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Neoclassicism and Romanticism

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there were many movements of art that were widespread and influential to people of that era. Neoclassic and Romantic Art were two major artistic, intellectual, and literary movements. Romantic art focused heavily on displaying evocative colors while neoclassic art steered towards illustrating what the art piece is instead of what it made an individual feel. Although it may be challenging to decide which paintings belong in either category today, the differences between them are still stark in theory and both movements were instrumental in paving the way for other styles for centuries to come.

Beginning in the late 18th century to the late 19th century, Romanticism revolved around the emphasis of emotions and placed art focus on non-traditional values. It stressed on self-expression and individual uniqueness and men and women were to be guided by warm emotions rather than cold, abstract rules established by the Bourgeois society.[[1]](#footnote-1) Inspired by the Great Revolution and the Enlightenment, artwork involved in that movement strayed from the conventional values that characterized Classicism and Neoclassicism such as reason, logic, rules and laws. One of the great prominent artists of the Romantic Era was James Mallard William Turner. J.M.W. Turner went through doubt and experimentation, following much adversity to find originality in his work. Many lambasted his art at the time they were first painted, and he soon became the most chastised artist in the 19th century. He was known for his uniqueness and boldness, leading to his exceptional paintings that were exemplary of Romanticism. It was noteworthy that although Turner’s paintings provoked so much criticism for being different from the style back then, he ‘was always keen to gain recognition as a conventional painter and wanted to fit in.’[[2]](#footnote-2) Many of his Romantic paintings were marked with feelings of turbulence, and provoked a deepened appreciation for the beauty of nature. An exemplary painting of Romanticism by J.M.W. Turner would be *The Fighting Temeraire*. This painting was greatly influenced by the Battle of Trafalgar.[[3]](#footnote-3) The Temeraire was a 98-gun battle ship, and helped fend off Napoleon and the Franco-Spanish fleets attempting to invade Britain in 1805. Thirty-three years after the ship’s valiant role in the victory of England over Napoleon forces, the ship was to be scrapped up into pieces. Turner expressed the magnitude to which the Temeraire contributed to Britain’s success through this painting, and wanted to elicit feelings of loss. The loss was to be felt as a nation, for the ship is similar to a symbol of Britain’s guardian. The ship is shown to be tugged by another ship to shore so it can be broken up, with the background lively of warm colors. The sad account of the ship being taken out of the picture draws parallels with the sunset, in that the sun setting is similar to the fall of the ship but it also can label the birth of something new, as the sun will rise again. A notable facet of the painting is the fact that the sunset vibrantly reflects on the water in front of the ship as it is being dragged, making the water appear red. The Battle of Trafalgar was known to be one of the bloodiest and goriest historic battles of England, and the influence on this painting suggests that Turner illustrated the water as a shade of red to allude to the Battle of Trafalgar. Moreover, pieces of wood, which are most likely fragments of a ship, are found scattered around the sea, which indicates that there was collision or combat prior to the painting being drawn. Turner also underscores feelings of pride and admiration in the painting; even though the ship is pulled to its destruction, the ship puts on a display of strength and confidence, as it still looks robust after so many years. Turner hints that the Temeraire will go down with dignity, and elicits much feeling of hope using vibrant colors. It is patent that Turner wanted the audience to perceive what he was feeling in entirety at the time of the painting. The lighting and chiaroscuro was dominant throughout the entire painting, giving the atmosphere a holistic experience. One cannot deny that this painting was successful as a work of Romanticism, in regards to how it captured the emotions of the artist at the time of painting and implemented a medium to communicate to the audience.

Another piece that could be an example of romanticism is *Ploughing up Turnips, near Slough*. Turner also drew this, in his efforts to communicate his sympathy for the hard working people in the painting. This picture uses toned-down and melancholy colors to express a sympathetic mood, one that Turner felt towards the people in the picture. Although the facial expressions aren’t very clear, one can manifestly see the expression on the old mother nursing a baby. Like many of his other paintings, the background is very blurred along with the characters and objects. In reality, the background’s shadow of a building from a distance is actually Windsor Castle. He does this because the characters and objects are not the focal point of the painting. Romantic paintings are immensely represented by colors, and this one in particular shows a group of low-class people struggling to get what they need, whether it is nursing a baby, tending to a broken plough or picking up turnip roots. Not only the characters are looking gloomy, but the trees in the background are lifeless, which Turner has done deliberately to successfully contribute to the mood.

Ranging from around the same time era as Romanticism, Neoclassical paintings typically focus on the rigorous designs of classical events and ensure the setting in the painting is historically accurate and precise. Neoclassical art was greatly associated with academic art, in which artists created their art works from a structured system. The term ‘academic art’ is conventionally used to describe the style of true-to-life and realism taught by institutions for art in Europe.[[4]](#footnote-4) Moreover, neoclassic art is clear-cut, but there is a blatantly correct method of painting. Benjamin West was a well-established artist in the neoclassical art movement. One of his paintings, *Pylades and Orestes Brought as Victims before Iphigenia*, reveals two nearly naked men who look to be detained for committing a crime. A man forcefully restricts their hand movements while another man points them out to a group of women, who appear to be high-class. A woman standing in front with white drapes and a green headband on, who looks to be the authoritative figure, looks at them bewilderingly. Another man directly at the center of the picture behind the glamour of the front scene looks inconspicuous, as if plotting something mischievous, while he turns around and stares at the incident with his eyes covered. This narrative perfectly embodies characteristics of neoclassicism because it contains elements of seriousness, blandness, and authenticity. The illustration doesn’t evoke feelings, but makes an individual ponder about the backstory behind the art. West exploited somber colors, with a touch of vibrancy in the robes of the two thieves, possibly to deliberately attract attention to them. In actuality, the painting is a product of the play by Euripides. The two men have been arrested for attempting to steal a gold statue and were brought forth to the priestess to be sacrificed. It was then that the priestess realized one of the men to be her long-lost brother.[[5]](#footnote-5) The story draws the audience in, while at the same time establishing accuracy in how the real-life incident occurred. There are no noticeable blurs present in the painting. This is attributed to the fact that neoclassic art is known to appear finished and contain all the minute details, making the painting look realistic as a result. *Pylades and Orestes Brought as Victims before Iphigenia* is influenced by academic art, in that it promoted a sense of intellectual style and involved a degree of rationality displayed by the characters. The man asks for permission, and rationalizes that the men should be sacrificed or punished; however, the female who appears to be in charge seems to be contemplating and figuring something out.

In contrast to Romantic art, neoclassical art is far more detail-oriented, completed, and meticulous. Neoclassic art is formal and systematic, whereas romantic art is more liberal. Painters could transform brush strokes into feelings, which would epitomize romantic art. The brush strokes were often blurred and vague, as shown by Turner’s paintings. Nevertheless, these two movements have had massive impacts on art that would be created in the following eras. Romanticism’s liberalism inspired many other artists to do unconventional things to their paintings, sparking movements such as contemporary art. Neoclassicism has influenced art in providing people with the truth, and inspired paintings that depict the reality of many events. While distinct in theory, neoclassic and romantic art practically look similar and the line between the two is very blurred; however, the two proved to be influential in their own ways.

1. https://www.mtholyoke.edu/courses/rschwart/hist255/jkr/romanticism.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 2Graham-Dixon, Andrew. *A History of British Art*. Berkeley: U of California, 1999. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.artble.com/artists/joseph\_mallord\_william\_turner/paintings/the\_fighting\_temeraire [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/academic-art.htm#definition [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/west-pylades-and-orestes-brought-as-victims-before-iphigenia-n00126/text-display-caption [↑](#footnote-ref-5)