

Romantics and Realists

Romantic has always been an elusive label—in 1836 one wag concluded that romanticism “consisted in not shaving, and in wearing vests with heavily starched lapels.” Delacroix, who in fact declined to identify himself as a romantic, is often set opposite the “classical” Ingres. Yet both produced romantic works exploring literary, historical, or purely imaginary, often exotic, themes: Delacroix with freely painted, energetic compositions and vivid color, Ingres with carefully controlled but evocative contours and highly refined surfaces. More than defining a style, romanticism suggests an inspiration in the creative imagination and an intense, personal response. In 1846 the poet and critic Charles Baudelaire answered his own question “What is romanticism?” by calling it “a manner of feeling.”

For realist artists in the next generation, on the other hand, the painter was to be guided by observation. “Painting is an essentially *concrete* art,” Courbet wrote in 1861, “and can only consist in the representation of *real* and *existent* things. It is a wholly physical language, which uses visible objects instead of words; the *abstract*, invisible and nonexistent, lies outside the scope of painting.” He adopted as subjects the events and people of ordinary life and elevated them to a stature previously reserved for themes from the Bible, ancient history, or mythology. It was an affront to the arts establishment, compounded by the way in which he painted, with rough texture and the offhand look of accidental compositions.

A similar bias for fact was already at work in **landscape painting**. Abandoning the idealization that had long characterized French landscapes, “modern” landscapists—including Courbet—depicted real, even unremarkable places with the freshness of direct observation.



Théodore Géricault

French, 1791–1824

Mounted Trumpeters of Napoleon's Imperial Guard, 1813/1814

This small canvas is one of a series of cavalymen Géricault painted between 1812 and 1814. It is difficult to categorize Géricault's horsemen: neither true portraits nor genre scenes, they are more finished than studies yet not fully independent works. They convey the romantic excitement of battle and the glamour of military uniforms in the Napoleonic era. Géricault studied his subjects—and they are more often trumpeters than soldiers—with precision. The heroism of French expansion throughout Europe was soon reduced to disillusion and despair as the allied opposition gained the upper hand in 1814.

Here Géricault seems to have been preoccupied in the painting itself, in a lively handling of pigments and the working out of his design. Notice the soft spots of color on the center horse's muzzle and the long, rippling streaks in its tail. This painting shows the influence of the Flemish and Italian artists he was copying in the Louvre. Géricault's trumpeter and his mount reflect elements taken from Rubens and Van Dyck. The energetic styles of these baroque artists and their emphasis on color were well matched to a sensibility that valued inspiration and emotion.

Oil on canvas, .604 x .496 m (23 11/16 x 19 1/2 in.)
Chester Dale Fund 1972.25.1



Horace Vernet

French, 1789–1863

Hunting in the Pontine Marshes, 1833

Though less well-known than other painters in this room, Horace Vernet was regarded by many in his day as one of the greatest French artists of all time. Horace's forthright and accurate reporting of facts was already being disparaged by some romantic critics before his death—and more recently he has been compared to Norman Rockwell. Increasingly, however, his naturalism is appreciated as foreshadowing the work of realists like Courbet.

This painting was made in Italy after Vernet had been appointed director of the French Academy in Rome. Following the July Revolution of 1830, which installed “Citizen King” Louis Philippe, Vernet found himself the most senior French official in the city—an uncomfortable post, given the antipathy of the pope and Italian public toward a more liberal French monarchy. It was often advantageous to be out of town, and the painter's love of hunting offered frequent opportunities.

Here, tiny figures are overshadowed by the wild landscape—an ancient wooded marsh some forty kilometers from Rome. Vernet described it as a majestic place, where the presence of man did not interrupt the order of nature.

Oil on canvas, 1 x 1.370 m (39 1/2 x 54 in.)
Chester Dale Fund 1989.3.1



Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot

French, 1796–1875

Forest of Fontainebleau, 1834

At first there seems to be something a bit incongruous here. The forest is rough, almost wild, but a young woman lies on the ground to read. Her blouse falls perilously low, but her book has the look of a biblical text. Viewers who saw this at the Salon in 1834, however, would have quickly recognized the woman as Mary Magdalene from her book, the deer, and especially her long tresses. Corot apparently added the figure as an afterthought—she is painted over bits of foliage and water—probably to elevate his landscape in the hierarchy of the Salon. By introducing a narrative element, and a religious one at that, his subject would be accorded greater prestige and justify the large size of his canvas.

Today, Corot is most appreciated for very different kinds of landscape: for *plein air* sketches, never destined to be exhibited themselves but painted outdoors in preparation for studio pictures, and for lyrical views (he called them *souvenirs*) of the countryside. The soft, silvery *souvenirs* recapture a poetic response to nature. Their fresh touch and light atmosphere are informed by outdoor studies and combined with a strong sense of form retained from classical French landscapes of the seventeenth century. Corot's work was an important influence on younger impressionist painters.

Oil on canvas, 1.756 x 2.426 m (69 1/8 x 95 1/2 in.)
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.109



Constant Troyon

French, 1810–1865

The Approaching Storm, 1849

In the 1840s Troyon worked with other landscape painters centered in the village of Barbizon in the forest of Fontainebleau. This group had emerged from the so-called Generation of 1830, young painters who as the July Revolution was deposing a conservative monarch were themselves overturning long-held traditions of French landscape painting. They had been influenced by John Constable’s panoramic views of the English countryside, two of which had been shown at the Paris Salon of 1824, which encouraged them to express nature without academic convention or idealization. Here Troyon has depicted an ordinary, if beautiful place in a straightforward way. Preparing for the last ferry crossing before a storm, country people look at the looming, dark sky. The air is filled with the approaching storm, which is more than anything else the “subject.”

If the Barbizon painters’ unembellished themes offended tradition, so did their manner of painting. The texture of the paint is clearly visible, helping to convey the scene’s rustic character. This free handling of paint, along with a feeling for light in all its variations, was to be an inspiration for the impressionists. But the Barbizon painters were not interested in nature’s fleeting effects; instead they sought out the rugged and enduring unity beneath its changing aspects.

Oil on canvas on board, 1.162 x 1.575 m (45 ¾ x 62 in.)
Chester Dale Fund 1995.42.1



Eugène Delacroix

French, 1798–1863

Christopher Columbus and His Son at La Rábida, 1838

The hero, the individual of talent and passion who follows a difficult, solitary path to greatness, was central to romanticism. Here is Columbus at the final moment of frustration before his ultimate triumph. Almost penniless, he and his son have sought shelter in the monastery of La Rábida, where, according to legendary accounts, word of the fateful meeting with Queen Isabella would soon arrive.

Calm rectangular forms dominate: the juncture of walls and ceiling, the parade of dark canvases down the hall, the large map that Columbus contemplates. The figure groups have solid geometrical form. Even the colors are quiet: the monks’ habits, the soft light and brown shadows—only the plume of Columbus’ hat, which points to him as protagonist, interrupts this muted range. Neither the tone nor composition matches our image of Delacroix as the champion of color and exuberant form. More typical of his work, for example, are the bright color accents and dynamic zigzagging energy of *Arabs Skirmishing* (see following entry). *Columbus and His Son* is one of a pair—the second painting (Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio), much richer in color and effect, shows the explorer returning in triumph—and it seems likely that Delacroix wanted to underscore radically opposed circumstances by corresponding differences in feel.

Oil on canvas, .903 x 1.180 m (35 ½ x 46 ½ in.)
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.127



Eugène Delacroix

Arabs Skirmishing in the Mountains, 1863

In 1832 Delacroix accompanied a French diplomatic mission to Morocco. His five months in North Africa would provide inspiration for the rest of his life. The exoticism and the vicarious thrill of this violent subject are typical of romantic art. While in Morocco Delacroix had painted watercolors and filled notebooks with sketches recording details of landscape and Arab dress, but he wrote later that “I did not begin to do passable work in my trip to Africa until the moment when I had sufficiently forgotten the small details to recall in my pictures only the striking and poetic aspect: up to that point I was haunted by that love of exactitude which people are apt to mistake for truth.”

In this painting details are muted, subsumed into atmosphere and the energy of the attack. It has the look of a quick improvisation, yet close study reveals how carefully painted it is. In distant bluffs, small touches of color enliven the luminous haze. In the middle range, figures and surroundings merge into one mélange of color, where churning brushstrokes convey the turbulence of action. And in the foreground, brilliant accents of green, blue, and red stand out to produce a closer—and more dangerous—sense of reality. Delacroix’s free handling of paint and juxtapositions of complementary colors influenced the impressionists.

Oil on canvas, .925 x .745 m (36 ½ x 29 ½ in.)
Chester Dale Fund 1966.12.1



Gustave Courbet

French, 1819–1877

Beach in Normandy, c. 1872/1875

During 1869 Courbet had worked along the beaches in Normandy, painting sketches that he later used to produce a number of finished paintings in the studio: “Did I ever earn my bread and butter,” he wrote a friend. “I painted twenty seascapes. . . .” Years later, while in exile in Switzerland, he painted more beach scenes, perhaps returning to the same sketches or recalling the landscape from memory.

Recent scholarship suggests that this painting is probably one of the later group. The light and air lack the kind of vivid freshness of Courbet’s work done while he was still under his immediate impression of a place. The rocky cliff seems generalized rather than defined by its strong highlights. Still, its bulk attracts our attention; our eyes are drawn by the sheer tactile mass of the pigments there. In many places Courbet painted not with a brush, but with a palette knife. His rough technique, like the unsentimentalized peasant subjects he pioneered, scandalized the art establishment—and helped galvanize the bold style being adopted by younger painters like Manet. Fiercely proud of his rural roots and his country-bred vigor, Courbet retained a forthright and physical connection to the world. He painted the concrete, he said, and he gave what he saw actual physical dimension on his canvas.

Oil on canvas, .613 x .902 m (24 ⅛ x 35 ½ in.)
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.10