The 19th century saw the writings of many French authors. Victor Hugo is sometimes seen as "the greatest French writer of all time"[313] for excelling in all literary genres. Hugo's verse has been compared to that of Shakespeare, Dante and Homer.[314] His novel Les Misérables is widely seen as one of the greatest novels ever written[315] and The Hunchback of Notre Dame has remained immensely popular. Other major authors of that century include Alexandre Dumas (The Three Musketeers and The Count of Monte-Cristo), Jules Verne (Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas), Émile Zola (Les Rougon-Macquart), Honoré de Balzac (La Comédie humaine), Guy de Maupassant, Théophile Gautier and Stendhal (The Red and the Black, The Charterhouse of Parma), whose works are among the most well known in France and the world.

In the early 20th century France was a haven for literary freedom.[316] Works banned for obscenity in the US, the UK and other Anglophone nations were published in France decades before they were available in the respective authors' home countries.[316] The French were disinclined to punish literary figures for their writing, and prosecutions were rare.[316] Important writers of the 20th century include Marcel Proust, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Jean Cocteau, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry wrote The Little Prince, which is one of the best selling books in history.[317][318]

Medieval philosophy was dominated by Scholasticism until the emergence of Humanism in the Renaissance. Modern philosophy began in France in the 17th century with the philosophy of René Descartes, Blaise Pascal and Nicolas Malebranche. Descartes was the first Western philosopher since ancient times to attempt to build a philosophical system from the ground up rather than building on the work of predecessors.[319][320] France in the 18th century saw major philosophical contributions from Voltaire who came to embody the Enlightenment and Jean-Jacques Rousseau whose work highly influenced the French Revolution.[321][322] French philosophers made major contributions to the field in the 20th century including the existentialist works of Simone de Beauvoir, Camus, and Sartre.[323] Other influential contributions during this time include the moral and political works of Simone Weil, contributions to structuralism including from Claude Lévi-Strauss and the post-structuralist works by Michel Foucault.[324][325]

France experienced a golden age in the 17th century thanks to Louis XIV, who employed talented musicians and composers in the royal court. Composers of this period include Marc-Antoine Charpentier, François Couperin, Michel-Richard Delalande, Jean-Baptiste Lully and Marin Marais, all of them composers at the court. After the death of the "Roi Soleil", French musical creation lost dynamism, but in the next century the music of Jean-Philippe Rameau reached some prestige.[citation needed] Rameau became the dominant composer of French opera and the leading French composer of the harpsichord.[326]

In the field of classical music, France has produced a number of notable composers such as Gabriel Fauré, Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, and Hector Berlioz. Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel are the most prominent figures associated with Impressionist music. The two composers invented new musical forms[327][328][329][330] and new sounds. Debussy was among the most influential composers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and his use of non-traditional scales and chromaticism influenced many composers who followed.[331] His music is noted for its sensory content and frequent usage of atonality. Erik Satie was a key member of the early-20th-century Parisian avant-garde. Francis Poulenc's best-known works are his piano suite Trois mouvements perpétuels (1919), the ballet Les biches (1923), the Concert champêtre (1928) for harpsichord and orchestra, the opera Dialogues des Carmélites (1957) and the Gloria (1959) for soprano, choir and orchestra. In the middle of the 20th century, Maurice Ohana, Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Boulez contributed to the evolution of contemporary classical music.[332]

French music then followed the rapid emergence of pop and rock music in the middle of the 20th century. Although English-speaking creations achieved popularity in the country, French pop music, known as chanson française, has also remained very popular. Among the most important French artists of the century are Édith Piaf, Georges Brassens, Léo Ferré, Charles Aznavour and Serge Gainsbourg.[333] Modern pop music has seen the rise of popular French hip hop, French rock, techno/funk, and turntablists/DJs. Although there are very few rock bands in France compared to English-speaking countries,[334] bands such as Noir Désir, Mano Negra, Niagara, Les Rita Mitsouko and more recently Superbus, Phoenix and Gojira,[335] or Shaka Ponk, have reached worldwide popularity.

France has historical and strong links with cinema, with two Frenchmen, Auguste and Louis Lumière (known as the Lumière Brothers) credited with creating cinema in 1895.[339] The world's first female filmmaker, Alice Guy-Blaché, was also from France.[340] Several important cinematic movements, including the late 1950s and 1960s Nouvelle Vague, began in the country. It is noted for having a strong film industry, due in part to protections afforded by the government. France remains a leader in filmmaking, as of 2015[update] producing more films than any other European country.[341][342] The nation also hosts the Cannes Festival, one of the most important and famous film festivals in the world.[343][344]

Apart from its strong and innovative film tradition, France has also been a gathering spot for artists from across Europe and the world. For this reason, French cinema is sometimes intertwined with the cinema of foreign nations. Directors from nations such as Poland (Roman Polanski, Krzysztof Kieślowski, Andrzej Żuławski), Argentina (Gaspar Noé, Edgardo Cozarinsky), Russia (Alexandre Alexeieff, Anatole Litvak), Austria (Michael Haneke) and Georgia (Géla Babluani, Otar Iosseliani) are prominent in the ranks of French cinema. Conversely, French directors have had prolific and influential careers in other countries, such as Luc Besson, Jacques Tourneur or Francis Veber in the United States. Although the French film market is dominated by Hollywood, France is the only nation in the world where American films make up the smallest share of total film revenues, at 50%, compared with 77% in Germany and 69% in Japan.[345] French films account for 35% of the total film revenues of France, which is the highest percentage of national film revenues in the developed world outside the United States, compared to 14% in Spain and 8% in the UK.[345] In 2013 France was the second greatest exporter of films in the world, after the United States.[346]