee, so Courbet—a man of immense self-confidence—staged his own

one-man exhibition in a “Pavilion of Realism” he erected at his own expense alongside the official show. Courbet’s exhibition was unsuccessful both commercially and critically, but nevertheless it has a momentous place in art history. By challenging the authority of the institutional art world, he led the way for others, including the Impressionists, to follow.

Although Courbet was avowedly a Realist, his paintings often have symbolic aspects, and he gave The Artist’s Studio a rather baffling subtitle—A real allegory summing up seven years of my artistic and moral life. He wrote that the figures on the left represented “the world of commonplace life—the masses, wretchedness, poverty, wealth, the exploited, the exploiters, those who thrive on death.” On the right are “my friends, fellow workers, and art lovers”—those who “thrive on life.”

GUSTAVE **COURBET**

1819–77

Courbet changed the course of French art by bringing a new grandeur and seriousness to scenes of everyday life, and by exhibiting his work outside the traditional venues.

Courbet was born in Ornans, eastern France, into a prosperous farming family. This background was important, for although he worked mainly in Paris, he often depicted earthy, rural subjects. He became famous in 1850 when he exhibited three remarkable paintings at the Paris Salon, most notably The Burial at Ornans, a huge and defiantly unidealized scene of country life. These works established him as the leader of the Realist movement, in which artists believed that everyday life could provide subject matter just as serious as the traditional major themes of history, religion, and mythology.

Courbet’s radical views also came out in his politics. After France was overwhelmingly defeated in the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71), Paris was ruled for two months by a revolutionary government called the Commune, in which Courbet was head of the arts commission. When the Commune was crushed, he was imprisoned for six months. Fearing further punishment, he moved permanently to Switzerland in 1873. In addition to his ambitious figure compositions, he painted landscapes and portraits.

It’s my way of seeing

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| society with all its interests and passions; it’s the whole world coming to meto be painted |

The Fighting Temeraire

**Like an apparition,** the glimmering spectacle of a tall-masted gunship glides toward us on the still waters of the

river Thames. The Fighting Temeraire immortalizes the ship on her final journey, which took place 33 years after the Battle of Trafalgar. The Temeraire had played a heroic role in the battle, coming to the aid of Lord Nelson’s ship the Victory when it was locked in close combat. Despite her aura of magnificence, the ship is now in a poor state of repair. Stripped of anything salvageable, she is being towed from Sheerness to Rotherhithe shipyard where she will be broken up. A white flag flies from the tug, symbolizing the Temeraire’s sad surrender to the breaker’s yard.

**A moving tribute**

Although the Union Jack no longer flies from the mast, the Temeraire’s past bravery is acknowledged by Turner in this idealized, theatrical vision. Artistic license has allowed him to manipulate events and he shows the ship traveling east, with a glorious sunset behind her, whereas in real life she would have been traveling west, as Rotherhithe is west of Sheerness.

Many factors combine to make this work so memorable and moving: the sublime setting, the harmonious balance of the composition, the extraordinary quality of light, and the emotion inherent in the visual symbols. A metaphor for the journey of life, the demise of this aged sailing ship represents the end of an era; even the black buoy in the foreground seems to act as a full stop. Turner was in his sixties when he made the painting and perhaps the powerful sentiments echo his own feelings about the passage of time.

When the work was first exhibited, in 1839 at the Royal Academy in London, the nostalgia of the occasion was enhanced by the inclusion in the catalog of two lines from Thomas Campbell’s emotionally charged poem Ye Mariners of England: “The flag which braved the battle and

the breezes, No longer owns her.” The critics of the day were united in their praise of a painting that not only celebrated a contemporary historical event but also successfully embraced the techniques of the old masters, particularly those of Claude, the 17th-century French landscape painter (c.1604–82), whom Turner admired. The artist refused to sell The Fighting Temeraire, calling it “my old darling”, and the work was recently voted the most popular painting in Britain.

J. M. W. **TURNER**

1775–1851

The most original artist in the history of English landscape painting, Turner was fascinated by the effects of light.

A gifted and imaginative child, Joseph Mallord William Turner first exhibited a painting at the Royal Academy, London, when he was only 15 years old.

Turner traveled widely and produced a vast amount of work. His style varied considerably over the years, ranging from accurate, topographical watercolors in his early years to grand landscapes in the classical manner that he painted after visiting Italy. By 1805, increasingly influenced by Romanticism, his paintings became freer and more expressive as he sought to capture the power of nature in luminous landscapes depicting violent storms and blizzards. Turner’s work was criticized for lack of formal composition, but it also attracted great admirers, notably the critic John Ruskin, who championed his work. When Turner died in 1851, he bequeathed much of his work to the British nation.

…slow, sad, and majestic, follows the brave old ship,

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| with death, as it were, written on her |
| **WILLIAM MAKEPIECE THACKERAY** BALLADS AND MISCELLANIES, 1899 |

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Visual tour

**KEY**

3 **GHOSTLY SHIP** The 98-gun, three-decked Temeraire had been moored off the port of Sheerness for several years. Her three masts had been removed, together with all her rigging, and paint was peeling off her timbers. Turner, however, has chosen to present us with an elegant, romantic vision in white and gold, complete with masts—a more fitting farewell for a ship whose name means bold and fearless.

2 **INDUSTRIAL TUG** On the day of her final voyage, another boat was following the Temeraire. Turner has chosen to exclude it, possibly to emphasize the contrast between the ugly, blackened, steam-powered tug and the majestic white sailing ship. The tug has been interpreted as a symbol of the evils of the British Industrial Revolution but Turner’s other work does not support this. On the contrary, Turner embraced the steam-powered engineering of the future in his 1844 painting Rain, Steam and Speed—The Great Western Railway, a celebration of the age of the train.

4 **SHIP IN FULL SAIL** On the horizon, just to the right of the tug, you can just make out the shape of another ghostly sailing ship. Turner may have included it to remind us how the Temeraire must have appeared in her full glory. However, this tall-masted ship has almost faded from view, so perhaps it serves to reinforce the theme of the painting: the end of the era of the sailing ship and the irrevocable transition to the age of steam power.

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1800–1900

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4 **RISING MOON** A sliver of moon is visible in the sky at the top left of the painting. Its reflection lights up the water beneath, glinting on the rolled-up sails on the masts and on the foam churned up by the paddles of the tug. The silvery light reinforces the ethereal paleness of the ship and contrasts strongly with the fiery tones of the setting sun.

3 **FLAMING SUNSET** The setting sun is symbolic, representing the passing of the age of sail as well as the demise of the Temeraire. The blood-red sky, reflected in the surface of the water, perhaps reminds us of the sacrifices made by the British navy at the Battle of Trafalgar. The Temeraire is positioned well to the left of the painting but its visual weight is perfectly balanced by the glowing sunset that dominates the whole right side of the composition. Notice how thickly the paint has been applied above and around the sun, using a technique called impasto.

2 **HUMAN LIFE** In the blues and greys in the right-hand corner of the painting, you can just make out the silhouette of a vertical figure standing on a boat. The figure has probably been included to give an idea of scale and help to establish the sheer size of the Temeraire. The boats and buildings in the distance also add a human element to the painting.

6

ON **TECHNIQUE**

Turner’s landscapes were influenced by the work of Claude, whose fascination with the qualities of light he shared. Turner painted the sun-drenched clouds in The Fighting Temeraire using a technique he learned from Claude. He applied very thin layers of semi-transparent white and yellow oil paint over the darker blue, orange, and red to give the clouds a translucent appearance.

Turner left his works to the British nation on the understanding that some of them be hung next to those of Claude. Dido Building Carthage and Sun Rising Through Vapour are displayed alongside Claude’s Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba (below) and Landscape with the Marriage of Isaac and Rebecca.

THE FIGHTING TEMERAIRE  J. M. W. TURNER

1Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba, Claude, 1648, 59 × 77½in (149.7 × 196.7cm), National Gallery, London, UK

1Dido Building Carthage, J. M. W. Turner, 1815, 61¼ × 90½in (155.5 × 230cm), National Gallery, London, UK

The Temeraire played a key part in one of the most famous sea battles in British naval history, the Battle of Trafalgar. On October 21, 1805, the British navy, led by Lord Nelson, was engaged in combat with a fleet of French and Spanish ships off the Cape of Trafalgar, south of Cadiz, Spain. Under the command of Captain Eliab Harvey, the Temeraire came to the rescue of Nelson’s flagship, the Victory, and also captured two French ships. In four and a half hours, the British navy captured over half the enemy ships and one was destroyed. During the fighting, Lord Nelson was fatally wounded, but was informed that the battle had been won and the threat of invasion by Napoleon’s forces averted.

Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog

**In this haunting painting**, a lone figure stands on a pinnacle of rock, contemplating an awe-inspiring Alpine landscape. Nearby rocky peaks loom up out of the dissolving sea of mist, and a distant mountain rises majestically above the scene against a luminous sky.

The scene is based on sketches of mountains that Friedrich made while staying in Switzerland, but the dense fog obscures what lies between the mountains, creating a sense of mystery. Compositionally, the man is standing right in the middle of the painting, and the horizontal lines of rocks and distant mountain slopes all lead toward him. The striking contrast in tone between the dark silhouette of the man on the rock and the pallor of the fog and sky adds to the impact of the image.

The painting may have been a posthumous tribute to a colonel in the Saxon Infantry—the central figure stands upright and heroic as he contemplates the scene before him—but it can be interpreted in many ways: as a symbol of man’s yearning for the unattainable or as an allegory

of the journey through life. The work encapsulates Romantic ideas about man’s place in the world—the isolation of the individual when faced with the sublime forces of nature. As such, it has become an iconic image of the Romantic individual.

Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog

c.1818  OIL ON CANVAS  38½ × 29½in (98 × 75cm)  KUNSTHALLE, HAMBURG, GERMANY

CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH

1800–1900

Visual tour

**KEY**

1 **ROCKY PEAKS** The mountain tops break out of the fog like jagged rocks emerging from the sea. Because the fog obscures the lower-lying landscape, you have no sense of how near or far away the mountains really are. The tiny trees just visible on some of the peaks are the only thing to provide a true sense of scale.

4 **THE WANDERER** Friedrich’s solitary figure has his back to us, giving him complete anonymity, and gazes down at the scene before him. From his stance, he appears calm and self-possessed, but it is left to us to imagine his expression or his attitude to the dramatic landscape before him

The Third of May 1808

outside a city where ghostly, fortresslike buildings are silhouetted against the night sky. Dense blackness, without stars or moonlight, fills almost a third of the composition and intensifies the nightmarish quality of the scene.

Goya’s compelling painting shows the cruel fate of a group of civilians who had risen up in rebellion against the occupying French army during the Peninsular War in Spain (1808–14). Following a day of violent insurrection on the streets of Madrid, the French soldiers rounded up rebels and innocent bystanders caught up in the conflict and shot them the following day—the date of the painting’s title. Nationwide uprisings and guerilla warfare followed.

**Brutality of war**

In this painting, Goya not only created a lasting tribute to the bravery of the Spanish rebels, he also created a revolutionary image of the dehumanizing effect of war. Braced to carry out their task, the soldiers have their heads down, but the terror on the faces of those about to be slaughtered, and their helpless gestures, are depicted with heartbreaking eloquence. Unlike other contemporary painters, such as Jacques-Louis David (see p.132), Goya did not try to glorify war in this painting, or in its companion work, The Second of May 1808. This is a shocking image of an act of atrocity and a graphic condemnation of man’s inhumanity to man.

The tight composition of Goya’s painting increases the sense of doom. Ranged diagonally on the right, the soldiers form an impenetrable barrier.

THE THIRD OF MAY 1808  FRANCISCO DE GOYA

**A defenseless man** kneels in front of a firing squad, his brilliant white shirt reflecting the light of the single lantern on the ground. With arms thrown open in a powerful yet tragic gesture—the symbolic pose of the crucified Christ—he faces a solid wall of uniforms and guns. This is a scene of brutal execution on a bare hillside

This is the first great picture

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| which can be calledrevolutionary in every sense of the word, in style, in subjec and in intention |
| **KENNETH CLARK** LOOKING AT PICTURES, 1960 |

FRANCISCO DE **GOYA**

1746–1828

The Spanish painter and printmaker Goya was one of the outstanding figures of the Romantic movement. He created portraits of the aristocracy as well as extraordinary etchings.

Born the son of a master gilder in Saragossa, Spain, Goya was apprenticed at 14. He later settled in Madrid, where he designed cartoons for royal tapestries and began to make a living as a portraitist, becoming painter to the court in 1789. Goya was inspired by the paintings of Velázquez (see p.98) but developed his own innovative style, bringing out the character of his royal and aristocratic sitters with an honesty that was not always flattering. In 1792, a severe illness left Goya permanently deaf. While a court painter, he created a series of disturbing satirical etchings called Los Caprichos (The Caprices) in 1799, including The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters. His other great series of prints, The Disasters of War, published after his death, depicted atrocities on both sides during the French occupation. In his last years Goya painted his famous murals known as the Black Paintings. He died in France.

Facing them, the heroic central figure and his ragged compatriots are on their knees, and a long file of the condemned men who are next in line straggle uphill. Goya’s colors are muted and somber, there are pools of deep shadow, and fine detail is scarce. Your attention is focused on the man in the white shirt, and the awful inevitability of his next moment.

Goya painted The Third of May 1808 six years after the actual event portrayed. He asked for a commission from the newly restored Spanish monarch, Ferdinand VII, to commemorate the insurrection against the French in two companion works. The commission was agreed and Goya made his two paintings, but this one, his masterpiece, was not appreciated at first and it was put in storage for 40 years. When it finally surfaced, the painting proved a source of inspiration to other artists. It remains to this day one of the most famous paintings of the atrocities of war.

The Death of Marat

**Propaganda rarely produces great art**, but this is a notable exception. In this stark yet moving picture, David mourns the death of a close friend and fellow revolutionary. The victim, Jean-Paul Marat, was a leading member of the National Convention—the short-lived governing body in France during the Reign of Terror, the most violent days of the Revolution. His extreme views made him many enemies, particularly after the fall of the Girondins (one of the more moderate factions).

On July 13, 1793, one of their supporters, a young woman named Charlotte Corday, was granted an audience with him in his bathroom. This was not unusual. Marat suffered from a debilitating skin condition that required him to take frequent baths, so he used the place as an office. During the meeting, Corday pulled out a knife and stabbed him to death. At her trial, she proclaimed, “I killed one man to save 100,000 lives.” On July 17, she was sent to the guillotine.

**A revolutionary tribute**

On the day after Marat’s murder, David was invited by the Convention to arrange the funeral ceremony and to paint a memorial for the dead man. He began work immediately and had completed the picture by November. David was the obvious choice for this task, partly because he knew Marat very well and shared his ideals, and partly because his rigorous, Neoclassical style was well suited to the moral gravitas required for such a theme.

David stripped the scene down to its essentials. He removed the ornate decor of Marat’s bathroom and replaced it with a darkened void. This may have been inspired by the gloomy lighting in the Cordeliers (a former church), where the victim’s body lay in state. David exchanged Marat’s unusual, boot-shaped bath for a more traditional design and focused the viewer’s attention on the limp, dangling arm in the foreground, deliberately conjuring up associations with the pose of Christ’s body as he was lowered from the Cross. The artist may also have been inspired by memories of an ancient sculpted relief known as the Bed of Polycleitus. After the Revolution, the painting proved an embarrassment to

This work contains something

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| both poignant and tender; a soul is taking flightin the chill air of this room, within these cold walls, around this cold funerary tub |
| **CHARLES BAUDELAIRE** SALON DE 1846, 1846 |

the new regime and in 1795 it was returned to David. It was not exhibited again in France until 1846, 21 years after David’s death, when the poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire’s lyrical praise restored its reputation

An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump

**Dramatically lit** by a single brilliant light source that produces an extraordinary play of shadows, this compelling painting depicts an unusual domestic scene. A family group is watching the progress of a scientific experiment that is being performed in front of them at night. The responses of the audience are skillfully captured and their exquisitely illuminated faces express a range of human emotions. Life-size and painted

in a highly polished style that looks almost photographic, An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump is one of Joseph Wright of Derby’s famous and original “candlelight” scenes.

This painting was created during a period of major scientific activity in 18th-century Europe. At the time, it was fashionable for scientists to travel with their equipment and perform demonstrations at country houses— events that were entertaining as well as educational. Wright took a keen interest in the new scientific discoveries: he had probably attended lectures and also sought to promote interest among the wealthy classes in the innovations of the day. In his painting, a living bird has been enclosed in a large, glass flask and the air then pumped out to create a vacuum. The experiment has been set up to demonstrate the effect on living creatures when they are deprived of air. We are witnessing the make-or-break moment when the scientist can choose to reintroduce air into the flask to revive the dying bird or let it perish. We can never know the outcome and Wright offers few clues. This sense of uncertainty and the emotional reactions of the group heighten the human drama of the painting.

**Effects of light**

By means of strongly contrasting light and shadow, the technique known as chiaroscuro, Wright immediately engages our attention, directing our focus on the dramatically illuminated figures that are sharply outlined against the gloom of the background. The white-haired, magicianlike scientist, his right hand at the top of the flask, looks directly out at us from the

Everyone is illuminated by a

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| single source of light…all of them, and us, are capable of being enlightened by the power of science |
| **ROBERT CUMMING** ART EXPLAINED, 1995 |

JOSEPH **WRIGHT OF DERBY**

1734–97

The first major English painter to base his career outside London, Wright excelled at unusual subjects characterized by dramatic light and shadow.

Wright, the son of an attorney, was born—as his name suggests—in the Midlands town of Derby. He spent two periods in London training as a portrait painter before settling in his native town, where his reputation was soon established. Although Wright went on to paint industrial scenes and landscapes, portraiture was a consistent and reliable source of income throughout his career.

In the 1760s, Wright began to experiment with chiaroscuro in his paintings. His candlelit scenes displayed flair and originality and were justly celebrated, especially the two depicting serious scientific themes: A Philosopher Giving a Lecture on the Orrery and An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump, exhibited in 1766 and 1768 respectively. Wright continued his exploration of unusual lighting effects in his landscapes, such as Grand Fire Work at the Castel of St. Angelo, Rome, c.1775, and his views of Vesuvius erupting, which he witnessed in 1774. Apart from short periods in Liverpool and Bath and a visit to Italy from 1773 to 1775, Wright spent his later career working in Derby.

painting. With his penetrating stare, he is immediately captivating. The brightly lit faces and gestures of each of the onlookers—especially the children—register distress, concern, and even detachment. The background of the painting is in shadow, except for a second light source— the full moon in the window on the far right.

Wright was fascinated by the depiction of lighting effects—a preoccupation he held throughout his life, whether he was painting scenes of the Industrial Revolution in Britain or Mount Vesuvius erupting in Italy. The originality of An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump lies in his mastery of light combined with a highly unconventional subject. It is his best-known painting and a wonderful insight into the age of the European Enlightenment.