

'Natural painting'

Plein-air painting

'For these few weeks past, I believe I have thought more seriously of my profession than at any other time in my life.'

When the twenty-six-year-old John Constable (1776–1837) wrote thus to his friend Dunthorne on 29 May 1802, he had just taken a momentous decision: he had refused a post as a drawing master in order to devote himself fully to his art.

From now on he was determined to work directly, and on his own. He would return that summer to his native village of East Bergholt, 'where I shall endeavour to get a pure and unaffected manner of representing the scenes that may employ me. *There is room enough for a natural painter.*'

Although the word 'painture' was an innovation of Constable's, it soon became clear enough what he was referring to. And indeed, the long and arduous struggle he had in setting aside preconceptions about landscape painting in his pursuit of a 'pure and unaffected' representation of the English countryside has since become one of the heroic legends in the history of naturalism.

Constable's representation of rural England in such mature paintings as *The Haywain*, seems so effortless and self-explanatory that it is hard now to credit the difficulties that he faced. Yet it is precisely the appearance of naturalness that is the measure of his achievement. Each scene was in fact the product of a mind keen to trace the workings behind the surface of events; each demanded a skill in understanding that led the painter to declare that the art of seeing nature was 'as much to be acquired as the art of reading the Egyptian hieroglyphs'. He knew, too, of the unbridgeable gulf between what is seen and what can be recorded; he saw that 'natural painture' was above all a matter of suggestion.

Both these problems, of understanding and of presentation, were to be Constable's constant concern. Yet they lead to an even more basic problem. For if natural painting involves interpretation and selection, how can it be 'pure and unaffected'?

The dominant feature of 'natural painture' was the desire to observe directly. And it was this that led Constable to lay such importance on the oil



136. CONSTABLE *The Haywain* 1821

sketch made in the open air. Yet he was hardly the inventor of this method. Claude himself is supposed to have finished the distances in his pictures outside in the Campagna, and by 1750 the making of oil sketches in the open appears to have been a well-established activity among landscape painters in Rome. It certainly seems to have been practised there by Claude Joseph Vernet (1714–89), that French master of dramatic atmosphere. The habit may have been introduced among British artists by Richard Wilson (1714–82), who, after his sojourn in Rome around 1750, returned to paint historical landscapes and local views which are notable both for their command of a Claudian vocabulary and their mastery of light effects.

There may seem to be a world of difference between Wilson's reinterpretation of the British landscape in such large-scale compositions as *Holt Bridge on the River Dee* and Constable's 'six-footers'. Yet it was Constable's appreciation of the observation in such works that led him to describe Wilson as 'one of those appointed to show the world the hidden stores and beauties of nature'. Envisaging him 'walking arm in arm with

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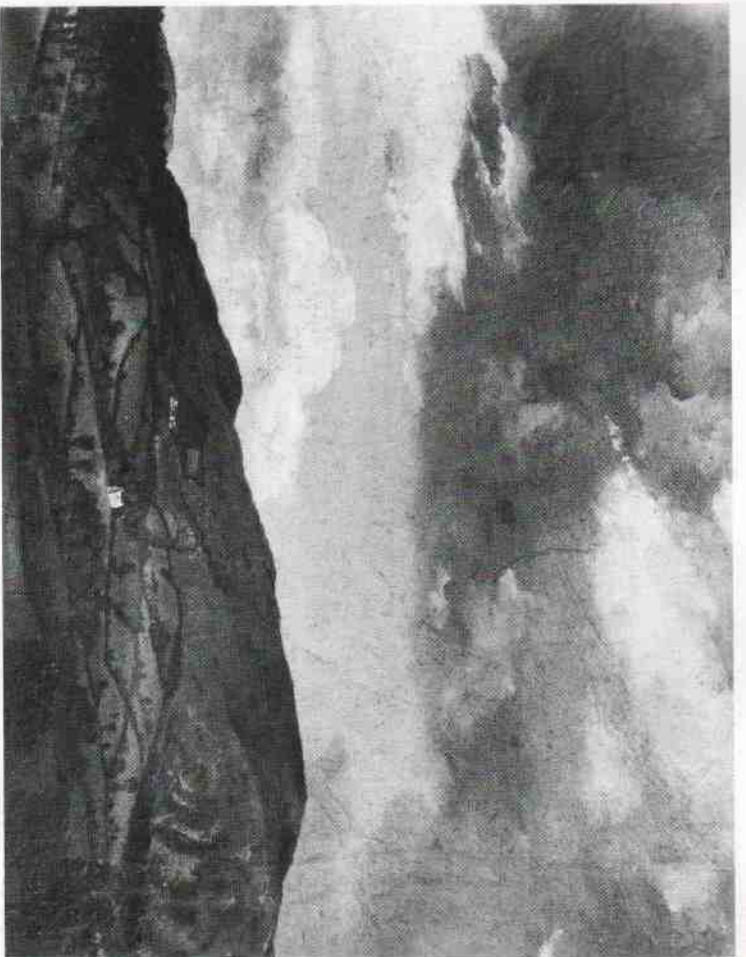
137 WILSON Hole Bridge on the River Dee c.1762

Milton and Linnaeus', he saw him as one of those artists who combined a scientific investigation of natural phenomena with deep poetic sensibility.

No actual oil sketches before nature by Wilson can now be traced, but his pupil Thomas Jones (1743–1803) left behind a large number. Like other painters of the time who adopted the practice, Jones used it as a means of making records, but not as a basis for large-scale compositions.

Jones' rapid studies, painted on paper, have considerable vigour. Yet they also reveal the problems for eighteenth-century artists of using oil as a sketching medium. For the method of building up effects of luminosity through the careful application of layers of glazes – common in the studios – could hardly be applied when working in the field. In *Penetrig* Jones lets the brown tone of the paper show through to give a warmth to his Welsh hills. But there is little else to lighten their forms, and the solid green land seems hardly related to the bold clouds above. It was only when more varied forms of handling were introduced that oil became an effective means of recording direct impressions of atmospherics.

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138 JONES *Penetrig* 1772

Watercolours and local atmosphere

The light and transparent washes of watercolour, on the other hand, could capture such effects more readily. The paintings of Paul Sandby (1725–1809) demonstrate the way this quality gradually began to be exploited by the professional topographers. The *Distant View of Leith*, a study made while the artist was working as a military map-maker in Scotland, may have been intended first and foremost as reconnaissance, but the medium has at the same time allowed a swift and deft laying on of washes to capture the tonal subtleties of the shadowed foreground and the luminosity of the estuary beyond.

Watercolour painting also had its idealist side, evident in the Rubensian fancy of Sandby's later woodland views. It was in the imaginative views of John Robert Cozens, moreover, that light first became the dominant feature in a watercolour.

Turner and Thomas Girtin (1775–1802) brought together these two traditions in their works. During the period when they were both copying

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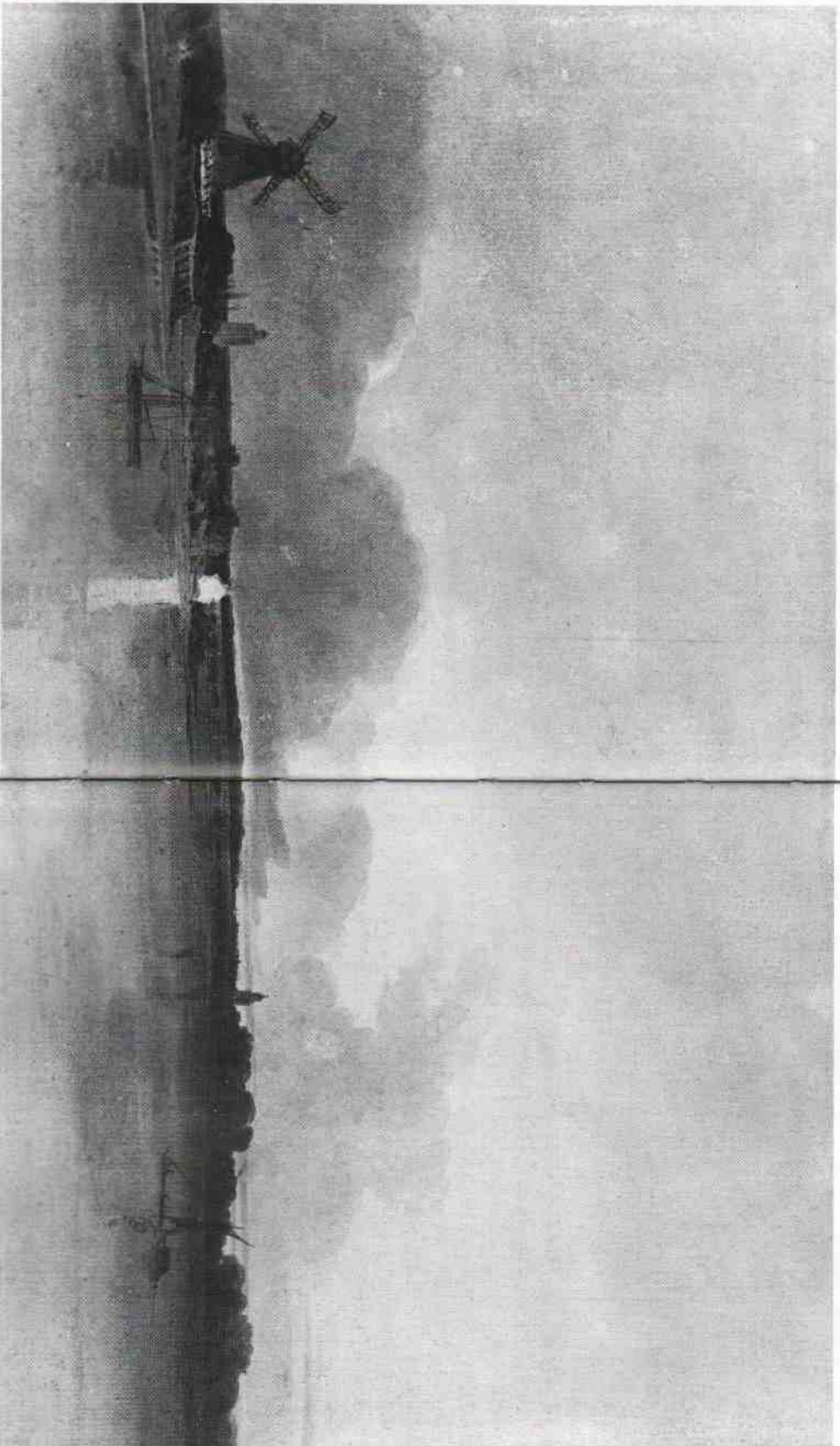
the Cozens in Dr Monro's care, their use of layers of blue-grey washes to build up tones was virtually identical. But it was Girtin who continued to explore the subtle gradations that captured every nuance of a place and moment.

Girtin's search for structured luminosity led him to abandon many of the conventions of landscape composition. In his *White House*, a watercolour that even Turner felt he had not equalled, he gave the most unexceptional of scenes, a bend in the River Thames by Battersea Reach, an air of expectancy by emphasizing a single house and its reflection. There is nothing mystical about this magical achievement. It is a perfect demonstration of how the discovery of an atmospheric effect – in this case the way white, in certain conditions, stands out from its surroundings – can become an event in itself.

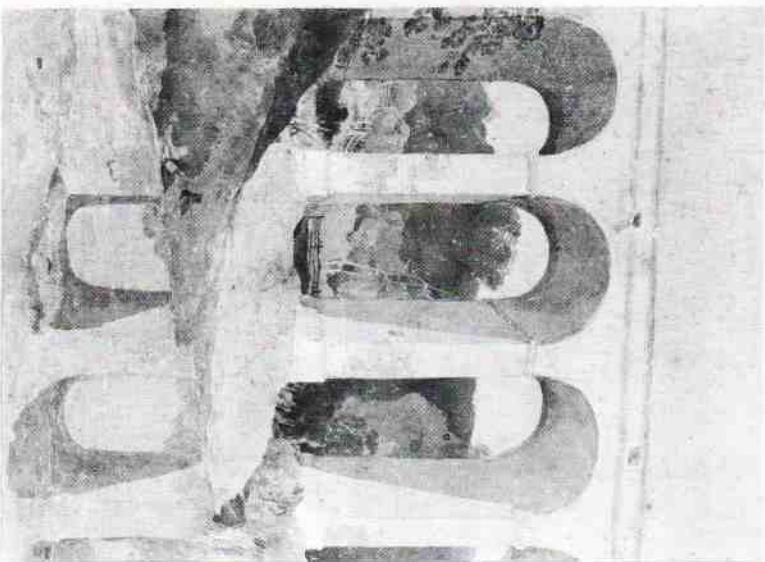
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139 (left) GIRTIN *The White House* 1800



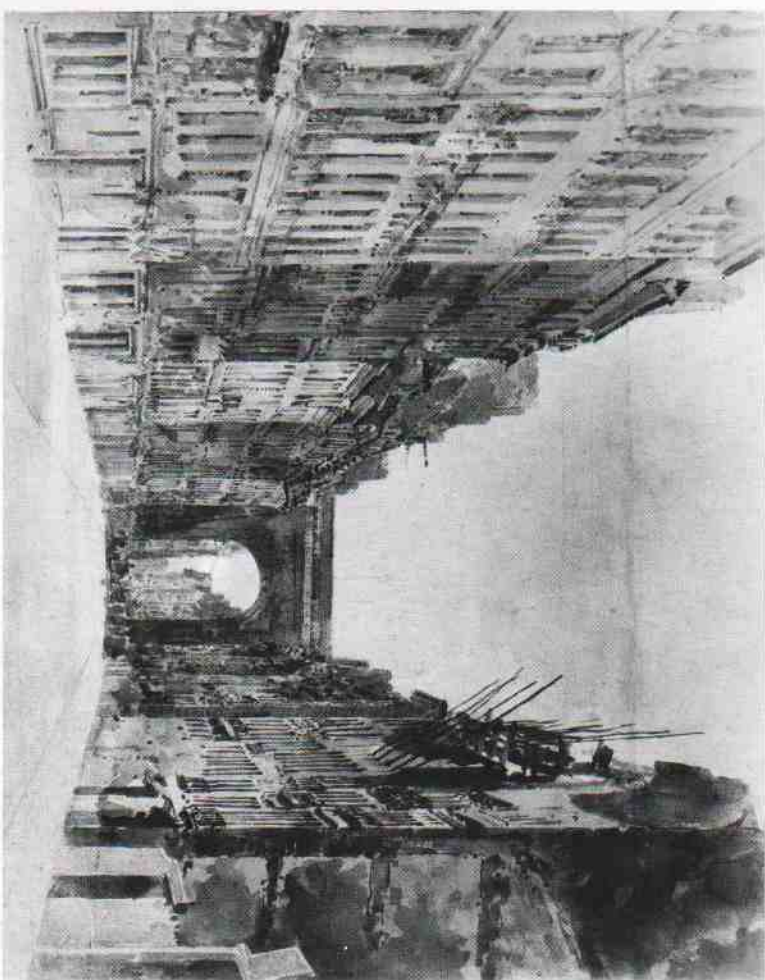
140 SANDBY *Distant View of Leith* 1747



141 COTMAN *Chirk Viaduct* c.1804
142 GIRTIN *La Rue Saint-Denis* 1802

142 It is quite in keeping that, while Turner was moving towards the description of vast holocausts, Girtin's most ambitious scheme should have been the creation of a panorama of London, a monumentalization of mere locality. His *Eidometropolis*, probably painted around 1800, but exhibited in the summer of 1802, only a few months before his death, is now lost; but surviving studies show the fidelity of his record. There is in them the same interest in the sheer presence of the city as there is in the street scenes of Paris he painted as a result of his visit there of 1802. Possibly the sketches he made there were first undertaken with a panorama in mind. In any case, there is a remarkable objectivity to such watercolours as *La Rue Saint-Denis*.

No other watercolourist ever matched the totally unassuming luminosity of Girtin's last works. Later artists like Bonington (see p. 248), Samuel Prout (1783-1851) and Thomas Shotter Boys (1803-74) were influenced by his Paris scenes - published in 1803 - but could never adopt similar views without resorting to a more obvious drama. More generally, Girtin opened the eyes of a whole generation of watercolourists to the freshness and intimacy of locality. When the young Norwich painter John Sell



Cotman (1782-1842) came to London in 1798 it was Girtin's example that led to the development of his own rigorous manner. A watercolour of Chirk Viaduct is a masterpiece in the presentation of the incidental. A chance section of the viaduct is viewed from the shrubland and pools it spans. All temptations towards Piranesian grandeur are avoided as this motif becomes the starting-point for a rhythm of lucid intervals, articulated by the clearly marked, but closely balanced, tonal areas. There were few among his contemporaries to appreciate such an eventless art. For, as Cotman himself explained, 'three quarters of mankind, you know, mind more *what* is represented than *how* it is done'.

East Anglia and the Dutch

If watercolour painters were more precocious than oil painters in developing the treatment of the intimacy and atmosphere of locality, their art could suggest less of the weight, the force of earth, light and wind in the countryside. It was this sense that comes over in the finest of the seventeenth-century Dutch painters, such as Hobbema and Ruysdael; and it is perhaps not

surprising that the naturalist movement in English oil painting should have received its strongest impetus from that part of the country, East Anglia, which had the strongest traditional commercial and cultural links with Holland.

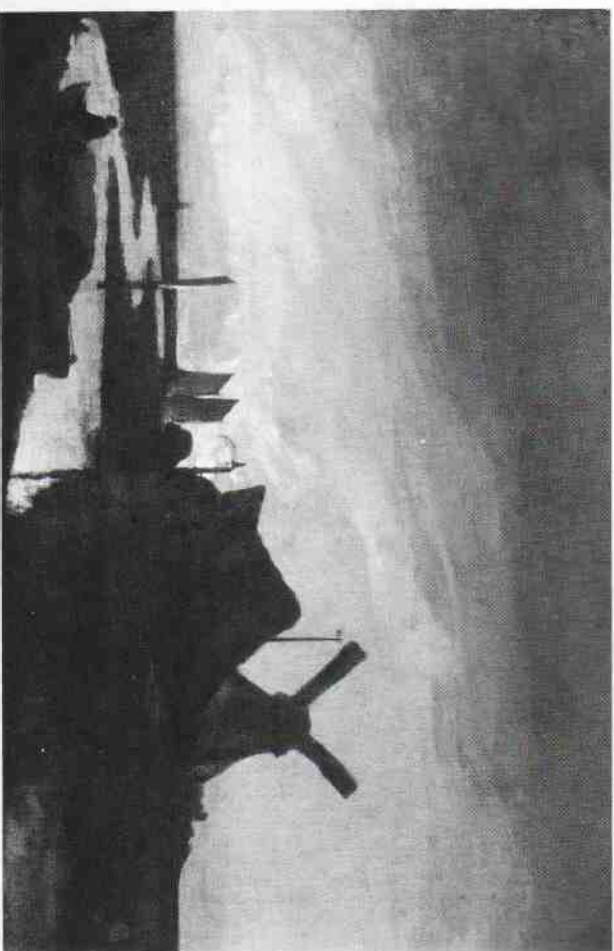
Although it was the Norwich school who turned most fully to the art of the Dutch, the early work of Gainsborough bears witness to the survival of a taste for Dutch art in that part of the country. A native of Sudbury, Suffolk, Gainsborough was first active as a landscape painter. In later years, his Arcadian vision of nature – fired by his sense of restriction at being ‘confined in *Harnes* to follow the track’ in his profession as a portrait painter – led to the depiction of wistful autumnal pastorals readily described by contemporaries as ‘romantic’. But his earliest works have quite a different effect.

Gainsborough was later to be rather apologetic about these ‘first imitations of little Dutch landscapes’ and regarded his *Cornard Wood* as having ‘very little idea of composition’. Nevertheless, he did concede that the picture, despite lacking the broad sweep of his later style, was equal to it in ‘the touch and closeness to nature in the study of the parts and *minutiae*’.

Gainsborough was to leave this style behind him when he moved from his Suffolk practice in Ipswich to Bath in 1759. But these Anglicizations of the



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144 CROMÉ *Moonrise on the Yare* 1811–16

Dutch were to become an inspiration for Constable, whose maternal uncle, David Pike Watts, was at one time the owner of this particular painting.

The last flowering of the Dutch influence was in Norwich in the early nineteenth century. No doubt the extreme conservatism and isolation of this region at that time helps to explain the emergence of so independent an artistic community, complete with its own exhibiting body, the Norwich Society, founded in 1803. Certainly local patronage does not seem to have been a cause, for even the leader of the school, John Cromé, had to subsist on teaching, while Cotman had a hard time making a living even by this.

Yet John Cromé (1768–1821) – who was born in Norwich and lived there all his life – was dependent for his artistic instruction largely upon the collections of local connoisseurs. And it was through these that he gained such a close knowledge of Dutch landscape and, to a lesser extent, of Wilson and Gainsborough.

While Cromé's horizons were later to be expanded by visits to London, and even Paris in 1814, his work can still virtually be classified according to Dutch prototypes; but if his pictures are strongly traditional in outlook, they do nevertheless have a vigour that is the artist's own. *Moonrise on the Yare* may be a tribute to the moonlight scenes of Aert Van der Neer, yet the Dutch master never treated any of his scenes in terms of such bold silhouettes.

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143 GAINSBOROUGH *Cornard Wood* 1748

John Constable

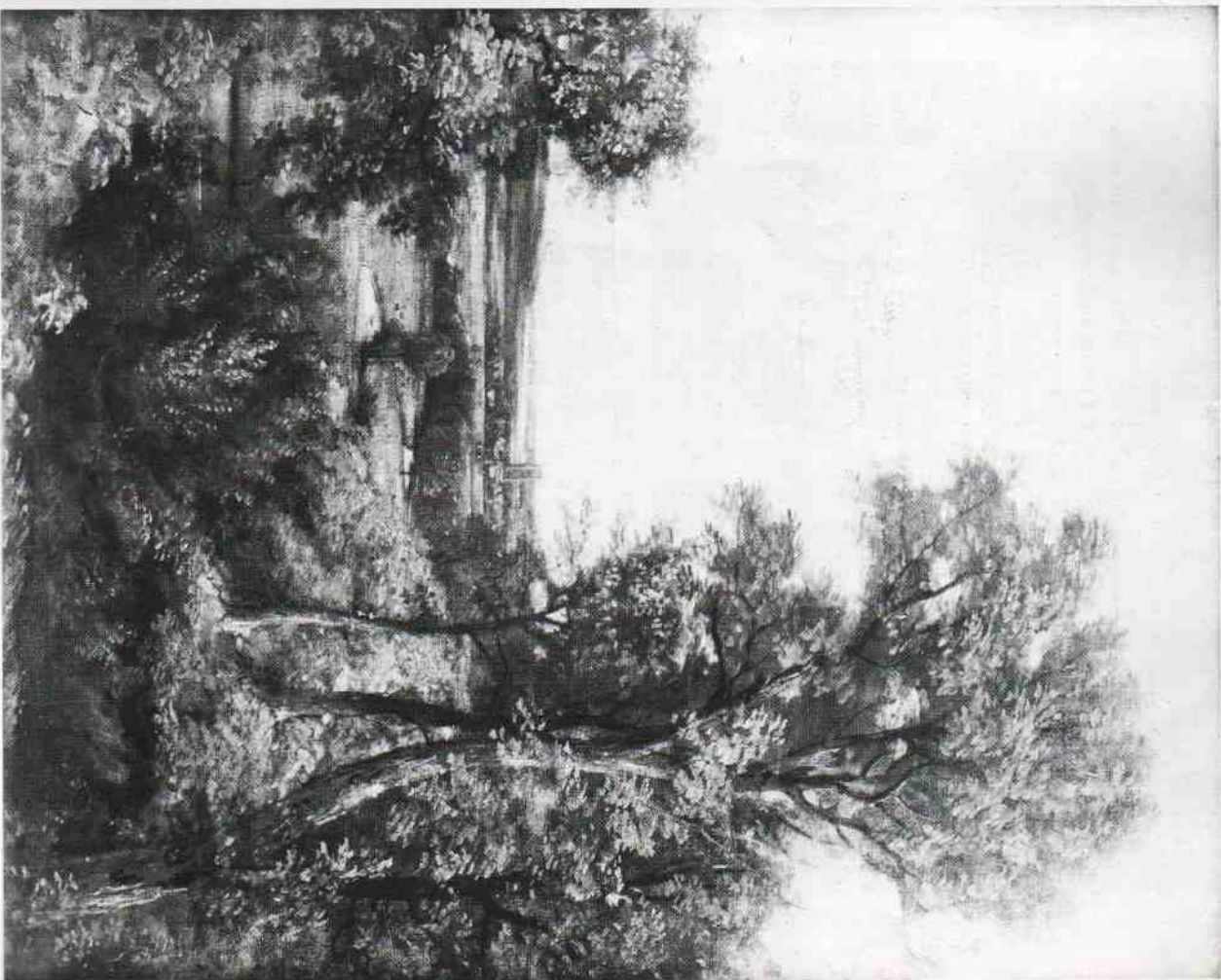
Constable can be seen as part of an East Anglian tradition; but what made him stand out from the others was the scope of his ambitions and his persistence in pursuing them. He steadfastly refused to dissipate his energies by acting as a drawing master, as Cotman and Crome did, or by painting the type of landscape calculated to bring success. Unlike Turner, he rarely painted lucrative views of gentlemen's country seats or famous places, or the dramatic imaginative scenes that would flatter the pretensions of a collector.

It is probable that when Constable declared his intention of achieving a 'natural painter' he had no more than the vaguest idea of what the outcome would be. For even when he painted *The Haywain* nineteen years later, he himself noted its 'novel look'. In his early years he was struggling hard enough simply to keep painting. Born the second son of a wealthy miller in the Suffolk village of East Bergholt, Constable had to contend with opposition when he decided to become an artist. Finally, in 1799, he settled in London and became a student at the Academy at the age of twenty-two.

Like the other young painters of the day, Constable was largely dependent upon the benevolence of collectors for gaining a knowledge of the works of the Old Masters. And while he was soon to remonstrate against 'running after pictures, and seeking the truth at second hand', he never ceased to use the works of others as a guide and stimulus. If he was opposed to mindless imitation, he nevertheless told the engraver John Burnet that 'he seldom painted a picture without considering how Rembrandt or Claude would have treated it'. He was fortunate to find in the local collection of the commissioner Sir George Beaumont examples by both these artists as well as Rubens' landscape *Château de Sien* and watercolours by Girtin; all these works were to have a formative influence upon him.

Throughout his career Constable copied pictures that particularly attracted him, and one of the first works that he copied was Beaumont's small Claude *Hagar and the Angel*, which is now in the National Gallery. Certainly the 'amenity and repose' he admired in Claude can be felt in his first painting of Dedham Vale, where the view to his favourite local church is framed by harmonious banks of trees in a manner similar to those in the *Hagar*. Yet this is already combined with a freshness in the colouring, the frank admission of the greenness of the Suffolk countryside, that shows how he has already moved away from any suggestion of mere imitation.

Any tendency that he might have had towards idealizing was balanced by his admiration for the early landscapes of Gainsborough, and of the Dutch themselves. 'The Dutch painters were a stay-at-home people, — hence their originality', he later declared. He valued them also on account of the similarity between the scenery they painted and his. Ruissdael, whom he was



145 CONSTABLE *Dedham Vale* 1802

also copying in his first years in London, he later praised for the way he 'has made delightful to our eyes, those solemn days, particular to his country as to ours, when without storm, large rolling clouds scarcely permit a ray of sunlight to break the shades of the forest'.

In later years Constable was to be dismissive of the Picturesque movement, but in 1806 he was still sufficiently uncertain of his direction at this time to take up an offer from his maternal uncle David Pike Watts to finance a visit to the mountainous Lake District. For the next three years he was to use the studies he made there for the oil paintings he sent to exhibitions. But after that he abandoned such topics altogether. Later he was to tell his biographer Leslie that the 'solitude of mountains oppressed his spirits. His nature was peculiarly social and could not feel satisfied with scenery, however grand in itself, that did not abound in human association. Certainly his finest works abound with the image of man peacefully gaining his living from the land.'

Constable's deep involvement with the act of painting can be seen in his persistence in using oil painting as a sketching technique, unlike Turner, Linnell and other landscapists of the period. He was not deterred by the clumsiness of the medium when compared with watercolour, but revelled rather in the vigour of effect that it could achieve. Habitually using panel or millboard for these open-air studies, he would dab separate areas of paint over a unifying warm brown ground. In *Flatford Mill from a Lock on the Stour*

146 CONSTABLE *Borowdale* 1806



147 CONSTABLE *Flatford Mill from a Lock on the Stour* c.1811



his handling has ranged from bold impasto in the sky to the thin striations on the water. Each form, each effect, required something different.

Constable felt keenly the 'individuality of each phenomenon. 'No two days are alike,' he once declared, 'not even two hours; neither were there ever two leaves alike since the creation of the world.' But if this essentially Romantic attitude led other painters of the period, such as Palmer or Olivier, to the minute elaboration of detail, Constable chose rather to observe individuality in movement, light and atmosphere. He sought – as he later said in the introduction to Lucas' mezzotints after his works *The English Landscape* (1833) – 'to arrest the more abrupt and transient appearances of the *CHIMB OSCURO* IN NATURE . . . to render permanent many of those splendid but evanescent Exhibitions, which are ever occurring in the endless variety of Nature, in her eternal changes'.

However bold Constable became in his pursuit of the momentary, he still had to face the problem of how to retain such effects in finished compositions. To a certain extent he was already investigating this in his oil

sketches. It has been noticed by Michael Krison that the composition of *Elaford Mill from a Lock on the Stour* is similar to that of one of Claude's *Seaports*. But, while in *Deudham Vale* he fully accepted the Claudian device of viewing a distance through a clearly defined foreground, he has rethought the design here so that the distance is almost completely blocked and attention is being held in the middle ground. Devices are being rearranged to accommodate experience.

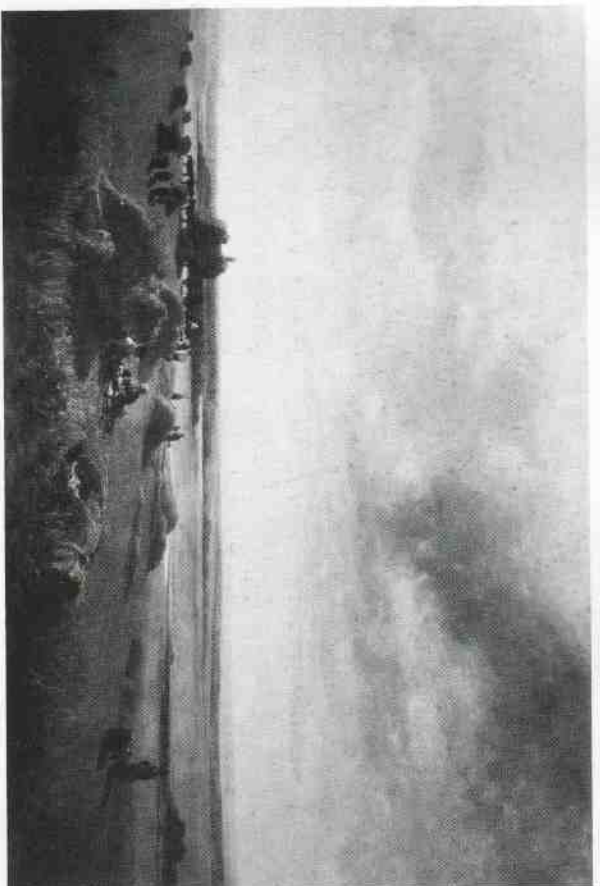
149 It was in *Boat Building on the Stour*, which he claimed to have painted entirely on the spot in the summer of 1814, that Constable appears to have attempted first to bring together sketch and completed picture. As can be seen by comparing the work with a surviving pencil study for it, he did no more than rearrange a few of the boatbuilders' implements and deepen some shadows in the foreground to soften the uneasy presence of the barge's hull. One can sense in the result the constraints that Constable placed upon himself to achieve such rigid authenticity in the handling. For the broad and variegated treatment of his oil sketches has now become smoothed down to gain an overall unity of surface. If there is much sunlight in this picture, the 'chiaroscuro in nature' is but faintly present.

There was little in this small work, in fact, to make Constable's contemporaries suspect that it was more than a fresh and diverting piece of rural genre when it was shown at the Academy in 1815. Nor can Peter de Wint's (1784-1849) *Comptfield*, exhibited at the same time, have helped to dispel this view. Superficially, at least, De Wint recorded the rural economy of Lincolnshire with every bit as much fidelity and freshness as Constable did that of Suffolk. And the fact that De Wint found that such large-scale treatments of these scenes did not sell, and was obliged to pursue instead the career of a watercolourist, did not augur well for Constable's future intentions.

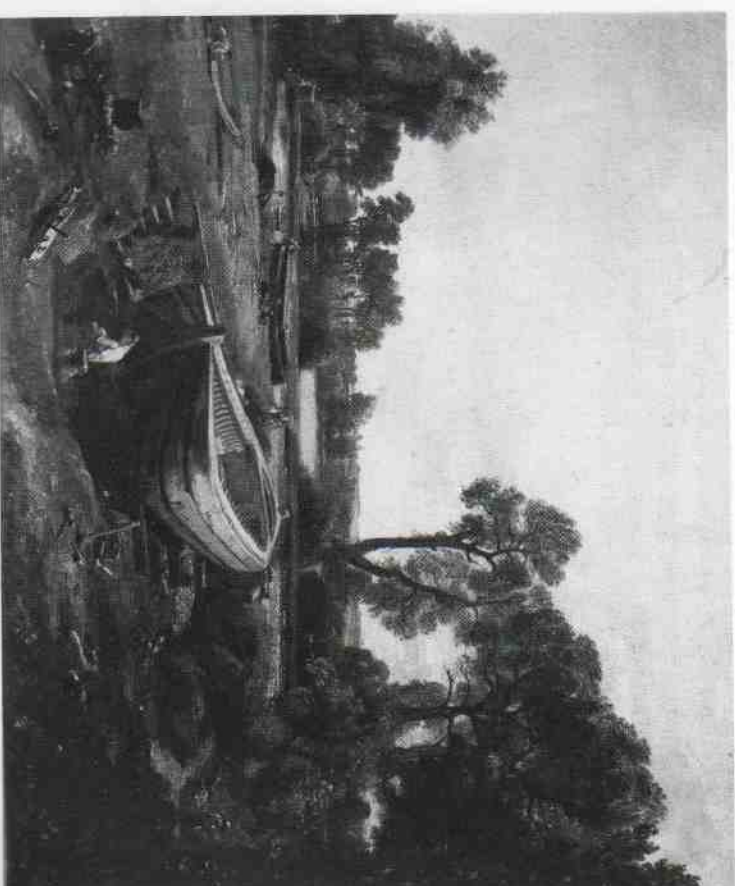
Constable's exploration of the surrounds of East Bergholt had in fact been paralleled by a similar search for authenticity elsewhere. In London the watercolourist John Varley (1778-1842) had been influential in encouraging his brother-in-law William Mulready (1786-1863) and his pupils William Henry Hunt (1790-1864) and John Linnell (1792-1852) to 'go to Nature for everything'. For Mulready the advice had been far from satisfactory: his two scenes of the area around Kensington Mall (1811, 1812) were rejected by the Academy and considered 'too literal' by the man who had commissioned them.

Literariness was the keynote of the open-air studies made by this group. Linnell soon developed a detailed *imitation* in his finished oils which readily explains his fascination with Dürer. It is hardly surprising that it was in this circle that a mechanical device for transcribing detail, the Graphic Telescope,

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148 DE WINT *Comptfield* c.1815



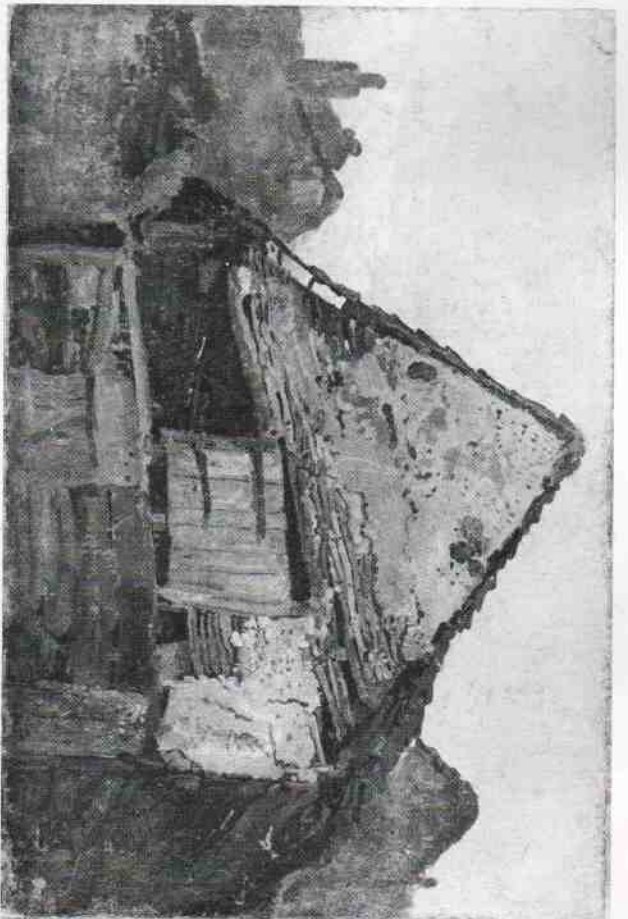
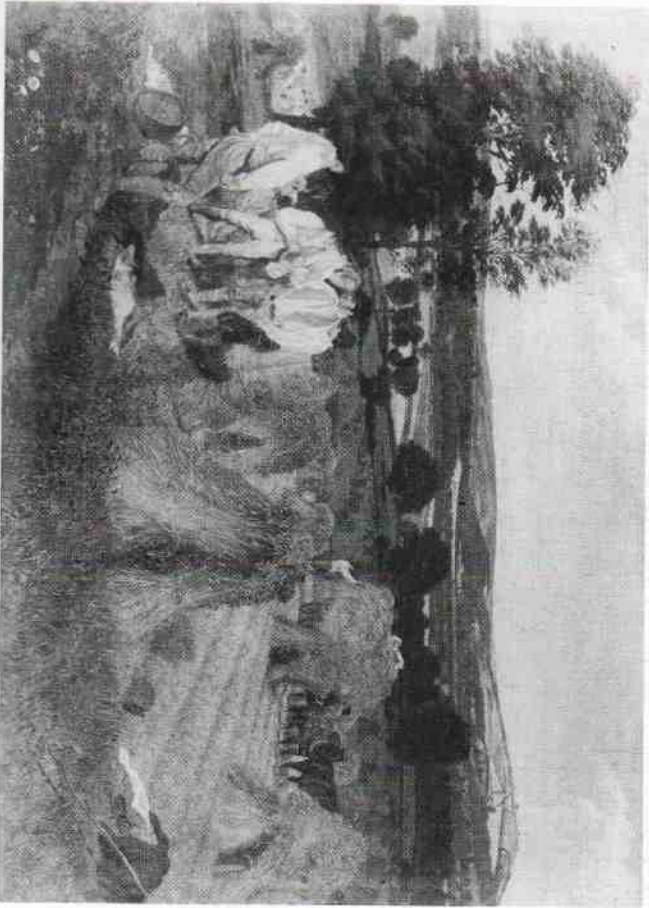
149 CONSTABLE *Boat Building on the Stour* 1814

was invented by Varley's brother Cornelius. A last and brief flowering of such interests can be found in the works painted by George Frederick Lewis (1782-1871) before 1820. A friend of Linnell's, he proudly recorded in the catalogue of the 1816 exhibition of the Society of Painters in Oil and Watercolour that his *Hereford, from the Haywood, Noon* was 'painted on the spot'. If, as Leslie Parris believes, this work is the one now in the Tate Gallery, it shows how little the sketching or painting in oils before nature need lead to the exploration of atmospherics and light. For, if Lewis' work is remarkable for recording the data of British farm life with an objectivity far removed from Constable's ^{romantic view of} rural activity, it shows none of the Suffolk artist's meteorological concern. Noon, for Lewis, is more a time when farmhands take a rest and a swig of ale than one of those 'splendid but evanescent Exhibitions... in the endless variety of nature'.

There seems to be no clear reason why Constable should, in his mid-forties, have suddenly embarked upon the series of large exhibition canvases, the 'six-footers', for which he is now chiefly remembered. The first of the series, *The White Horse*, still shows the difficulties Constable had in magnifying his freshness of vision to the scale of the big academy showpiece.

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150 LEWIS *Hereford, from the Haywood, Noon* 1815



151 LINNELL *Study of Buildings* 1806

the *grande machine*. But in *The Haywain* he resolved this, having mastered the habit of painting first a full-size sketch of the work, in which he could lay out the whole effect with great boldness, and then elaborating on this in the final work.

Unlike *Boat Building*, these large canvases are not exact records of a place. *The Haywain* may show a well-known place, the cottage in which a local character, Willy Lott, spent the whole of his life, but Constable has made alterations to the shape of the river, and the extent of the banks, in order to create a design with greater breadth. Above all, it was the immediacy of a particular time that he was seeking to convey, and it is as well to remember that when Constable first exhibited the work at the Academy in 1821 it was simply entitled *Landscape: Noon*.

It is this sense of a moment that creates the centre of the picture's excitement. Like the landscapes of Rubens, which he so admired, it is full of rhythm, colour and movement. The whole surface is alive with incident, the smoke rising from a chimney, the sun shining through leaves, making them translucent and brown, a fisherman emerging from the rushes. Yet everything is held in the most careful and tranquil of balances. The

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152 CONSTABLE *Study of Clouds* 1821

movement is the slight but constant change of a ^{fresh} breezy summer's day; and just as this movement can be suggested without threatening the harmony of the whole, so the individuality of each object is asserted ^{without} without creating conflict.

This does not seem to have struck critics at the time. At the Academy it created no stir. But three years later, when exhibited at the Paris Salon, it created a furor. Yet this, too, seems to have gone wide of the mark. For in their excitement about the freshness of the whole work, the way it had captured the movement of clouds and painted green upon green without becoming tedious, the critics ignored the completeness of the work's content, and referred to it as a 'sketch'.

Nothing governs the movement in *The Haywain* more than its sky. Constable was far from being the first landscape painter to make skies an

effectual part of the composition. Indeed, he himself recognized this as a common practice when, defending the implication that the sky was ^{obscure} in his pictures, he stated: 'It will be difficult to name a class of landscape in which the sky is not the key-note, the standard of scale, and the chief organ of sentiment.'

Yet here, as elsewhere, Constable established a new standard. He may have taken as a starting-point the *Cloud Compositions* in Alexander Cozens' treatise on landscape: but he took pains to make studies in the 1820s that emphasized above all the specific. This one, for example, has on the back the inscription 'Hampstead/Sept 11 1821 10 to 11 Morning/Clouds silvery grey on warm-ground/Light wind to the S.W./fine all day - but rain/in the night following'.

However, if Constable's concern is for accurate observation, he is not interested in classification. He compiled no inventory of clouds and his studies were largely devoted to those kinds of cumulus associated with changeable weather. He sought only to gain a close knowledge of those transient moments that attracted him.

In his combination of scientific enquiry and emotive response, Constable was fully of his age. Perhaps at no time since would it have been possible for an artist to write both 'Painting is a science, and should be pursued as an inquiry into the laws of nature' and 'Painting is for me but another word for feeling' without any sense of contradiction. Like Coleridge, whose poetry he greatly admired, he felt the attentive perception of nature in itself to be spiritually uplifting.

Constable also shared something of Coleridge's dark and troubled temperament, and it was not necessarily his intention that he should go down in history as the painter simply of rustic tranquillity. In 1821 he wrote of his wish that 'it could be said of me as Fuseli says of Rembrandt, "the followed nature in her calmest abodes and could pluck a flower on every hedge - yet he was born to cast a steadfast eye on the bolder phenomena of nature"'. Many of his sky studies are of stormy effects and sunsets, and after *The Haywain* he attempted to heighten the drama of his 'six-footers'. *The Leaping Horse*, exhibited in 1825, takes its cue from a moment of rapid action. It shows the moment when one of the barge horses makes its customary leap over one of the barriers set up along the Stour towpath to prevent cattle from straying.

Constable himself was clear about his interest in the 'bustle incident to such a scene' and felt anxious that the finished work had not completely conveyed the effect he wished. Certainly the full-scale sketch for it contains more sense of drama, and the violence of its impasto has made it a favourite work for Francis Bacon.



153 CONSTABLE: Study for *The Leaping Horse* 1825

The death of his wife, and a continued lack of serious recognition, served to deepen his inner pessimism. In such later works as the full-scale sketch for *Hadleigh Castle* the paint is laid on almost ^{with} ~~with~~ ^{sausage} ~~sausage~~ ^{variety} ~~variety~~ with a palette knife, and the whole surface is flecked over with those white highlights that became known as 'Constable's snow'. Constable fully accepted that it was an inner turmoil that was being expressed in these canvases: 'How for some wise purpose is every bit of sunshine clouded over in me. Can it be wondered at that I paint continual storms - "Tempest o'er tempest rolled"?'

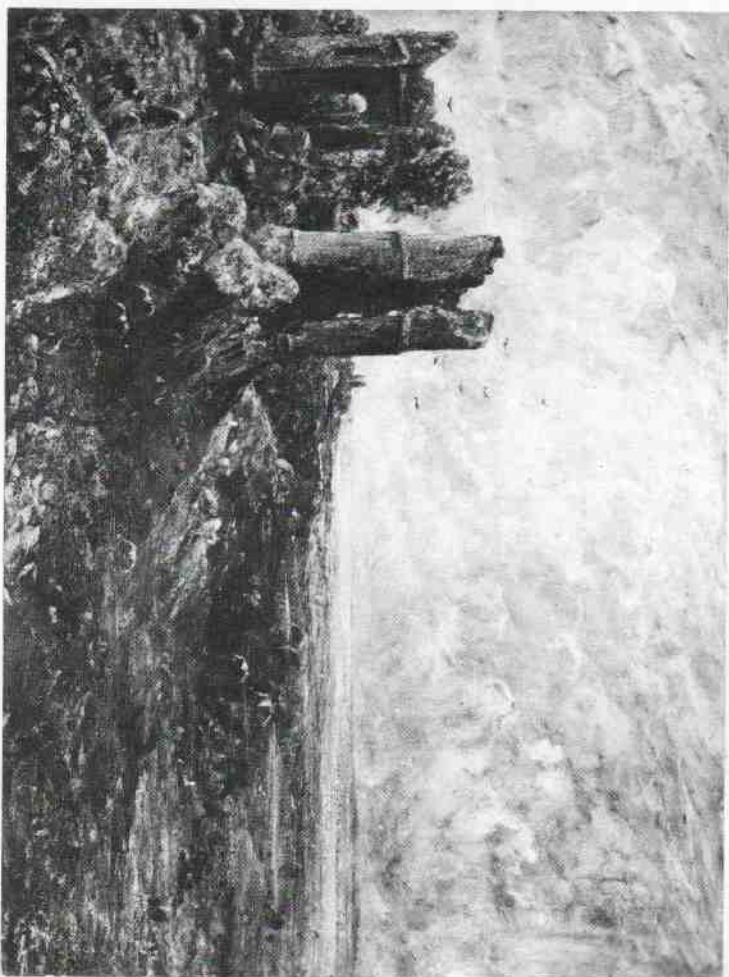
Yet he also saw something therapeutic in the sheer act of this expression: 'Still the darkness is majestic and I have not to accuse myself of ever having proscribed the moral feeling of Art. . . My canvas soothes me into forgetfulness of the scene of turmoil and folly and worse.'

136 As an image - a ruined castle by the sea - *Hadleigh Castle* is certainly very different from *The Haywain*. But it seems curious that Constable did not vary his subjects more in the late expressive years. He never sought out a wider variety of scenery after the intellectualities of his 'picturesque' tours of Derbyshire and the Lake District in his youth. All other views were the outcome of journeys undertaken for personal reasons. He went to Brighton and the South Coast on account of his wife's health, and to Salisbury to visit his friend Archdeacon Fisher.

The range of time and weather in his pictures is not extensive either. His storms are really clouded summer days, and one would be hard put to it to find a Constable painting of a real tempest. Occasionally his pictures have a hint of autumn, but never of winter. There is no snow in Constable's world. Evenings are rare, night-times non-existent.

Even before Constable's personal life had become clouded, the harmony of the countryside had been rent by violent change and economic recession - the consequences of the mechanization of farming that followed on the Industrial Revolution, the shift of productivity in Britain to industry and the slump that followed the wars with France. Suffolk, a highly organized farming community, was hit by these changes particularly badly, and Constable, the relative of farmers, millers and landowners, was well aware of it. In 1822 he considered the 'state of things in Suffolk' to be 'as bad as Ireland'.

Yet there is no more unrest in the subjects of his pictures than there was in the nooks and dells of Samuel Palmer. Constable's labourers go about their business peaceably, the fields are full of corn, there is not a burnt hayrick in sight. For a member of the landowning classes to paint such scenes of rural harmony in Suffolk in the 1820s virtually amounts to propaganda. It hardly needs to be added that Constable, like Palmer, was opposed to the Reform Bill of 1832. For this would 'give the government into the hands of the



154 CONSTABLE Sketch for *Hadleigh Castle* 1829

rabble and dregs of the people, and the devil's agents on earth - the agitators'. Constable's revolution was a pictorial one. He painted the greenness and movement of the English countryside, and in doing so sacrificed the conventions of distancing, tonality and finish that were traditionally thought to make a landscape pleasing. But if he made nature appear more immediate, his image of it was still that of the pastoral.

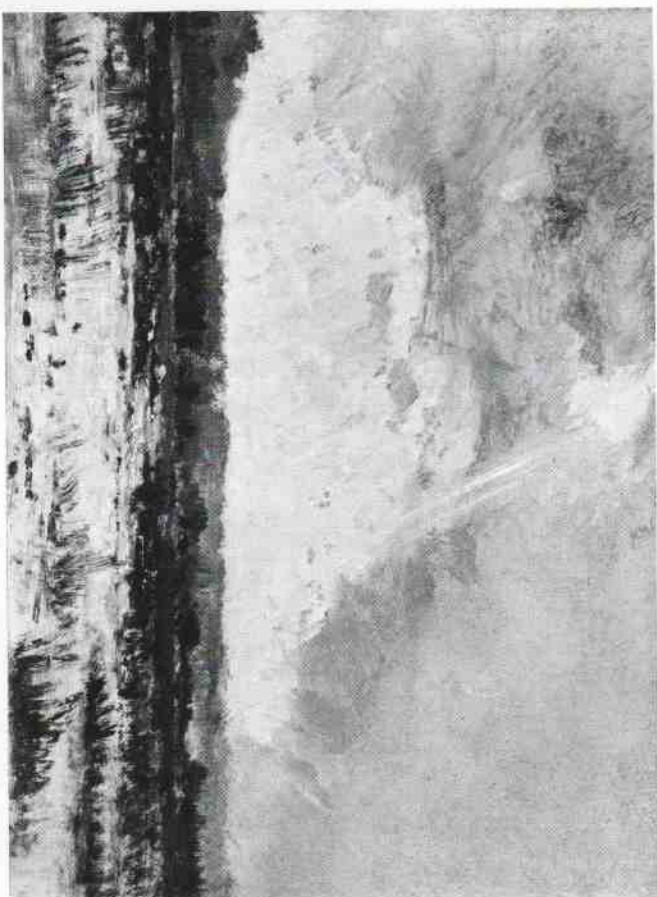
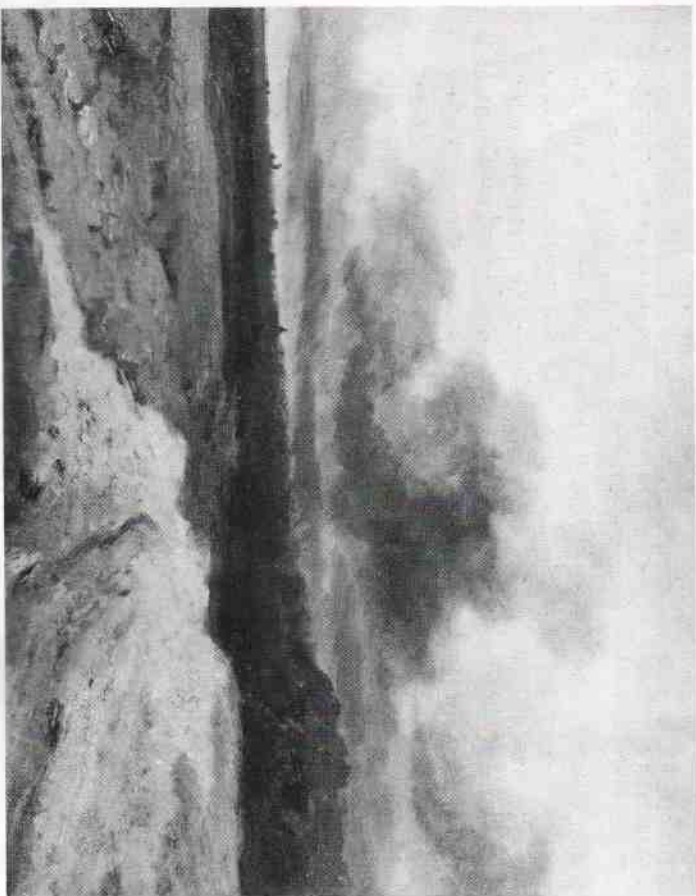
Naturalism is a standard that changes with every generation. Constable certainly brought about a new understanding of the effects of atmosphere and light; but he was not a naturalist in the sense that these effects alone were sufficient cause for painting. There was still the 'moral feeling of art'. His freshness was the means of bringing to life his memories of a harmonious world, a peaceable land of summer weather; and it is the Suffolk of his boyhood that still lingers beneath the agitated surface of his last pictures.

Towards naturalism

In France the search for a pure and unaffected manner was to lead to the consideration of the *effects* of nature – of light, colour and atmosphere – in themselves. But this was not before painters there had received an impetus from Constable. Previously the depiction of common nature had been upheld by Georges Michel (1763–1843), a Parisian John Crome. Absorbing the lessons of Ruysdael and Rembrandt, this artist settled at Montmartre, and found among the windmills and the heathlands the moodier moments of the Dutch.

It was the artists who began to move to the Forest of Fontainebleau to surround themselves with the marshes and woodlands in the neighbourhood of the village of Barbizon after 1830, who set up a more contemporary standard of naturalism. It is one that is only partially related to the notions of Romanticism. It is true the artists' 'flight to nature' to immerse themselves in an idyllic primal world has much of the Rousseauian vision about it. But their response to the forest scenery they surrounded themselves with was on the whole less charged than that of Constable to his native Suffolk. It is perhaps for this reason that their pictures remind one more readily of the more placid Dutch masters of the seventeenth century. They are best remembered today for extending the habit of painting directly out of doors,

155 MICHEL *The Storm*

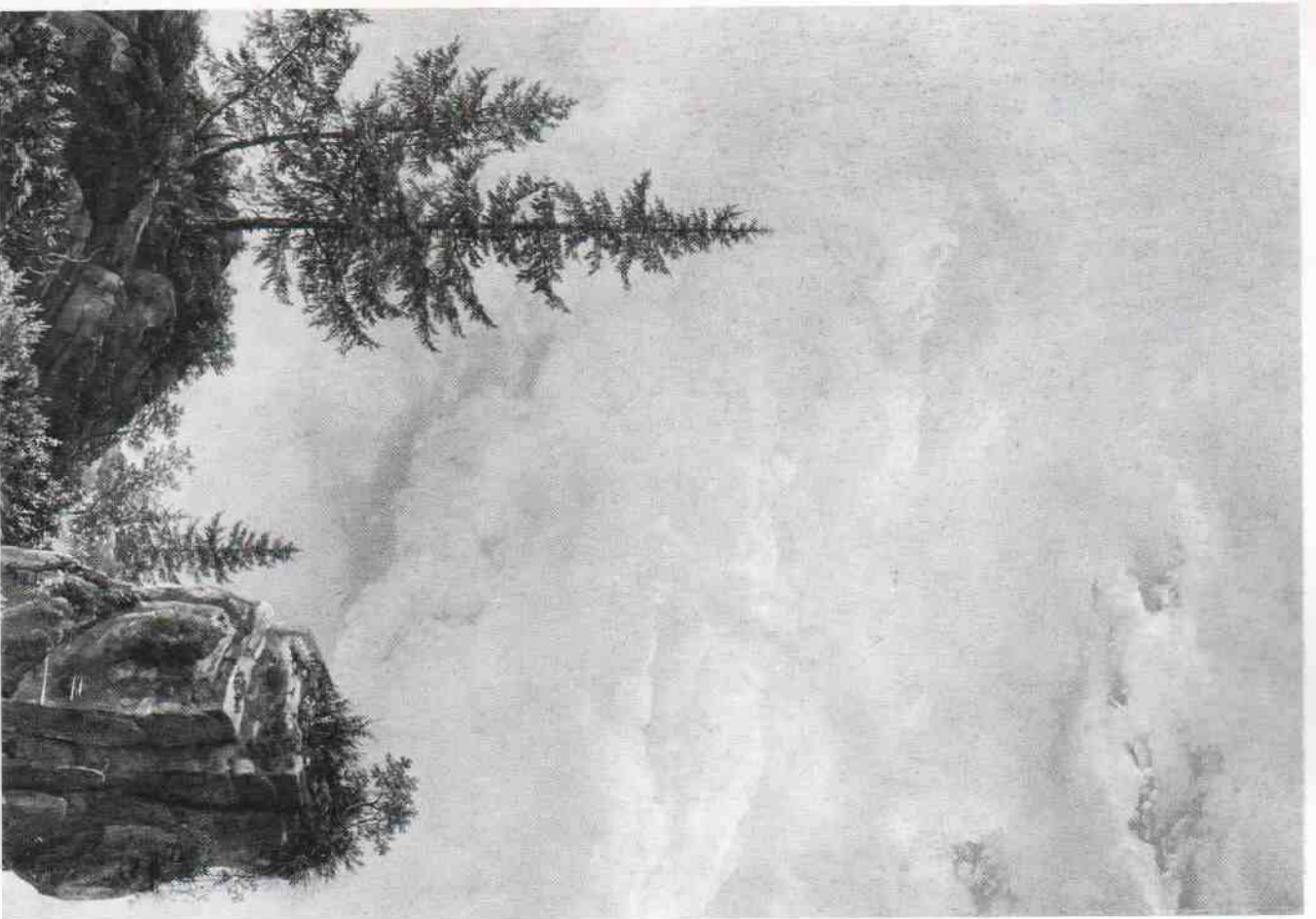


156 THÉODORE ROUSSEAU *A Marshy Landscape* 1842

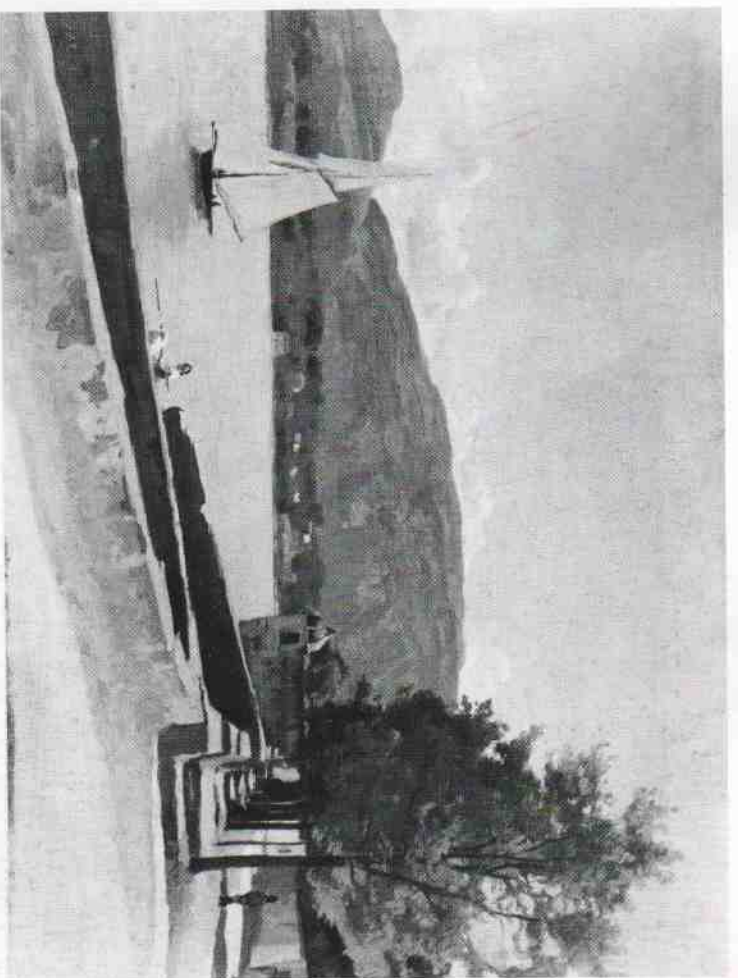
blurring the distinction between 'sketch' and 'finished picture' in a way that Constable had never done, and becoming a direct inspiration for the Impressionists. Only Théodore Rousseau (1812–67), the strongest personality in this loosely knit group, allowed his subjective emotions to emerge in the actual manner that he painted. From the time that he first exhibited at the Salon in 1831 this artist became notorious for the challenging vigour of his naturalism. As such he shared something of the sensationalism of the *romantiques* – although, unlike them, he was not favoured by the regime of Louis-Philippe. Only after 1848 did he achieve official acceptance. Prior to his first visits to the Barbizon area in 1830 Rousseau had absorbed the principles of the classical 'universal landscape' from his teacher Lehière. When he saw *The Haywain* in 1833 it made a deep impression on him; but he found nothing in its treatment to go against the emotive approach to landscape. And if he encouraged his followers to keep in mind the impression of 'virgin nature' he also understood composition to be the means by which 'that which is within us' enters into 'the external reality of things'. Within him there was a feeling for grandeur and passion that came to the fore when he confronted a mighty tree or a marshy expanse.

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157 DAHH *Rising Clouds in the Mountains* 1826(?)



158 COROT *Geneva, Quiet des Paquis* 1841

A less impassioned – and also less Constable-like – naturalism can be found in the works of Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796–1875). During his first visit to Rome (1825–28) he found among the practitioners of the classical landscape a concern for *plein air* effects, evident in the open-air oil sketches of the major French classical landscape painter Valenciennes. In his own works there is a calm and unpretentious insistence on the exploration of pure tonal values that was to become a model for later generations. The distinction between this quiet art and the more impassioned work of Rousseau was admirably brought out by Baudelaire in his Salon review of 1859: ‘If M. Rousseau – who, for all his occasional incompleteness is perpetually restless and throbbing with life – if M. Rousseau seems like a man who is tormented by several devils and does not know which to heed, M. Corot, who is his absolute antithesis, has the devil too seldom within him.’

Yet Corot’s art is not wholly without emotion. There is something of the Franciscan in his simplicity, and one contemporary at least could feel that ‘he does not so much paint nature as his love for her’. In later years this love



159 DURAND *Kindred Spirits* 1849

mellowed and took on a wistful poignancy, which was far more successful with the Salon-going public than his fresher earlier paintings had been. At this popular level, at least, Romanticism eventually caught up with him.

The charting of the gradual shift from emotive response to dispassionate description is an uncertain business, but there can be no doubting the strength of the movement. Throughout Northern Europe there sprang up movements and individuals who sought to set both idealism and subjectivity behind them. Such a man was Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller (1793–1865) whose fresh and immaculate views of Austrian mountains and pastures were as much of an affront to the Academy in Vienna as anything by Constable and Rousseau was to the art establishments of London and Paris. Another was the Norwegian Johann Christian Clausen Dahl (1788–1857). After a visit to Italy Dahl settled in Dresden in 1823 and became the intimate of Friedrich. Yet, although he would at times adopt the imagery of his sombre friend, and would also depict scenes of his native Norway in terms similar to those of Everdingen, his pictures reveal a blander interest in sheer description. A genial, even-tempered man, he felt no urge to probe too far beneath the surface either of appearance or of his own personality.

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160 DURAND *Study from Nature - Rocks and Trees* c.1855

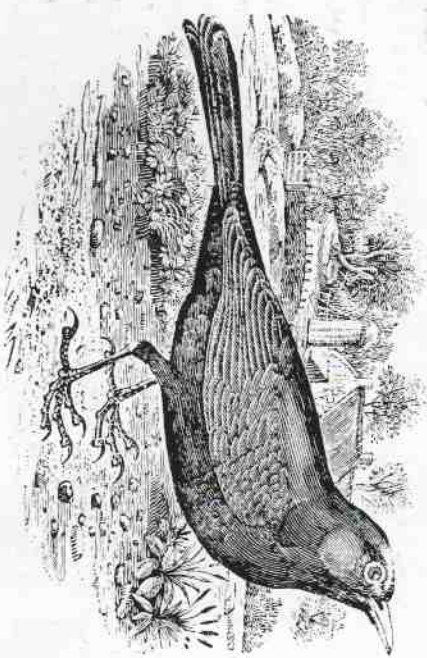
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In America, too, there developed a less excited interest in the wonders of the New World. Thomas Cole himself had, in his later years, moved towards the investigation of a less stupendous scenery. But the figure who led the 'Hudson River School' towards a Barbizonian appreciation was Cole's successor, Asher B. Durand (1796-1886). In 1849 Durand painted a picture in Cole's memory, *Kindred Spirits*, showing the artist and the poet Bryant standing on a rock, above a deep gorge, contemplating the hazy expanse. But within a few years he himself had turned towards the *plein air* study of the rocks and trees in that same area.

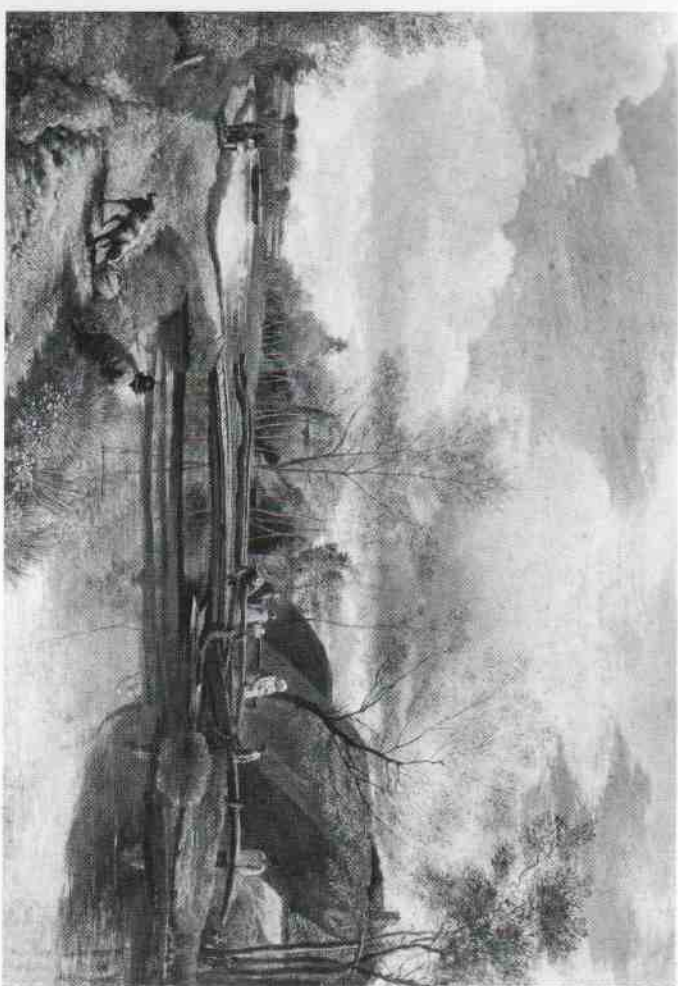
Intimism and Luminism

As the English Pre-Raphaelites were later to show, the search for natural truth did not always lead in the direction of atmospherics: there was also a more naïve impetus to record facts rather than effects.

From the start this tendency was connected with an admiration of 'Primitive' art, whether this was the 'unprejudiced' investigations of the fifteenth century or the simple directness of folk-art. Even Constable cast a wistful eye on those artists prior to the High Renaissance who supposedly went to nature without having to contend with the influence of others' impressions. And if he felt the need to come to terms with a knowledge of



161 BEWICK *The Blackbird (Black Quetzl)* 1797

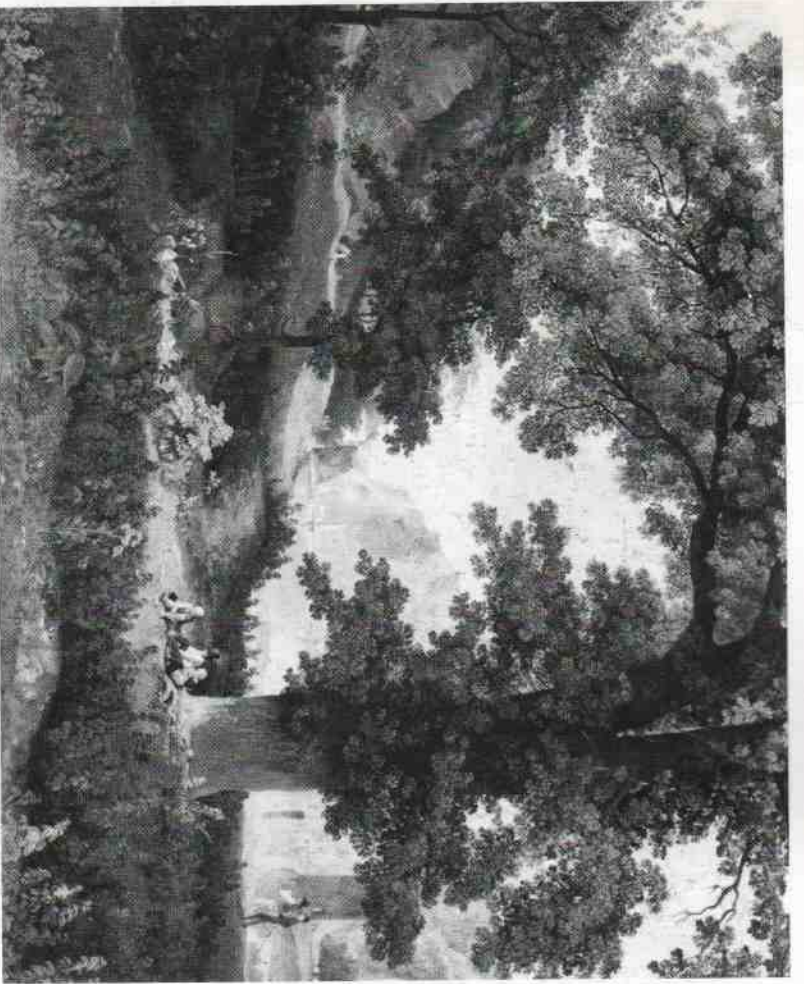


162 LINNELL *Canal at Newbury* 1815

nature that went beyond such innocence, such naturalists as John Linnell found their own studies before nature to accord with the detailed accounts of Dürer and the Flemish. In his *Canal at Newbury* this sharp-eyed attentiveness has produced a record that is as appropriate to the hardness of early spring as Constable's rippling fullness is to midsummer.

Such literalness, too, was closer to the kind of art that sought to make records for the naturalist, the precise drawings required by the botanist, zoologist and geologist. Thomas Bewick (1753-1828), the Newcastle artist who revived the use of wood as an engraving medium, used this archaic medium to grasp the markings and features of animals and birds in his popular books on natural history. And if his precision owed little to the old masters of woodcut, he was nevertheless reviving a medium that had sunk, since the Renaissance, to the level of a popular art and which seemed to him to be most appropriate for expressing his own deep affection for his native region.

Conscious naïveté and provincial primitivism in fact constantly intermingle in the type of art that often goes under the name of 'Intimist'. Yet whichever it is, the precision does seem to be deliberate in an artist like



163 DANBY *Clifton Rocks from Roundham Fields* c.1822

Francis Danby (1793–1861). For when this Irish artist wound up in Bristol between 1813 and 1824, after having failed to make his fortune immediately in London, he seems to have readily adopted a detailed manner for local work while sending more extravagant pictures to London exhibitions. Such scenes as *Clifton Rocks from Roundham Fields* provided an account of every leaf of every tree that was certainly well appreciated by patrons who had a special interest in local topography. It was out of a similar concern for natural history that the Swiss animal painter Jacques-Laurent Agasse (1767–1849), who settled in England in 1800, could bring a fresh charm to such genre scenes as *The Playground*.

The kind of faithful and unpretentious record that can be found in such works accorded well with the kind of small-town intimacy that goes in Central Europe under the name of 'Biedermeier'. This word derived from the confounding of two fictitious, deeply provincial and Philistine characters

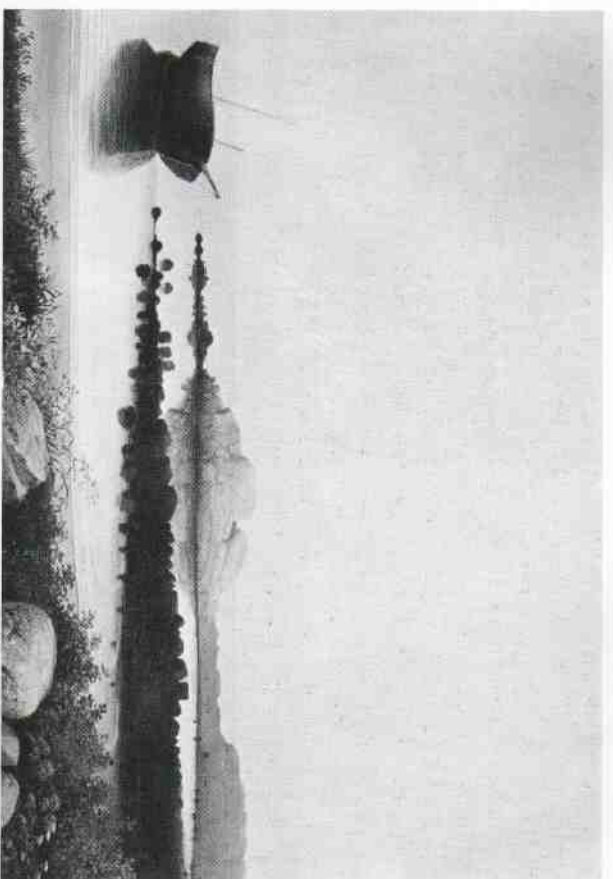
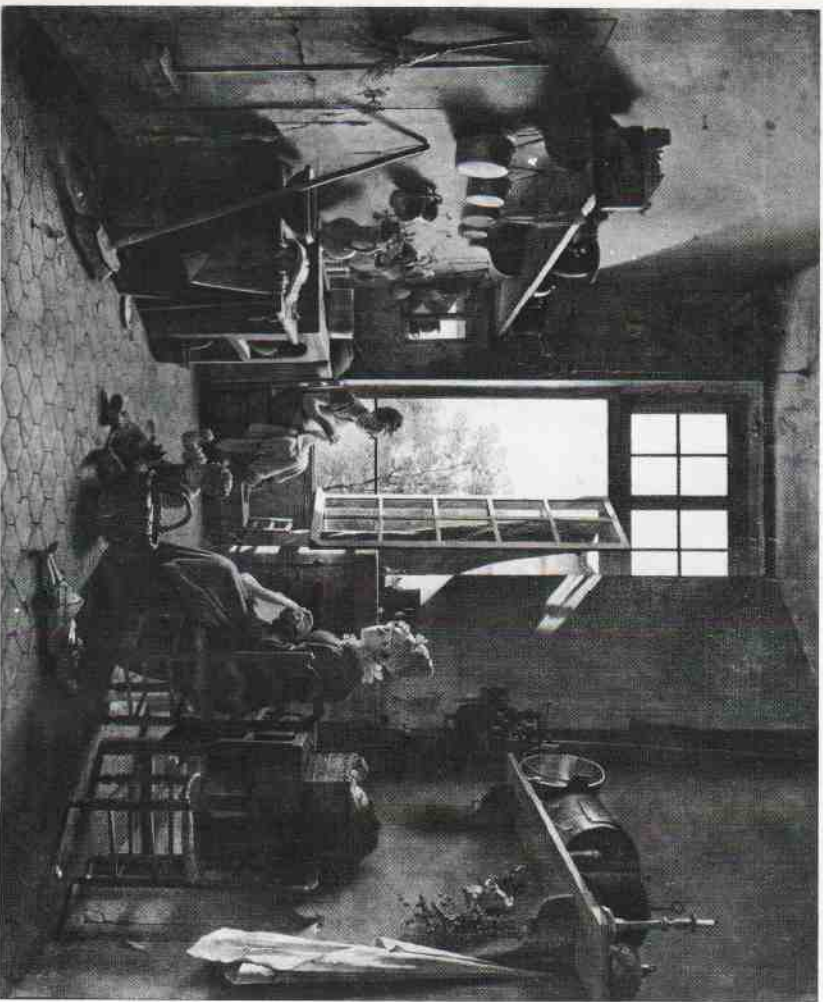


164 AGASSE *The Playground* 1830

– Herren Biedermann and Bummelmeier – who were currently the butt of much journalistic wit. It is certainly a useful term for identifying a tendency in the art and social life of the period 1815–48 – although it has none of the theoretical implications of such associated designations as Romanticism and Realism and cannot in any way be associated with an explicit movement. It should also not be confused with the simpler but equally bourgeois *intimiste* tradition that had existed as a sub-culture throughout Europe since the seventeenth century. Perhaps it is best to be distinguished from this by a certain self-consciousness and sentimental humour that can be seen as the innocent counterpart of Romantic ennui. Used in this way it can have a meaning not only for the art in Central Europe, but also in France, England and America. Thematically it can apply equally well to the description of people's everyday lives as to the nature that surrounded them. It certainly has a relevance for the exquisite interiors of Georg Friedrich Kersting (1785–1847) – a friend of Caspar David Friedrich who eventually became a

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165 DROLLING *Interior of a Kitchen* 1815



166 LANE Brant's *Rock, Eastern Point, Gloucester* 1863

drawing supervisor at the Meissen china factory – and the meticulous records of the French genre painters Louis-Léopold Boilly (1761–1845) and Martin Drolling (1752–1817).

In both cases there is an obvious dependence on the 'little masters' of the Dutch school. Yet both are of their time in the lyrical sentiment that underlies their enjoyment of domesticity.

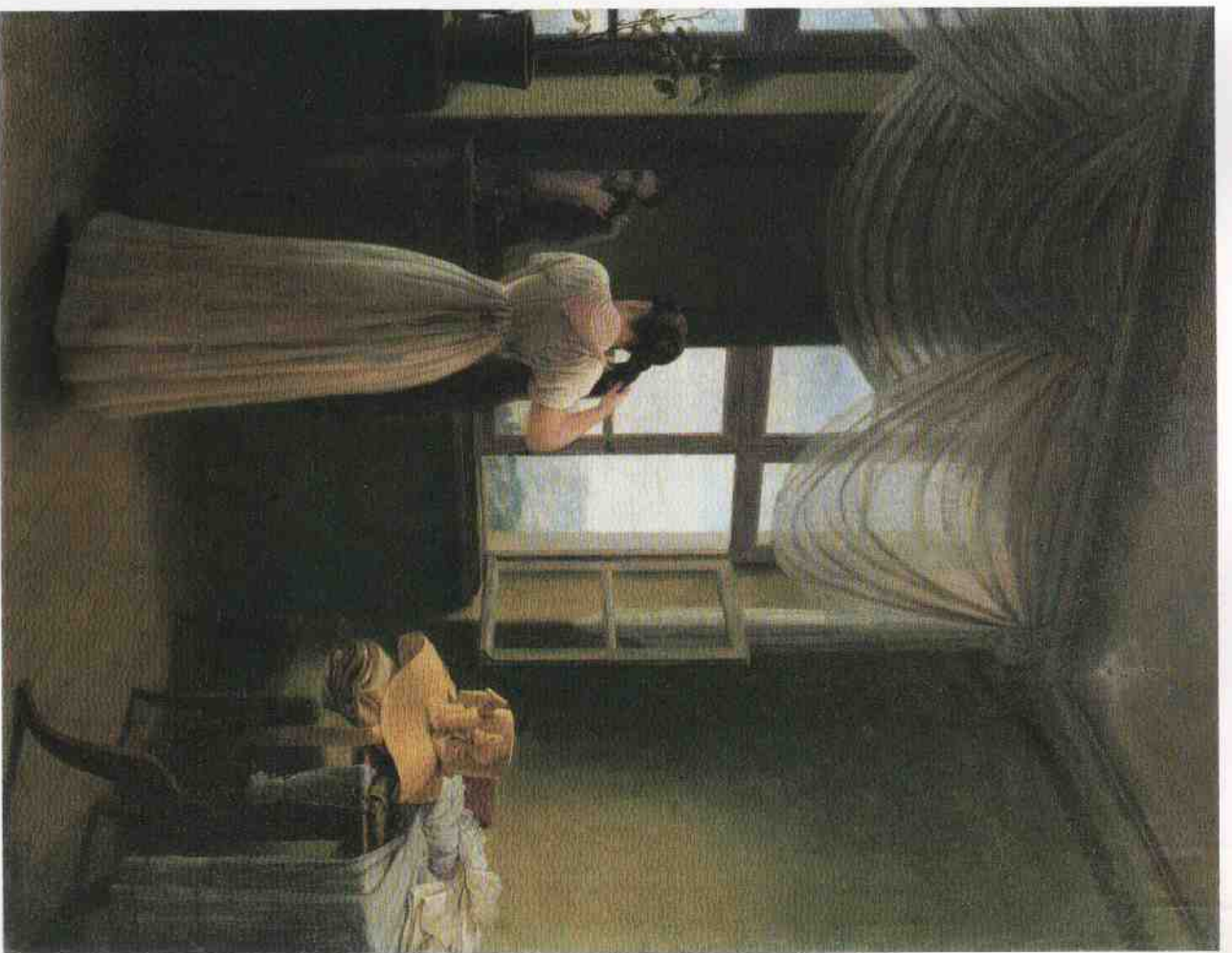
In America the relationship between such detailed art and the folk tradition is more complex. The 'luminist' seascapes of the New England painter Fritz Hugh Lane (1804–65), with their careful detail and subtly graded tonalities, seem to belong to both traditions at once. Lane was painting for a highly appreciative local audience, and seems to have shared with other New Englanders a deep involvement with ships and the sea. George Caleb Bingham (1811–79) was more nationally famed for his Missouri genre scenes. There is certainly a most knowing control in the clear organization of these scenes of Middle American life. Yet the smoothly painted luminosity gives an almost magical quality to their realism. In their



167 BINGHAM *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri* 1845

different ways both Lane and Bingham gave their accounts a precision that has since become a recurring feature of American realism.

The European search for naturalism had many unexpected reverberances. And if some of these could be felt in America, others travelled to the Far East. Landscape painting here was an art of great antiquity, and there was nothing that Europeans could teach Chinese and Japanese scroll painters about the spiritual contemplation of nature. It was such masters of the more worldly Japanese woodblock print as Hokusai (1760–1849) and Hiroshige (1797–1858) who adapted Western conventions of lighting and perspective to the Eastern tradition. And it is fitting that this more accessible and popular art should in its turn have been the one to have the greatest impact on Western painters when, a few decades later, these sought to reinvigorate their art by turning to the East.



168 KERSTING *Before the Mirror* 1837

Sensation

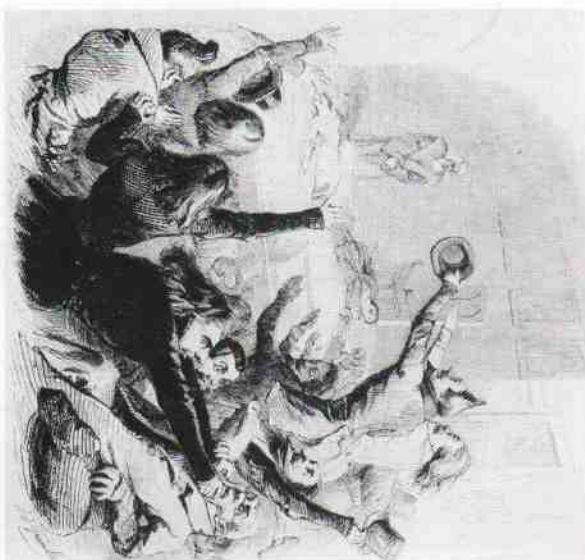
Romantic versus classic

169 It was in France that the controversy over Romanticism and classicism became most vociferous. In the time between Stendhal's proclamation of the *amour* and modernity of Romanticism in *Racine and Shakespeare* in 1823 and the staging of Victor Hugo's *Hernani* in 1830 – where the breaking of a classical convention of verse-making in the opening lines provoked riots in the audience – French Romanticism emerged as a violent and committed *avant-garde*.

The military metaphors that came so readily to those who took part in these skirmishes are symptomatic of the situation in which they occurred. For in post-Napoleonic France, art could be a surrogate for political action. There were many – old soldiers, dreamers, untried adventurers – who felt a stifling boredom and sense of betrayal, as they saw the daring changes of the Revolution and Empire atrophy in the hands of the new officialdom. Classicism – whether in the theatre or the salon – became for these a symbol of mindless traditionalism, the perpetuation of form for form's sake. Whereas an artist like Ingres indicated the 'timeless' values of Greek art, Stendhal could assert that all great art was daring and innovative when it was made; that the borrowing of conventions from the past was no way to create for the present age.

The classical-Romantic conflict was real enough in the sphere of art politics, but it is less clear how much it meant to the major painters of the time. Certainly Delacroix was hailed as a Romantic leader; yet he himself was disdainful of the movement, and never concealed his respect for tradition and 'permanence'. And although the later works of David's pupils could provide substance to the accusation that classicism was irrelevant and lifeless, there was no doubting the topicality of the paintings of David from the Revolutionary period, or those of Gros and Girodet from the Empire. Gérard and Delacroix were the heirs to a school of painting full of drama and emotional complexity.

By the end of the eighteenth century, in fact, some artists were producing works so aberrant that only the word 'romantic' seemed appropriate to describe them. In 1802, in *The Spirit of Christianity*, Chateaubriand had



169 GRANDVILLE *The Disorderly Romantics at the Battle of 'Hernani'* 1830



170 GROS *Sappho at Lenticae* 1801

defended the choice of religious themes in art on the grounds that they were 'richer, more beautiful, more romantic, more moving' than those of classical antiquity. However, subjects could be found in the ancient world, too, that transcended reasoned action; and when Gros exhibited his *Sappho at Leucate* in 1801, it had also gained the epithet 'romantic'.

Certainly the moment when the Greek poetess casts herself into the sea, after being abandoned by her lover, is anything but stoical: 'It was a fundamental deviation from the principles of Greek art to undertake the painting of despair', commented Charles Blanc in 1845. Contemporary critics objected not only to the subject's capitulation to emotion but also to an apparent arbitrariness in the handling, in particular the dominant blue-green of the mournful colouring and the unstable motion of the design. Arguing in a vein similar to that of Reynolds when he censured the free expression of fantasy in the visual arts (see p. 13), the *Journal de Paris* remarked: 'The scene is romantic, the colour ideal. This subject could present itself in such a manner to the imagination, but never to the eye.' Gros embroidered the legend by showing the suicide taking place at night – a circumstance that certainly heightens the pathos. In the moonlight the shapes become ambiguous. Sappho's cloak is translucent, like a ghostly shroud, the rocks behind her silhouettes of unearthly presence. She herself emerges from their forms with a silent motion that cannot be continued in the imagination without destroying the picture's fragile equilibrium. Although more classically detailed in execution than Gros's Napoleonic narratives, it is even more psychologically disturbing: hardly surprising that it puts many commentators in mind of late nineteenth-century treatment of the same theme by the Symbolist Gustave Moreau.

Gros's *Sappho* is a plea that emotive effect can be conveyed as much through precision as through bravura. It was not simply the breadth and passion of his portraits and contemporary scenes that fascinated the younger generation, but a more indefinable excitement that Delacroix could only describe as 'this power of projecting me into that spiritual state which I consider to be the strongest emotion that the art of painting can inspire'.

No follower of David strayed further from his master in his choice of subject-matter than Anne-Louis Girodet (1767–1824). In Rome in 1792, while working on an antique scene of medical professionalism, *Hippocrates Revising the Presents of Attaxerxes* for Trioson (the doctor who was later to adopt him as a son), he was at the same time engaged on a depiction of bewitchment, the *Sleep of Endymion*. In showing the Greek shepherd cast into an eternal sleep for the delinquency of the enamoured moon-goddess, Girodet fixes upon the effluence of the moonbeam as it plays over the languorous form of its victim. There is no rhetoric here, only wonderment.

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171 GIRODET *Sleep of Endymion* 1792

After he returned to France in 1795 Girodet divided his time between fashionable portraiture, book illustration and the exploration of fantasy. He shared Chateaubriand's fascination with the mystique of Christianity and painted the author – to the latter's great delight – unkempt and melancholic, meditating among the ruins of Rome (1807; Musée de Saint-Malo). When it was exhibited at the Salon of 1810 Napoleon remarked that it made its subject (who had fallen into political disfavour) look 'like a conspirator who has just come down the chimney'. Yet in 1801 he had himself benefited from Girodet's fantasy *Ossian Receiving Napoleon's Generals*, a work whose bizarre iconography led David to conclude that his former protégé had taken leave of his senses.

Whatever David may have thought, Girodet emerged as a leading defender of classicism under the Restoration. His fantasies had never interfered with the fulfilment of more pragmatic requirements, such as the narration of Napoleonic triumphs during the latter years of the Emperor's rule. Even his most imaginative themes remained confined by his technique. *Endymion*, a picture about light, is far from suggesting the immaterial. With its frieze-like

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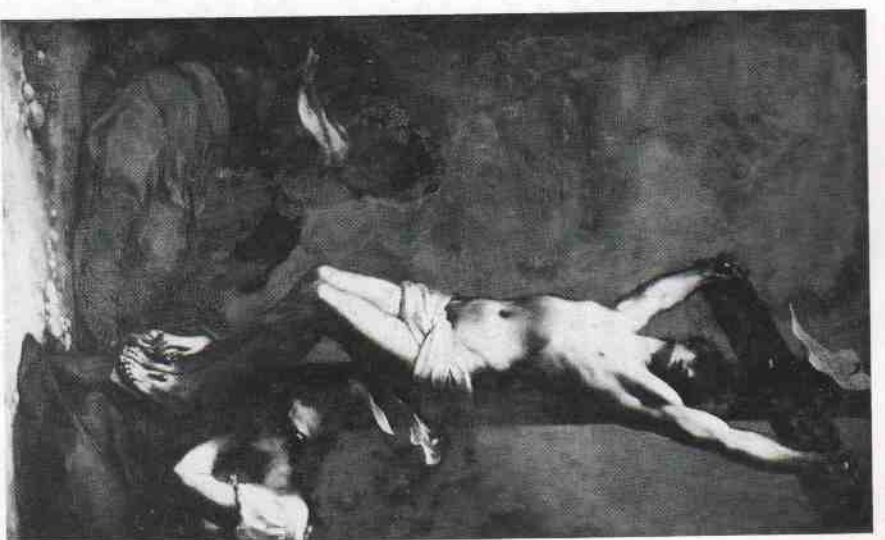
172 PRUD'HON *Justice and Divine Vengeance Pursuing Crime* 1808

design and carefully modelled forms, it is hardly more ethereal than a well-staged tableau. For Keats the 'poetic romance' of *Endymion* was to become a hazy, breathtaking quest for the ideal. The emotions aroused by Girodet's picture, as by the sculptures of Canova, which he so admired, are more tangible than transcendent. The moment is not so much mystical as erotic.

Girodet's scruple in maintaining a surface rationality – a logic of forms if not of subjects – reveals his position in the controversy on the limitations of pictorial suggestion. Both he and Gros were to regret the lead they had unwittingly provided for an art of sensation and sensationism.

The emotive tradition prevailed unrepentantly in the work of Pierre-Paul Prud'hon (1758–1823). Unlike Girodet and Gros, he was never a pupil of David. Trained first in Dijon, he was a student in Paris in 1780–83, a time when the Master's impact could still be avoided. During his subsequent years in Rome he preferred the softer Neo-classicism of Mengs, Antonio Canova and Angelika Kauffmann to that of the new French school; and he responded even more to Leonardo da Vinci and Correggio – painters of the High Renaissance with an incomparable feeling for floating grace and tender

173 PRUD'HON *Crucifixion* 1822



174 DELACROIX *Christ in the Garden of Olives* 1827



modelling. On his return to Paris in 1789 Prud'hon became a Jacobin and attended David's Club des Arts; but he still remained aloof from the declamatory manner, and continued to develop his own vein of sensibility in portraits, allegories and wistfully erotic book illustrations. During the Empire this 'French Correggio' – as he was known – played the court artist. A favourite of Josephine's, he portrayed the Imperial couple, worked as their interior designer and executed public decorative projects.

It would be possible to see Prud'hon as a survivor of eighteenth-century elegance, were it not for the tragic dimension that came to the fore in the great paintings of his later years. *Justice and Divine Vengeance Pursuing Crime* was commissioned to decorate the Salle de la Cour Criminelle of the Palais de Justice. The theme is elaborated with customary classical allusions. The fleeing murderer is based on a statue by Canova, and the flying deities are taken from one of Flaxman's outlines to the *Iliad*. Yet the overwhelming sense of guilt and retribution is conveyed by the masterful control of rhythm and illumination. The pale arc of the victim's body finds a response in the darkened curve of the pursuing deities, generating a relentless movement which already engulfs the hunched brooding figure of the assassin.

In his last years Prud'hon's own life became one of tragedy and remorse. His artistic reputation did not survive well in the Restoration, and in 1821 his personal life became blighted when his pupil and mistress, Constance Meyer, committed suicide. Perhaps an echo of these events can be found in his final major work, the *Crucifixion*. Christ's tortured body is seen close to, at an angle, against a darkened void. His eyes and hands cast in shadow, he is a sightless, helpless torso.

It is a great disservice to such artists as Gros, Girodet and Prud'hon to see them purely as forerunners for a later Romanticism. Even at their most intimate, fanciful or tragic the painters of the Empire did not strive to be subversive in the way that their successors did. For all his excitation of compassion or melancholy, Gros's protagonists remain heroes. Even the suicide of Sappho – his most aberrant moment – seems positively selfless when compared to the passionless destruction of Delacroix's *Sardanapalus*.

One is aware, too, that Prud'hon's *Justice*, for all its evocation of mood, allows no wavering in our sympathies. A murder has been committed, and Justice is to be seen to be done. His *Crucifixion* shows a break with the classical frieze-like design – no doubt a reflection of the lead that had already been provided by such works as Gérardin's *Melissa*. But even in his suffering and degradation Prud'hon's Christ remains noble. He is not the disturbingly exhausted and undervalued figure of Delacroix's *Christ in the Garden of Olives* whose 'earthy and African colouring', according to the *Journal de Paris*, 'resembles more a man already dead than an immortal being'.

The English

It was a key feature of this shift of emphasis that the irrational and the sensory should become dominant. Such obsessions drew the painters of the Restoration in France towards the more casual concern for sheer effect that was prevalent in contemporary English art. Since the mid eighteenth century the culture of the English had become a byword for informality. And just as they had brought 'naturalness' (or, if you preferred, 'wildness') to the garden, and had with West and Copley pioneered the modern-life history painting, so they introduced a nonchalant pose to High Romanticism. On a personal level this could be found both in the cult of the dandy – the meticulously studied understatement of dress of such figures as 'Beau' Brummel, the Prince Regent's boon companion – and in the stylish abandon epitomized by the poet Byron.

It is perhaps to be expected that painterly brilliance was most cultivated in those pictorial genres where observation was more the intention than narrative: notably in portraiture, animal painting and landscape. The portraiture of the age was dominated by an artist who epitomized the notion of the dandy in both style and personality. Sir Thomas Lawrence (1769–1830) – a handsome, kindly philanthropist – possessed all the ease of manners to make him acceptable in the most fashionable society. The apparently effortless expertise of his art brought him spectacular success at an early age. Like Turner he became an Academician at the earliest possible age; but for him the honours did not stop there. In 1815 he was knighted, and in 1820 he became President of the Royal Academy. By that time he had also taken Europe by storm. From the time that he was sent abroad by the Regent to paint the leading generals and rulers of the Allies in 1818 he was felt to be without rival. At the same time that he was exciting the young French artists he was also gaining official approval, and a visit to Paris in 1825 brought for him the Légion d'Honneur.

Lawrence's elegant portraits seem lacking in *gravis* and mental power – especially when compared to those of Reynolds. However, what he lacked in breadth and discursiveness he made up for in his awareness of temperament. His peculiar empathy for the proclivities of his fashionable contemporaries can be felt in the portrait of Arthur Atterley, where he captures the adolescent mood of the young man in its casualness and intensity. Shown walking, hat in hand, before a stormy landscape, Atterley turns to scrutinize us, giving his full attention to the momentary distraction. The pose is fleeing, yet it could not be more calculated in its balance; the dark circle of the hat generating a relaxed surface rhythm. Throughout the changeable lighting effects the paintwork is broadly laid, yet glistening and



175 WARD *Lioness and Heron* 1816

fluid. The sheer refinement and sensibility of such works set a standard that was to be emulated later by Delacroix, Manet and Whistler.

The animal painter James Ward (1769–1855) was to bring about a similar shift towards the emotive in his own genre. Ward was another artist who succeeded by demonstrable expertise, but his pictures display a more troubled temperament; and if Lawrence's stylishness attracted Delacroix, it is appropriate that Ward's morbidity should have appealed particularly to Géricault.

Ward's interest in energy and expression had a religious basis. Himself a follower of the apocalyptic clergyman Edward Irving, he shared the sect's belief in the gift of tongues, was an admirer of Blake and was given to praying for inspiration in his studio. His fascination with wild beasts was in effect a fascination with the sources of primal energy. Such works as *Lioness and Heron* have an utterly animal violence, which is intensified not only by

the stormy background, but also by the distortion of the lion's forepaw as it spreads forward to secure its prey. Stubbs' dramatic *Horse Frightened by a*



176 LAWRENCE *Arthur Atterley as an Etonian* 1790–91

Lion appears elegant and controlled by comparison. Ward's picture does not appeal, as Stubbs' work does, to our finer feelings, but to areas less susceptible to sensibility.

To those artists who had undergone the rigours of the French Academy, the English seemed enviable for their informality and emotiveness but ultimately devoid of more controlled qualities. Even Delacroix, for all his emulation of the expertise of Constable and Lawrence, felt 'all the great English painters' had the 'defect of exaggeration'. When reviewing the work of the school in his diary on 8 February 1860 he decided that this tendency to over-emphasis prevented them from achieving 'that quality of eternal youth characteristic of the great masterpieces'. Such an opinion highlights the principal dilemma that both Delacroix and Géricault felt in their art: how to paint in a lively and modern manner, to reveal in sensation – and yet produce an art that was as sustained and penetrating, as continuous in its revelation, as that of the great masters.

Theodore Géricault

183 No work produced a more convincing answer to this problem than *The Raft of the Medusa* by Géricault (1791–1824). This vast canvas, so disconcertingly dominant at the Salon of 1819, became as much a talisman for the young artists of the Restoration as David's *Oath of the Horatii* had been for those of the Revolution.

Nothing underlines the disparate emphasis of these two great innovators more than their motivations. Both wished to produce an art that was powerful and arresting – Géricault's recorded ambition was 'to shine, to illuminate, to astonish the world'. Yet David's State-commissioned enactments of resolution and achievement are the converse of Géricault's presentations of defeat, conflict and disease. David's emotions served his sense of public duty; Géricault's bore witness to a private obsession.

Géricault's eager, febrile disposition keenly felt the disturbances that followed Napoleon's downfall. His own affiliations were uncertain: so much so, in fact, that he could celebrate the military prowess of the Empire in his first exhibited work in 1812, join the Royalist guards three years later, and in a further three years paint a scathing indictment of the Restoration government. The son of a prosperous and indulgent – if uncomprehending – father, he was free from external pressures. He need exhibit at the Salon only when he had a special purpose (there were three such occasions); and when he received a Government commission that was not to his liking, he simply passed it on to his young acquaintance Delacroix.

Géricault's impetus was, therefore, fully at the mercy of his temperament. His career began casually enough with an apprenticeship in 1808 to the essay-



177 GÉRICAULT *Portrait of an Officer of the Chasseurs Commanding a Charge* 1812

going animal and battle painter Carlé Vernet (1758–1836). Two years later, however, he transferred to the studio of Pierre-Narcisse Guérin (1774–1833), the master of a spirited classical style who also trained Delacroix and Huet. From Guérin, Géricault received a thorough grounding in the mechanics of monumental painting, the laborious study and assemblage that goes into the construction of the grand historical piece. From this time – at first in a dilatory manner, and then with mounting conviction – Géricault moved towards the creation of such a work: *The Raft of the Medusa*. Yet the equivocation with which this was received discouraged him from further concentration on such a project. Only on his death-bed, when it was too late, did he dream of creating some other *grande machine*.

183 Géricault was consistently the chronicler of those modern events that struck his own sympathies. During the Empire this accorded well with the action and modernity of Carlé Vernet's horse paintings and battle scenes. He was never personally close to Gros, the master of the modern epic; yet he studied his style and shared his admiration for the colour and effect to be found in Venetian and Baroque painters. During his youth the Musée Napoleon was still intact, and he made free copies there of pictures by such masters of realism and drama as Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Rubens and Velazquez.

177 Géricault's first Salon exhibit, the *Portrait of an Officer of the Chasseurs Commanding a Charge*, was enthusiastically received. Painted while Napoleon was on his Russian campaign, it excelled even the military portraits of Gros in its vibrancy and action. The reception of its sequel, *Wounded Cuirassier Leaving the Field*, was more uncertain. Exhibited at the time when Napoleon was imprisoned in Elba, it is redolent of defeat. It was not the frank topicality of the work that dismayed the critics; they were concerned more that the brilliance and vividness of the 'Chasseur' had been replaced by leaden tones and a subdued design.

The *Wounded Cuirassier* also taxed the critics by its scale. Since *Officer of the Chasseurs* had been exhibited as a portrait, there had been little objection to its being life-size. However, it was felt to be inappropriate that the *Cuirassier*, a metre genre piece, should have been painted on a scale reserved for weightier themes. Géricault, however, was to persist in treating the unheroic with all the gravity and dimensions formerly reserved for history painting.

The contemporary disillusion which Géricault monumentalized here was soon to be reinforced for him by a private torment. For around this time he began a near-incestuous liaison with the young wife of his maternal uncle. The diplomacy of Géricault's father managed to prevent the scandal becoming known outside the family, but within it the rift was irreparable. He began to find the 'terrible perplexity into which I have recklessly thrown

178 GÉRICAULT *Wounded Cuirassier Leaving the Field* 1814

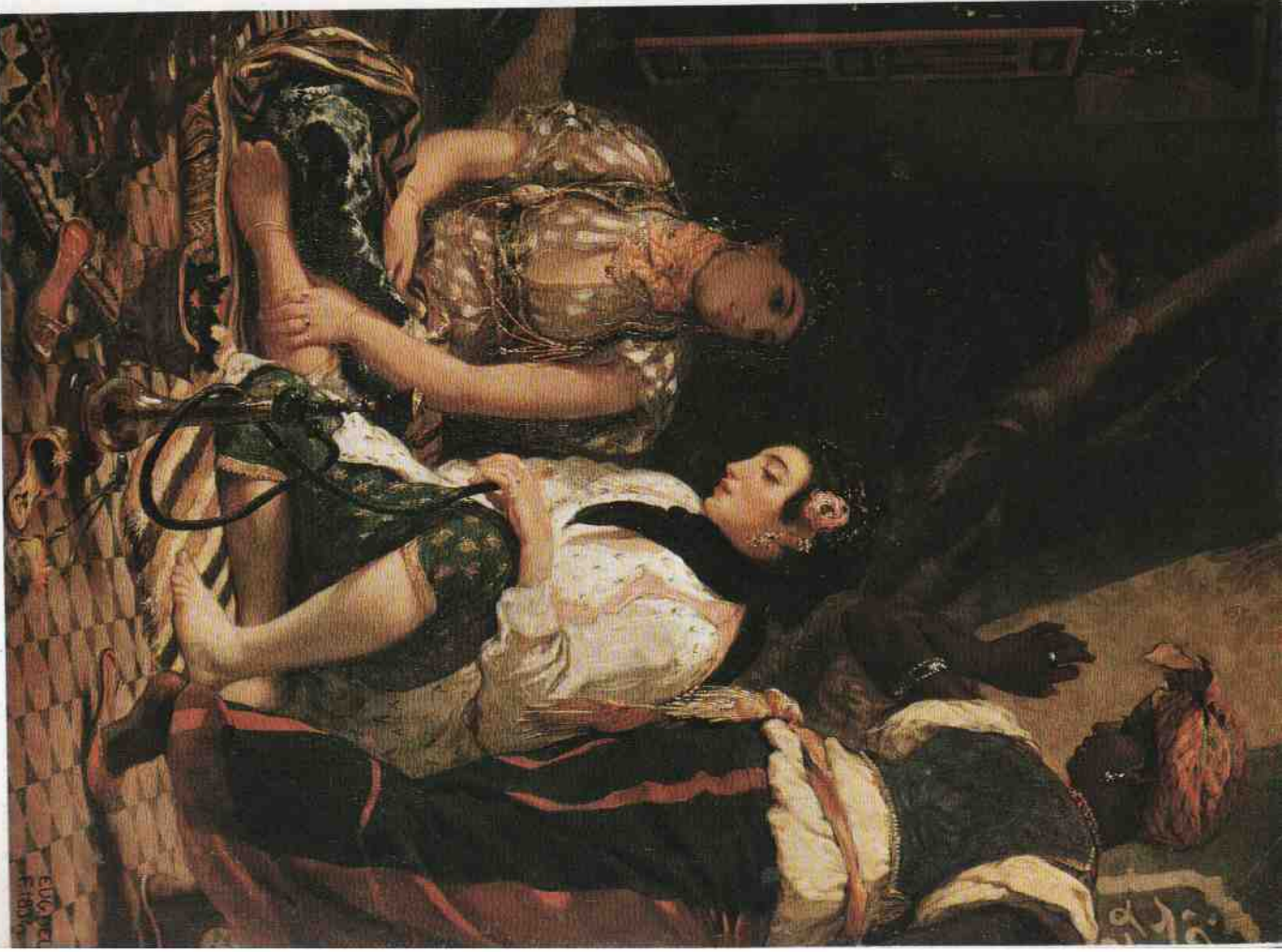


myself' unbearable. His decision to go to Rome in 1816 was taken as much to escape his predicament as to complete his artistic education. Having failed to win the Prix de Rome, he left in the autumn of that year as a private student. In little more than a year he had been driven back to Paris – and to his mistress – by depression and loneliness.

If it did not solve his personal dilemma, Géricault's stay in Rome certainly enhanced his artistic potential. He was overwhelmed by the inner energy of Michelangelo's figures and the unsuspected vigour to be found in certain classical statues. He also found a modern subject that seemed capable of receiving these impressions, the popular race of riderless horses that took place along the Corso in Rome every year at carnival time. It was his intention to paint an immense, thirty-foot canvas on the theme, and during his last six months in Rome he was preoccupied with making studies for it. These show a gradual narrowing down of interest from the general bustle of the event to the single action of conflict when Roman peasants are struggling to keep the excited horses in control just before the start of the race.



179 DELACROIX *Dante and Virgil in Hell* (detail of 1827)



180 DELACROIX *Algerian Women in their Apartment* (detail of 1834)

The final preparatory study is clearly based on a classical frieze in its design, in its profiling of forms, and even in the way all the individual features have become generalized. Perhaps there is a direct tribute to the horsemen of the Parthenon frieze, which had been brought to England by Lord Elgin in 1806 and which Géricault knew from plaster casts. Yet it is a classicism on the point of disruption. The horses are savage beasts, struggling to break loose. And while the underlying design is clear, its lines are broken up by the lighting. Instead of articulating the figures, light falls across them in arbitrary diagonals. The foreground man and horse are caught by a sunbeam, in a brief moment of equilibrium; but around them in the shadows are more frenzied silhouettes.

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Géricault shared the Romantic fascination with the horse as an image of superhuman energy. A recurrent theme in his art from the time of the *Officer of the Chasseurs*, it also grew from personal proclivities. For he was himself a fanatical horseman, and in his last desperate years a series of reckless riding accidents hastened his untimely death.

Soon after Géricault left Rome he abandoned this painting; perhaps he felt it was too timeless and formal to startle the Salon. He now began to frequent the jovial, faintly Bohemian milieu of his master's son, Horace Vernet, entering into its stylish concern for the bizarre and the topical: for the political and social undercurrents of a world without momentous events. Like Horace Vernet and their mutual friend Nicolas-Toussaint Charlet (1792–1845), he turned to the new and rapid journalistic technique of lithography to chronicle the debris of the Napoleonic campaigns. Yet unlike his colleagues he dwelt in his scenes of the campaigns not on the humorous or the anecdotal but upon brutality and degradation.

Géricault's obsession with violence may have been temperamental; but it was also an attempt to make an unheroic age aware of the existence of extremes. And just as he was drawn by the vivid sense of *reportage* that could be gained from lithography, so he found that news stories provided him with appropriately sensational subject-matter. Already in 1817 he was turning to such sources in search of a suitable theme for the work with which he intended to dominate the next Salon. At first he considered using a current scandal, the brutal murder of a former provincial magistrate, Fualdes, in which it was suspected that an ultra-Royalist gang had been involved. He made a number of designs for this, but abandoned it in favour of a slightly older scandal which seemed capable of more epic dimensions.

183
The story of the shipwreck of the *Medusa* on 2 July 1816 had even more serious political implications than the Fualdes affair, since it implied governmental incompetence. The *Medusa*, flagship of a convoy carrying French soldiers and settlers to the colony of Senegal, had run aground off



181 GÉRICAULT *Race of the Riderless Horses* c.1817

West Africa, largely as a result of the ineptitude of the captain, a returned royalist émigré. As there had been insufficient lifeboats, 149 men and one woman were forced to board a makeshift raft, which it was intended would be towed by the lifeboats. However, the crews of these, in their eagerness to reach the shore, soon cut the raft adrift. There followed fifteen days of errors, which included mutiny, cannibalism and a bitter moment of false hope at the sighting of a ship from their convoy, the *Argus*, which failed to notice them. When the raft was eventually found by the *Argus*, only fifteen of the 150 were still alive.

The Government tried to cover the whole incident up. The captain received a lenient sentence, and when two of the survivors, the doctor Savigny and the engineer Cortéard, tried to sue for compensation, they were dismissed from Government service. Savigny and Cortéard published a book which became a sensation throughout Europe.

Géricault met Savigny – possibly through Horace Vernet – and worked at the project for eighteen months. It was the kind of immense undertaking

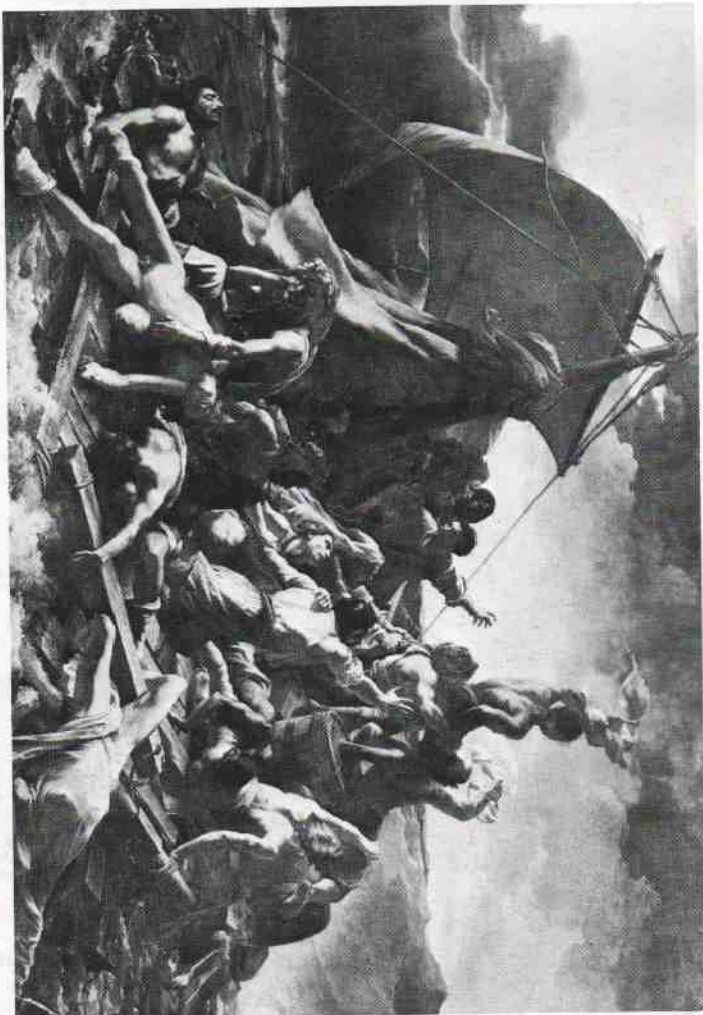
that most artists would have contemplated only with the support of a Government commission. Even for Géricault, a man of means, it was a strain on his resources. He hired a studio especially to work on the vast canvas; and the confined space made its impact all the more overpowering to those who came to visit him at work. Delacroix, after seeing the picture there, found himself breaking involuntarily into a run down the street.

Géricault took some time to decide on which moment of the disaster to depict, toying with such violent and morbid incidents as the mutiny and the outbreak of cannibalism. In the end, however, he chose a less horrific but more emotionally distressing event: the first sighting of the *Argus*. The picture itself shows a gradual crescendo from despair to false hope. In the foreground a brooding figure sits among the dead. Behind him other survivors gradually turn to face the horizon; two are waving their shirts. But the ship they are hailing is a tiny speck, hardly discernible between the dark rolling waves. It is clear that they must be invisible to it; and some have already sunk back into a desolate torpor.

This ebb and flow of moods is controlled by a composition that combines movement with precision. The final design has replaced the classical frieze by a series of diagonals moving up from the foreground towards the divergent apexes of mast and group of waving figures. Instead of a surface unity there is a sense of dispersal as the light picks out the distinct actions of the separate groups; and the sense of randomness is enhanced by the way in which the figures involved in the main incident are turned away from the spectator. Yet the position of every figure is so precisely thought out, so clearly described, that the conflicting gestures are held in a coherent pattern that has the powerful simplicity of truly monumental art. As in the *Race of the Riderless Horses*, the semi-nude figures are posed academy studies. These victims of fifteen days adrift show no emaciation. Their bodies are grand and vigorous, turning the sensation of the moment into a timeless drama.



182 GÉRICAULT
Severed Heads 1818



183 GÉRICAULT *The Raft of the Medusa* 1819

Yet for all his careful planning and use of generalized forms, Géricault's picture gains an actuality from his obsessiveness. The dead and diseased bodies of the foreground were derived from studies that Géricault had made in his studio of dead bodies and severed limbs gathered from the hospital and the morgue. Like the picture itself, these represent an amazing feat of control, of clear-sighted description in the face of the extreme. None of them was directly used for the final picture, but their lurid presence can be felt in it, from the dead bodies in the foreground to the bruised green and purple tones of the sky.

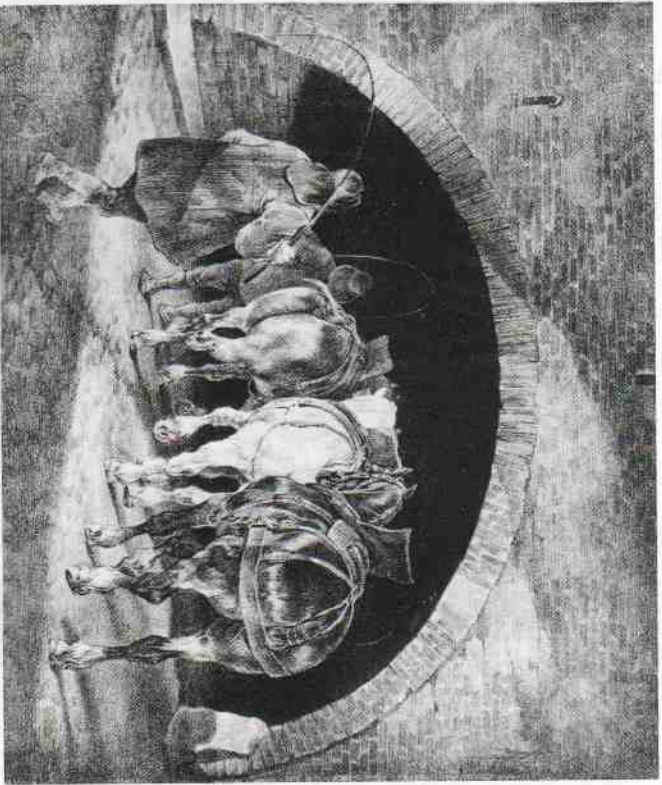
To Géricault's bitter disappointment the reception of his work was not so much hostile – it was prominently reviewed, and the artist was awarded a medal by the Government – as tepid. Most criticism was of a nigardly kind – complaining that Géricault had dared to treat 'genre' on a monumental scale, or that the colours were too dark, or that the record of the incident was not sufficiently faithful: all remarks that failed totally to appreciate the new direction that Géricault was attempting. The Government medal, too, was a way of acknowledging the artist without approving his work. All

suggestions that the work should be acquired by the State were pointedly ignored until after the artist's death.

Even Géricault's friends could not understand why the mildly favourable reception of the work caused him so much distress. When the artist Gérard asked him what it was that he wanted, he replied 'what I want is the trial of misfortune'. Nothing could show up the bankruptcy of society more than the way it had responded to his affront.

Géricault's picture received a somewhat more enthusiastic reception in London, at the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly, in 1820. There a dislike of the Davidian school and a less strict insistence on the decorum of the genres could lead to a more liberal appreciation of the way 'the bold hand of the artist has laid bare the details of the horrid facts with the severity of Michelangelo and the gloom of Caravaggio'. Géricault went to London for the exhibition, and became one of the first of the younger French artists to respond to the spirited spontaneity of Lawrence, Ward and the landscape painters.

The visit brought no relief from his obsessions. In London he was attracted not only by the British passion for sport, but also by the image of a city in the throes of an unprecedented urban expansion. The city which Gautier was later to call the 'native town of spleen' was already in the grip of that horrifying process of dehumanization that was to fascinate so many artists.



184 GÉRICAULT *Draymen at the Adelphi Wharf* 1821

185 GÉRICAULT *The Cleptomaniac*



To record this Géricault turned once again to lithography, in an unsuccessful effort to make a commercial success out of a medium that was still a novelty in England. Like his scenes of the Napoleonic campaigns, these images show figures persisting in a world that has lost all human scale or relevance.

Géricault returned to Paris in December 1820, still exhausted in mind and body from the exertions of the *Medusa*. He was never to undertake another major work: but his unflinching observation never left him. He could still produce works as remarkable as the series of portraits of madmen and madwomen for his friend the psychiatrist Georget, one of the earliest specialists to see madness as a disease that could respond to sympathetic treatment. However, one should not overestimate the extent of Georget's advances. Just as the 'natural philosopher' of the day could still find a use for the descriptive penetration of the artist, so psychology was still at that stage where it could be supposed that inner disturbance could be diagnosed from external features. More sophisticated than Lavater, Georget nevertheless still sought to classify madness through physiognomic observation. And while Géricault's portraits of mental patients — of which five now survive — are

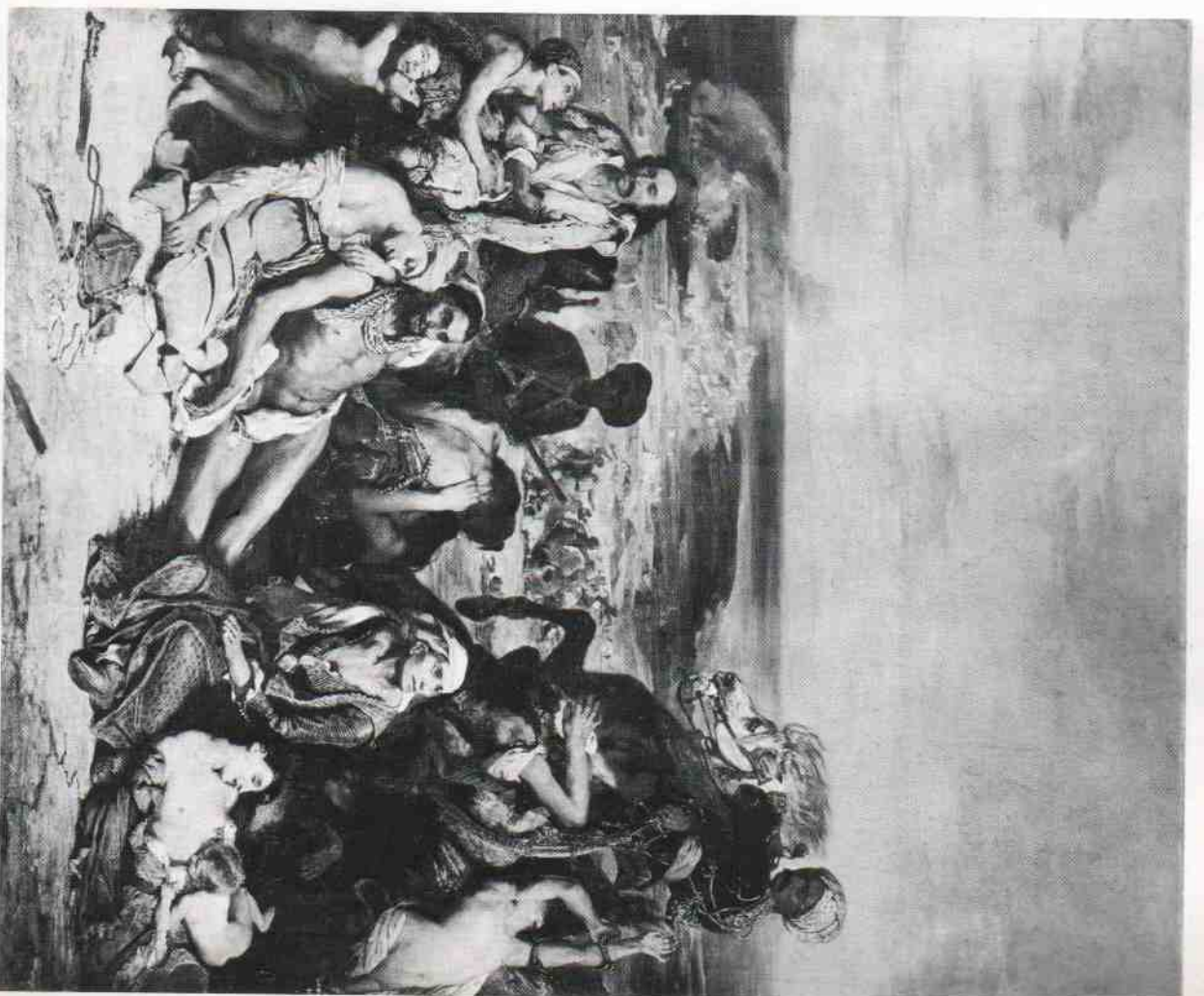
different from those used by Georget in his book *De la folie* (1820), it has been suggested by Klaus Berger that they were used as demonstration material in courses on pathology. In the sympathy that they arouse these works exceed the bounds of medical illustration as the *Medusa* rises above pictorial journalism. Yet in both cases the emotion grows out of the frankness of the observation, out of the ability to record without flinching. The portrait illustrated here does not epitomize kleptomania (or is it homicide? – the confusion over the title makes its own point about Georget's theories). But it is an incomparable evocation of a man preoccupied and debilitated by his own inner obsessions. No other artist of the period but Goya could capture the world of derangement with such insight; but while Goya seeks to invoke the mental state, Géricault proceeds always from a clear description of actual appearances.

183 As his death approached, Géricault felt, characteristically, that he had failed. His *Medusa* seemed too incomplete a record of his aspirations. Yet in its strange morbidity, its heroic desolation, it provided an authentic alternative at last to the school of David. He had created a path for the Romantics to follow, and had resolutely shown that the bizarre and the topical were not simply a matter for the minor genres, but were of central importance to an age of disenchantment.

Eugène Delacroix

186 The year in which Géricault died, 1824, was that in which Delacroix (1798–1863), as he put it, 'was enlisted willy nilly into the Romantic coterie', as a result of his contribution to the Salon of that year, *The Massacre of Chios*.

12 This timing has made it customary to see him as a successor to Géricault, a Titan to his Gorgione – the longer-lived survivor who brought the young innovator's work to fruition. Delacroix certainly learned a lot from Géricault (and was deeply moved by the tragedy of his death), but he was never particularly close to him either personally or artistically. Géricault, passionate and unstable, threw himself into the immediate and topical with obsessive vigour. Delacroix, on the other hand, concealed all emotion beneath an iron control. With the exception of *Liberty Leading the People*, he painted nothing that had overt bearing on contemporary France. Most of his scenes were from history and literature, and those that were modern were set in distant lands. His exploration of violence and sordidness never interfered with the purely pictorial thrill of brilliant paint surfaces and vibrant colour harmonies. Only one sentiment seems ever to have rivalled these concerns as a motivation in his work: and that was *spüren*, a Baudelairean sense of tedium that can be felt lingering even in the most impassioned of his paintings, and which is unmistakable in the *Algerian Women*.



186 DELACROIX *The Massacre of Chios* 1824

For Baudelaire it was this disengagement that made Delacroix supreme among living artists. He supposed that it was the outcome of disillusion, that a soul of passion was hidden beneath the enchanting exterior, that he was 'a volcano artistically concealed beneath a bouquet of flowers'. Yet the artist was so great a master of concealment that even now Baudelaire's statement remains no more than a supposition. The diaries and letters reveal little more than the surface of his uneventful life. In them he is polite, courteous, highly intelligent and full of sensibility; yet he never drops the mask. When reading Baudelaire's translation of Edgar Allan Poe's fantasies he was led to reflect on the distance between them and his own inclinations:

In these truly *extraordinary* – I mean *extra-human* – conceptions, there is the fascination for the fantastic which may be an attribute of some temperaments from the North or elsewhere, but which is certainly not in the nature of Frenchmen like ourselves. Such people only care about what is beyond nature, or extra-natural, but the rest of us cannot lose our balance to such a degree; we must have some foundation of reason in all our vagaries.'

Of the French paragon of Romanticism, Victor Hugo, he complained that 'he never came within a hundred miles of truth and simplicity'; and when he was himself hailed as the 'Victor Hugo of painting', he retorted 'I am a pure classicist'. Similarly, he regarded the music of Beethoven, 'the man of our time . . . romantic to the supreme degree', as worthless, especially when compared to that of his own hero, Mozart. He explained that where Beethoven is 'obscure and seems lacking in unity, the cause is not to be sought in what people look upon as wild originality, the thing they honour him for; the reason is that he turns his back on eternal principles; Mozart never'.

Yet, for all his insistence on control and reason, Delacroix's art is redolent of the *material* of Romanticism. He may have been more intelligent and more perceptive than the other painters of his generation, but he certainly shared their predilections.

Unlike Géricault, he did not begin to train as an artist until after the fall of the Empire. Yet he, too, had nostalgic memories of its past glory, for during this time his family had been relatively influential and wealthy. His father, who died in 1804, had been Minister of Foreign Affairs; and there was a rumour, too, that his real father had been that supreme diplomat and *éminence grise*, Talleyrand. The year of Napoleon's defeat was also that of the death of Delacroix's mother. He entered the Restoration young, impoverished and with only an elder sister to provide any guidance.

Trained, like Géricault, in the studio of Guérin (which he entered in 1815), Delacroix was fully committed to the painting of *grandes machines*. From the start he was anxious to obtain Government commissions, and felt, unlike



187 DELACROIX *Dante and Virgil in Hell* 1822 (see also 170)

Géricault, no compunction about working on those allegories and religious themes that were the staple of State patronage at the time. Nothing better expresses the difference between Géricault's and Delacroix's attitudes than the younger artist's debut at the Salon, the *Dante and Virgil* of 1822. This picture paid homage to the *Medusa* in its art of nautical disaster. Yet instead of a contemporary event, Delacroix chose a scene from Dante's *Inferno*, showing the moment when the poet is rowed across the 'murky pool' towards the infernal city in the company of Virgil. The literary source had been fashionable since the outlines produced by Flaxman three decades previously; and in its handling of the raking light and foreground display of nudes à la Michelangelo this is a perfect Academy piece. Furthermore, the darkened tones are made far more attractive than the lurid greys and greens of the *Medusa*. The fiery city of Dis provides a rich glow in the background; the greens of the foreground are enlivened by the red of Dante's head-dress and the russet of Virgil's cloak; and the whole of this central area is brought into a chromatic balance by the shaded blue of the cloak of Phlegias, the

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craftsmen. Such harmony already shows that concern for purely pictorial problems that was to dominate the work of his later years.

Dante and Virgil was an official success. It was bought by the Government, and hailed by the influential critic Adolphe Thiers as evidence of genius. More important still, it was praised by Gros, who called Delacroix a 'subdued Rubens' and allowed him to study in his studio, where he could become familiar with those masterly propaganda paintings of the Empire which could no longer be shown in public.

Delacroix's next major exhibit, at the Salon of 1824, was awarded a gold medal (albeit second class), and was acquired again by the Government for display in the Galerie du Luxembourg. But there was more to disturb in *The*

186 *Massacre of Chios*. This picture of the defeated Greeks in a recent battle in the Greek War of Independence was not subversive, but it was topical. More disconcerting than this was its negativism. Gros, in chagrin, dubbed it *The* *Massacre of Painting*. For although Delacroix had profited – as he later confessed to Alexandre Dumas – from studying Gros's *Plague at Jaffa*, he had reversed the principles on which that picture is based. *Chios* is a painting of anti-climax. The defeated await death, or slavery, with indifference. There is suffering and misery, but no villains and no heroes. Stendhal accused the artist of having made a massacre seem like a plague. Certainly there is nothing in this scene to connect it with *Manu* or the *Medusa*, and only Baudelaire could discern in such nonchalance a 'terrifying hymn in honour of doom and irremediable suffering'.

The muted lethargy of this picture is perhaps a comment on the vagaries of fate: Delacroix himself provides no clue. In his personal life he was already adopting the undemonstrativeness of the Anglophile 'dandy', and it is significant that this picture marks the point at which his art begins to show a debt to the techniques of English painters. For shortly before the picture was exhibited he saw *The Haywain* of Constable, the work that was to be shown with such success at the Salon of that year. As Delacroix himself told Théophile Silvestre, the sight of the freshness of this picture caused him to rework parts of his own canvas; and both the background and the immediate foreground show a new lightness. When he later went to visit Constable in England, Delacroix was most impressed by the way that the English artist used broken colour – in particular to enliven his greens – and this technique also accorded with his own observations of the methods of Rubens.

Delacroix's interest in the brightness and informality of English art was enhanced by his own acquaintances in Paris, notably Richard Parkes Bonington (1802–28). A member of a Nottingham lace-making family which settled in France when he was eighteen, Bonington was a pupil of Gros in 1820–22. Yet this fully Parisian training did not prevent him from

being to his French contemporaries a representative of English art. His penchant for watercolour certainly added to this impression, and the brilliance and lightness of his style accorded with all that was to be expected of his countrymen. Delacroix later wrote to Théophile Thoré: 'Nobody in this modern school, or possibly even before him, has had that lightness of touch which particularly in watercolour, makes his pictures as it were like diamonds that delight the eye, quite independently of their subject or of any representational qualities.'

In England in 1825 Delacroix ran into Bonington, whom he already knew slightly, and the two became firm friends. Later in Paris they shared a studio, and Delacroix watched the Englishman – carefully – to achieve a similar expertise. Their common interest in exotic subject pieces developed apace.

Bonington was also looking for a more extreme kind of literature to excite his imagination. In the late 1820s he shared the current fascination with the exoticism of Byron's poems and Goethe's *Faust*. In his lithographed illustrations to the latter – which were published in 1828 – he responded to the Gothicism of the theme with astonishing vigour, producing scenes that surpassed in emphatic angularity anything attempted in this line by German illustrators. Byron, however, captured his imagination more extensively. Delacroix's own obsession with Greece seems largely to have stemmed from his admiration for Byron and for the poet's part in the Wars of Independence; and the artist constantly heightened Byron's excesses.

This was certainly the case with the picture that Delacroix referred to as his 'second massacre', the *Death of Sardanapalus*, which was the largest and most challenging of the six canvases that he submitted to the Salon of 1827. *Chios* had caused consternation, *Sardanapalus* produced an uproar. *Chios* had, nominally at least, been a subject of sympathy. *Sardanapalus* depicted nothing but selfish destruction. The scene, inspired by Byron's play, shows a sybaritic Assyrian potentate who, defeated by insurgents, has himself burned on a funeral pyre. In Byron's play Sardanapalus seeks only to bring peace and plenty to his land, and his suicide forms a heroic conclusion to the story. He steps on to the pyre alone, and is then joined in death voluntarily by Myrrha, his favourite concubine. Delacroix changed all this, replacing it with an orgy of destruction, in which the king reclines *impassively*.

The theme – with its extremes of cruelty and indifference – is expressed by the cacophony. The tiled diagonals destroy any sense of coherent space. The colours are violent and full-blown: each one makes the others more febrile. The white flesh of the concubines becomes piant and helpless against the clashing reds of the bed and draperies and the black skin of the Negro slave. In the midst of the confusion is the vibrating discord of the yellow elephant's head on the bed corner and the blue of a concubine's headdress.

As with the *Chios*, it is hard to discern Delacroix's intentions. There is something frantic in the work's excesses, and it is tempting to see Delacroix himself in the impassive figure of Sardanapalus. The enclosed make-believe of the scene certainly has more than a hint of the voyeur at the brothel about it. Yet the curious inconsequentiality of the scene brings the attention back in the end to the technical achievement. For Delacroix has succeeded here in bringing the utmost confusion and discord under his control.

Delacroix never again painted so subversive a subject. Apparently he received an official warning, but the rejection of extremes seems also to have accorded with his own personal development. From now on he was to use ambiguity and irony for more evasive purposes.

There could be few more neatly balanced gestures from this point of view than that of the large painting that he submitted to the Salon of 1831, *Liberty Leading the People*. The subject here is a celebration of the Revolution of the previous year, which had led to the régime of the 'Bourgeois King', Louis-Philippe, who was committed to a constitutional monarchy. Typically, Delacroix took no part in the fighting, but when the outcome was clear he set out, like so many other painters, to celebrate it: 'I have undertaken a modern subject, a barricade', he wrote to his brother, a general, 'and if I have not conquered for my country, at least I will paint for her.'

Altogether the Salon of 1831 contained twenty-three celebrations of the events that had brought the new King to the throne; among these Delacroix's was unique for its lack of idealization. Even the figure of Liberty, as she rushes forward in her Phrygian cap with a gun in one hand and the tricolour in the



188 RONINGTON *The Colonnade Monument*, *Critic* 1826



189 DELACROIX *Death of Sardanapalus* 1827

other, is no frigid allegory: she is a very different woman from the objects of pleasure in *Sardanapalus*, but she is still full-blooded and sensuous. What was more disconcerting to most people was the rabble she was leading. Delacroix was taken to task for having taken his models 'from the populace, rather than from the people'. There were no figures in the work that the genteel visitors to the Salon could have identified with, even the man in the top hat is clearly no gentleman. Implicit in the work was an unpleasant reminder: the Revolution that benefited the bourgeoisie was fought by a less fortunate class.

Despite such disturbing implications, the picture was unquestionably in the heroic mould, and under the control of a noble design. Viewed from near to the ground, among the dead soldiers, the diagonals rise triumphantly towards the centrally placed tricolour. Perhaps, as the critic Gustave Planche suggested, Delacroix was moved most by a desire to monumentalize the topical, to make 'at a distance of five months, a barricade that is at the same time true, beautiful and poetic'. In any case, one cannot accuse him of a secret

sympathy for the populace, who are represented here with emphatic coarseness. For Delacroix was a confirmed conservative and a firm supporter of the Government of Louis-Philippe (who appointed him to the Légion d'Honneur for this work, bought it, and locked it away), and received the majority of his large monumental commissions under its aegis.

Through his contacts in official circles, he travelled with the entourage of the Count de Mornay, Envoy to the Sultan of Morocco, in 1832. French colonialist ambitions in North Africa were accompanied by a wave of Orientalism among artists; Horace Vernet, too, the nostalgic chronicler of Napoleonic power, became involved in this new area of French ambition.

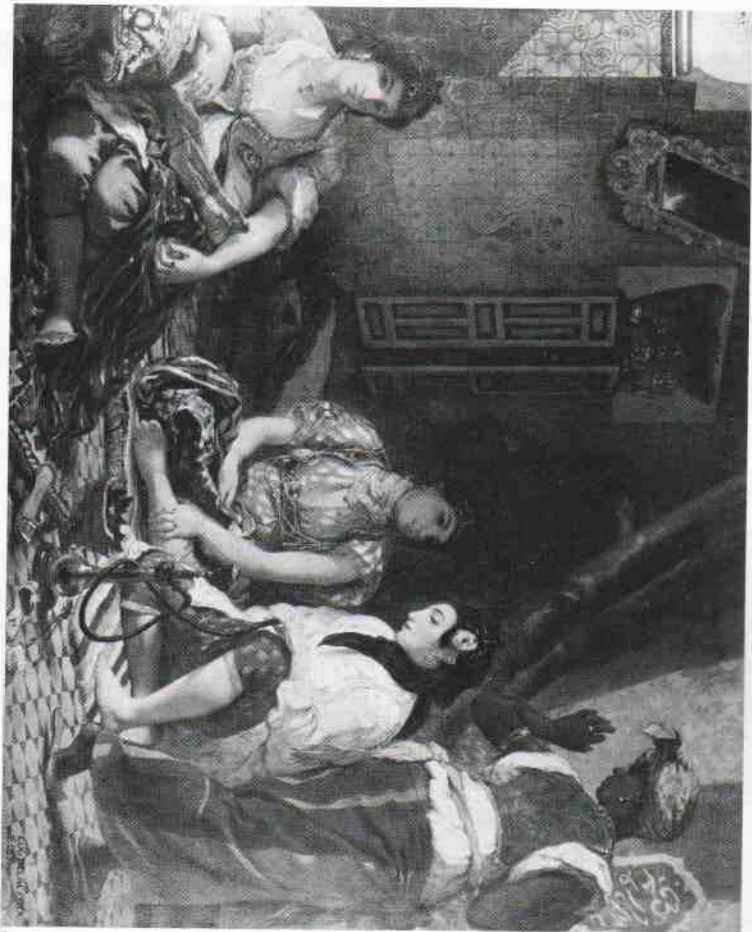
Although Delacroix fully entered into the exoticism of his subject, the journey was most influential in confirming directions in which he was already developing. It helped emphasize his traditionalism, for like Rousseau and the travellers of the eighteenth century, he found reminiscences of antiquity in the modern 'primitive'. 'I have Greeks and Romans on my doorstep . . .', he wrote in Tangier; 'I now know what they were really like; their marbles tell the exact truth, but one has to know how to interpret them, and they are mere hieroglyphs to our wretched modern artists. In his search for 'permanence' it was the nobility and *gravitas* of antiquity that he emulated, not its details.

But above all, the journey intensified his awareness of the sensuous means of art: colour and light. His *Algerian Women in their Apartment*, exhibited at the Salon of 1834, was relatively small in size and devoid of all historical pretensions; and yet he himself recognized it as one of his most important works. It shows how colours could be made effective without the cacophony of a *Sardanapalus*. Here they float in half shadows. The door in the background, with its juxtaposition of the complementaries of red and green, creates a powerful base for the rose and dull gold tints of the women. Delacroix had been aware when painting *Dante and Virgil* of the way complementary colours strengthen each other when placed in close proximity, and had used small touches of them in the drops of water and in the foreground bodies. But now he seemed to become more fully concerned with the creation of a surface pattern of colours which would mutually intensify each other and in which both lighted and shaded areas would have a positive effect. Possibly he was influenced in this development by the theories of the chemist Eugène Chevreul, on the simultaneous effect of complementary colours; but if so, he never pursued these ideas to the point of a dogmatic statement, as the Neo-Impressionists were to do. The use of colour remained for him a matter of personal sensibility. Nor, indeed, did his concern for colour effect ever become independent of association. In the *Algerian Women* it suggests a heightened sensuality—Renoir swore he could

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190 DELACROIX *Algerian Women in their Apartment* 1834 (see also 180)

smell the incense in it – which is all the more disturbing when combined with the lassitude of the women as they lounge in their confined chamber. As they sit there in their monotonous world, one staring at the spectator with insolent listlessness, they exude an eroticism that is more pervasive than that of the submissive odalisques of Ingres. Baudelaire recognized in them a thoroughly contemporary claustrophobia; that of the nineteenth-century Parisienne pent up in her bourgeois domesticity. In the same year Delacroix painted a portrait – his only contemporary figure in an interior – that seems to share the same lassitude and longing. In it, Madame Simon, the wife of the ballet-master of the Paris Opéra, rests listlessly in a darkened interior through which a single sunbeam cuts like a knife, giving a startling expectancy to the harmless redum of the scene.

The year after his return from Morocco saw the first of a series of commissions for monumental decorations that were to occupy him for nearly all the rest of his life. Thiers, the critic who had acclaimed *Dante and Virgil* in 1822, was now Minister of the Interior and in a position to arrange

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such undertakings. Delacroix started with the Salon du Roi in the Palais Bourbon (1833–37) and then went on to paint the library of the Palais du Luxembourg (1840–47), the ceiling of the Galerie d'Apollon in the Louvre (1849–51), and the Salon de la Paix in the Hôtel de Ville (1850–53). Finally he painted the *Chapelle des Anges* at Saint-Sulpice, a work that was completed in 1861. Only ill-health prevented him from executing more, and Delacroix must be counted the most fortunate of all mural painters in the nineteenth century, both for having as much work as he pleased and for having such a free hand in the planning of it. These schemes are the most distinguished of the century; and in pursuing them he gradually moved away from the preoccupations of the Romantics. For he was not only a traditionalist in considering monumental painting to be the highest of artistic endeavours; he also sought to keep close to what he considered to be his pictorial inheritance – the art of the Venetian High Renaissance and the Baroque. By the 1840s the quest for 'permanence' had become the leading obsession. And in the sense that colour, staging and composition in these murals show a reworking of time-honoured conventions, he lived up to his claim to be a 'pure classicist'.

For all their traditionalism, these later works are more than a coda to the art of the past: there is a wisdom about the subjects that is all his own. Those for the library of the Palais Bourbon, on the theme of the benefits of learning and the arts, begin with Orpheus bringing the gift of civilization and end with the destruction of this inheritance by Attila the Hun. In the colour, too, there is a tendency towards deep reds, blue-greens and pale gold that suggests an all-pervasive nostalgia.



191 DELACROIX
*Portrait of Madame
Simon* 1834

192 DELACROIX
Jacob Wrestling with the Angel
1850–61



Nostalgia, like ennui, is a motionless mood. Perhaps this is why his calm works are the most alluring. This is certainly so at Saint-Sulpice, which shows three instances of angels in combat on behalf of the Lord. On the ceiling is a celestial battle – St Michael defeating Satan – while the two large paintings on the walls are of earthly battles. On the right is the expulsion of the Syrian interloper Heliogorus from the Temple in Jerusalem by a 'mysterious horseman'. On the left is the curious incident of 'Jacob wrestling with the Angel': the struggle lasted all night and ended when the angel put Jacob's leg out of joint at daybreak and said 'your name shall no longer be Jacob but Israel, because you strove with God and with men, and hast prevailed'. Delacroix interpreted this as 'a symbol of the ordeals which God sometimes imposes on his elect'; and whereas the other two paintings concentrate on dramatic action, this one emphasizes reflection.

As a prototype for the design of *Jacob* he chose Titian's *St Peter Martyr*, a picture that was then held to be the origin of historical landscape for the way in which it used a dominant outcrop of trees to articulate the violent murder

that was taking place in its lower foreground. However, whereas Titian's martyrdom is enhanced by the splayed violence of the trees, the vast oaks in Delacroix's picture seem to disperse the struggle that takes place at their side. It is the still-life in the foreground that provides a formal link for the colours of the brightly lit areas. The trees, looming in the semi-darkness of the receding night, emphasize the quiet poignancy of the moment before dawn which brings with it both defeat and divine revelation.

Delacroix's distaste for self-styled Romanticism is understandable especially after 1830 when it became an 'official' style, dispensed by such as Delacroix and Horace Vernet. His own predominant interests, his explorations of colour and symbolism, reached — like those of Turner — far beyond the level of propagandist imagery and sectarian controversy. Yet — unlike Turner — he maintained a detachment which leaves his art with a sense of loss. Perhaps, as Baudelaire believed, the passions smouldered still beneath the impeccable surface: perhaps the volcano had long since been extinct. Either way, his fastidiousness and disdain inhibited that sheer credulity, the urge to paint at the edge of vision, that Turner, Goya, Friedrich and Géricault all showed. He was Romanticism's greatest casualty.

The Romantic genre

Romanticism as a critical and stylistic notion applies to such major figures as Géricault and Delacroix in varying and complex ways; Romanticism as a credo, as an artistic label voluntarily assumed, belongs essentially to lesser artists, and to their choice of subject. There is no mistaking the untramelled emotion, the extremes of ecstasy and fear proclaimed in their art.

It is this interest that makes the representation of animals — purely sensate beings — so much the vogue. Géricault and Delacroix both explored themes of animals struggling or confronting the elements; and the genre was sufficiently in demand for artists like James Ward and Horace Vernet to become specialists in it. Even in sculpture — the medium normally considered least conducive to Romanticism — there emerged a distinguished group of *animaliers*, notably Antoine-Louis Barye (1796–1875).

Horace Vernet (1789–1863), the third famous artist in this distinguished family of painters, combined a brilliant expertise with a straightforward boldness. Making his début in the same Salon as his friend Géricault, that of 1812, he was immediately employed by the Imperial family to paint an equestrian portrait of Jérôme Bonaparte. Unlike Géricault, Vernet remained a committed Bonapartist. His brash Napoleonic subjects made him a suspect figure under the Restoration, and it was not until the July Monarchy of 1830 that, like so many other Romantic leaders, he began to receive State patronage. Aply, he had to paint Napoleonic battle scenes at Versailles.

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193 HORACE VERNET *Mazzeppa* 1826

For Vernet the artist's job was one of simple description; and, while he might choose the most dramatic subjects, he chronicled them with the pedantry of a topographer — a habit that Baudelaire found painfully vulgar. Nothing could contrast more strongly with the imaginative impact that Byron had on Delacroix than Vernet's illustration of a Byronic theme, *Mazzeppa*. The story of a Polish page who was punished for making love to his Queen by being strapped naked to a wild horse which was then driven into the woods would seem to offer even more opportunity for an exhibition of cruelty and violence than *Sardanapalus*. Yet although Vernet has chosen the moment when *Mazzeppa* is in danger of being torn to pieces by wolves, he has treated the whole as if it were painted on porcelain.

The concern for sensation brought a new piquancy to traditional genre painting. The small interiors that Delacroix, Bonington and Eugène Delveria (1805–65) were painting in the 1820s took on something of the colourful fantasy of what was called the *style troubadour*. Deveria practised this in the most harmless manner, and was for a time considered the leading 'Romantic' history painter — but his place in the popular affection became usurped in the 1830s by Paul Delacroix (1797–1856), who achieved a more sustained and persuasive rhetoric. It was on the *infinitist* level that Deveria's fantasy was at its best. Pictures like *Young Girls Seated* are full of a playful amorosness. Nothing could be further from the lassitude of Delacroix's *Madame Simon*.

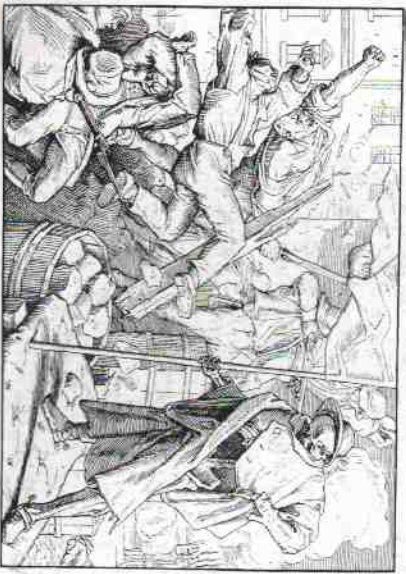
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than the tender abandon of these slumbering damsels. The sparkling paint casts them in a magical glimmer as the young man – half voyeur, half Prince Charming – intrudes.

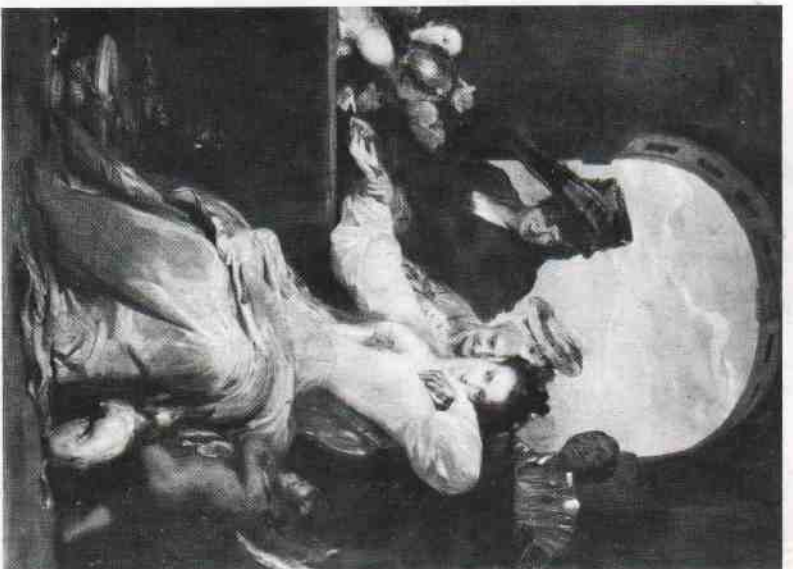
Such scenes – more wish-fulfillment than *reportage* – are invoked through a pervasive charm of handling. It was a mode that was soon emulated outside France. In England the distinguished Sir David Wilkie (1785–1841) – renowned throughout Europe for the anecdotal appeal of his Dutch-inspired interiors of Scottish peasant life – was inspired to set out in new directions after his tour of the Continent in 1825. Much impressed by Spanish, Netherlandish and north Italian art, he developed aspirations towards the grand manner that took most of his contemporaries by surprise. Yet despite his Old-Master prototypes these scenes have all the imaginative modernity of Romantic genre. *Josephine and the Story Teller* was based on a much-repeated fable about the Empress Josephine, in which she was supposed to have had her fate foretold when a young girl. There is an air of expectancy in the scene, in the glances and the fluttering rhythm of the paint. The feeling is so intimate that – despite the grandiose arch in the background – it is hard to realize that this is a large-scale picture, with the figures nearly life-size.

In all the pictures in the Romantic mode there is an emphasis on the sensuous in both the theme and the handling. It is hardly surprising that the sensory nature of death, too, should be emphasized – whether as a dream-like ecstasy of the kind to be found in Novalis' *Hymns to the Night* or as a frank invocation of fear. The contrast between the classical and medieval concepts of death – the former as a beautiful youth, the latter as a fearful skeleton – was brought into prominence by the artistic conflicts of the period. The sentimental, classically inspired image of death survived in the sorrowful and tranquil youths that appear so frequently on the monuments of Neo-classical sculptors like Canova and Flaxman; while the horrifying skeleton appears in such apocalyptic scenes as Benjamin West's *Death on a Pale Horse* or Alfred Rehbel's grim moralities. In subject painting the heroic death, the *exemplum virtutis*, had almost vanished by the mid nineteenth century, while murders, executions and suicides were rife. Few of these could have played more on

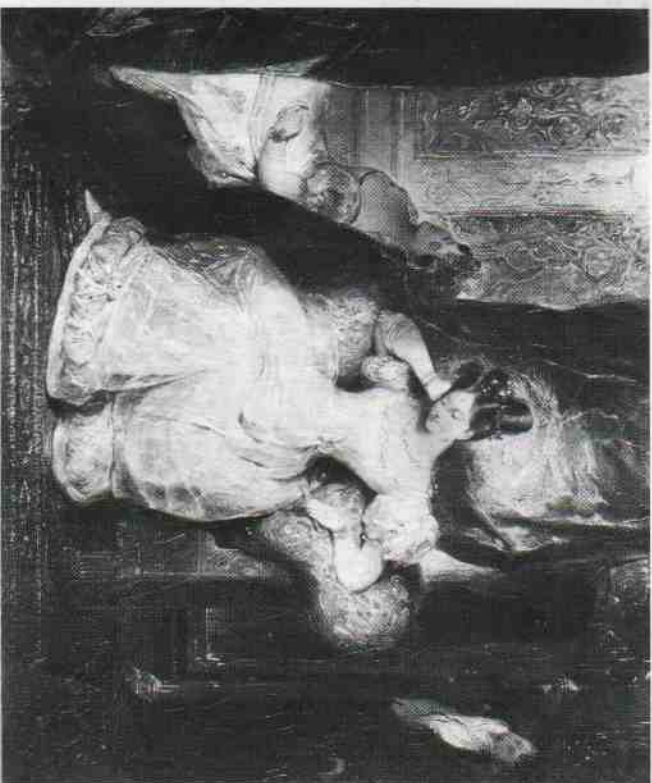


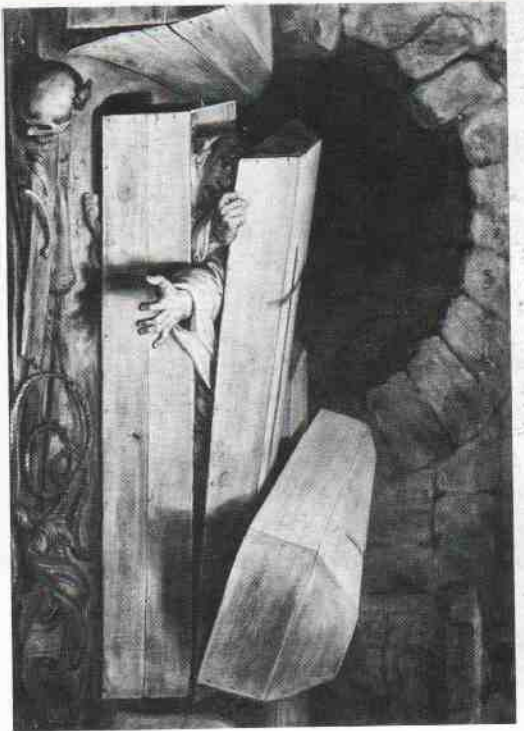
194 REHBE, *Another Dance of Death* 1848

195 WILKIE, *Josephine and the Story Teller* 1837



196 DEVEREAUX, *Young Girls Seated* 1827





197 WIERTZ
Buried Alive
1852(?)

197 contemporary fears than the *Buried Alive* of the bizarre Belgian megalomaniac Anton Wiertz (1806–65) – a theme inspired by the danger of death certificates being incorrectly issued during cholera epidemics.

Historicism

The unclassical fascination with the evocation of a specific location had already become clear during the Empire both in the contemporary history paintings of Gros and in the medieval interiors of such pioneers of the *style troubadour* as Richard. But the generation of the 1820s was gripped by a new historicism, a historical awareness and longing for authenticity, that helped to make Sir Walter Scott the most popular novelist of the age. And just as Scott heightened his vivid account of the past with an equally vivid presentation of character and situation, so the historicist had to provide an image that was as convincing emotionally as it was historically.

198 While few would agree today with Henry James that Delacroix's *Princes in the Tower* combines 'a reconstruction of a most ancient history' with the most subtle modern psychology', this work certainly shows why this artist's appeal to a historically conscious age was so strong. Delacroix had been a pupil of Gros, and, like Delacroix, evolved much of his sense of staging and atmosphere from this master. Yet everything in his art is subordinated to description. Not only are the features of the scene described with a minuteness equal to that of Horace Vernet, but the whole composition is generated by the narrative. It is a picture about uncertainty. All is tilted at an



198 DELACROIX
Princes in the Tower 1831

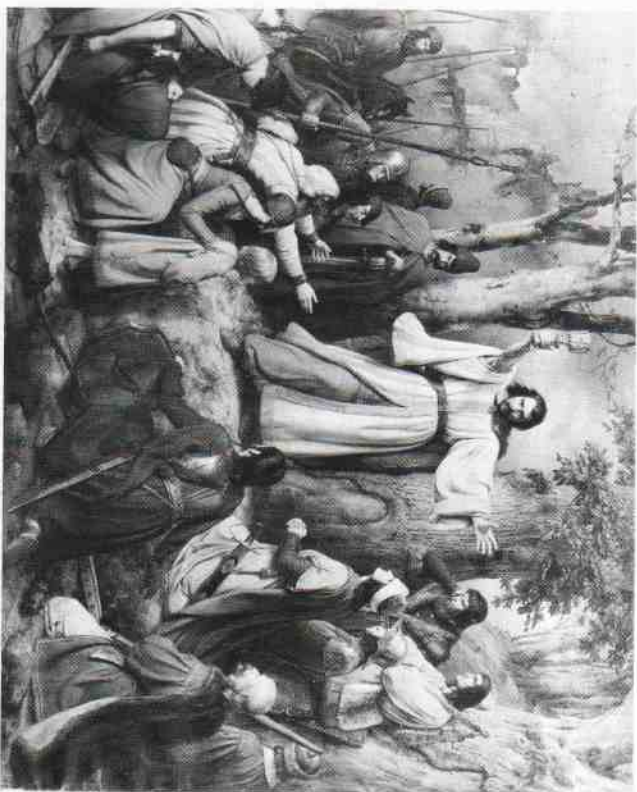
angle, and as the two young princes huddle together in the darkness, the younger of them looks round in apprehension. What he fears he cannot see. But our attention is guided by the dog to the door, where the crack of light is partly obscured by the shadow of their oppressor, Richard III.

Romantic subject painting had from Géricault onwards taken the role of the outsider when it cast a comment on contemporary politics, and it has often been cited as a dilemma for the Romantics that they should in the 1830s have found themselves on the side of the Government. Only Delacroix, through his negativism, preserved his individuality. Heinrich Heine was probably going too far when he detected in Delacroix's *Princes in the Tower* a picture showing the victims of usurped power – a reference to the recent 'usurpation' of power in France by Louis-Philippe; and yet, in assuming a political relevance, he was doing no more than follow a line of thought that had been dominant in historical painting since the time of David.

Outside France, Romantic history painting assumed similar political overtones. In Belgium with the bizarre and politically charged *Burgomaster Van made his reputation with the bizarre and politically charged Burgomaster Van der Werff of Leyden Offering his Own Body for Nourishment to the Citizens during the Siege of the City in 1576* – a macabre reminder of the Netherlands' struggle for independence, painted at a time when the Belgians were about to revolt against the union with Holland that had been forced on them in 1815. He mirrored the revolutions of the French Romantics, overthrowing the classicism of the émigré David in favour of the 'national' style of Rubens.

Even in Germany, where Nazarene art had become unequivocally aligned with the established regimes, the new historicism took on a subversive role. In Düsseldorf – the centre of the rapidly expanding industrial region that was at the same time witnessing the activities of the young Karl Marx – the most popular young history painter was Carl Friedrich Lessing (1808–80). His *Hussite Sermon* still has the symmetrical composition of a Nazarene painting; but it is crammed with the detail of the fourteenth century and with evocative effects of lighting and smoke. What made it so popular was not simply its immediacy, but the way in which this depiction of a medieval insurrection against the Catholic Church – it shows the followers of the Bohemian heresiarch Jan Hus at their devotions – mirrored a contemporary dispute about Church authority in the Rhineland. It is appropriate that artists like Vernet, Wappers and Lessing, who were so programmatic in their art, should have been partisan in their politics. This was indeed an indication of their aesthetic limitations. For in linking themselves so unquestioningly to a cause, they sacrificed that individualism and independence of action that had been characterized so effectively by Schiller as the ultimate responsibility of the artist.

199 LESSING *Hussite Sermon* 1835



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CHAPTER EIGHT

'Romanticizing the world'

Limitations

This book began by stating that there was in the early nineteenth century a self-conscious Romantic movement. It then set out to examine not only the history of the movement, but also its *claim*: namely, that the term 'Romantic' could be applied to all that was unique about the contemporary world.

In this final chapter it is the limits of this claim that will be considered. First, in relation to the society of the time, then to the arts themselves, and lastly to the new form of modernity. Realism, that emerged in the 1840s and which, in its turn, was hailed as the successor to Romanticism.

In social terms, the Romantic claim was of the most extreme. For it was the Romantics who first asserted that artists were the mouthpiece of their age, what Shelley called the 'unacknowledged legislators of the world'. The artist owed this position to his creative imagination, through which he reached to a level of understanding that transcended all rational enquiry.

'The world must be romanticized, that the original meaning may be re-discovered', exclaimed the poet Novalis in 1799, adding by way of explanation 'in so far as I give to the commonplace a lofty meaning, to the ordinary an occult aspect, to the well-known the dignity of the unknown... I am romanticizing them'.

This assertion gained respectability in the writings of A. W. Schlegel, where it was explained that such 'romanticizing' was in fact a striving towards the spiritual commensurate with the rise of Christianity. By 1820 the notion had received further status by being absorbed into the philosophy of Hegel. For just as Hegel's view of history was one that saw a dialectic development of man from the material towards the spiritual, so he saw this development as being objectified in the work of art. And in his scheme 'Romantic' art became the unique representative of the modern Christian era.

Such notions certainly added considerable authority to the Romantic claim of relevance, of spirituality and modernity. And while Hegel, like Schlegel, used the word 'Romantic' to refer to art throughout the post-classical world, both firmly directed their attention to those eras – notably the Middle Ages and the Baroque – in which the antique influence had been

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least manifest. They gave to Romantic art a historical location of its own, made it the inheritor of a totally modern Western European tradition.

The most important outcome of this was that Hegel succeeded in bringing the notion of the relevance of culture to human development into the mainstream of historical thought. And, indeed, the degree to which one finds it helpful to think of the early nineteenth century in terms of Romanticism depends on the extent to which one can accept the notion of cultural history that the Romantics themselves pioneered.

It is certainly a tempting notion, and one can readily bring to mind innumerable associations between the strictly cultural movement of Romanticism and the major events of the age. In political terms the emphasis on ethnic identity gave great stimulus to the emergent nationalist movements. The assumption of an indigenous culture and the assertion of a national identity ran parallel, for example in Germany during the Wars of Liberation (p. 109), in Belgium during the uprising of 1830 (p. 261) and in England in the early Victorian era (p. 126). Similarly, the Utopian vision of the Middle Ages, as the root of modern European society, was a powerful stimulus to anti-Ulitarian economists as different as Carlyle and the young Marx.

It is interesting, too, to see how the Romantic emphasis on change and development coincided with a rapid expansion in the study of the natural sciences. This was the time of such major innovations as the first scientific theory of evolution (that of the Frenchman Lamarck), and the establishment of the new discipline of comparative anatomy (one of whose pioneers was Carl Gustav Carus, the doctor and amateur artist who was a follower of Caspar David Friedrich). The concern for the understanding of the actual life force also took on startling new directions. On the physical level there were discoveries like that of Galvani that muscles could be stimulated by an electrical impulse (in itself the basis for Mary Shelley's fable of the 'Modern Prometheus', *Frankenstein*), and on the psychological level a growing curiosity about irrational behaviour, evident in the new and more sympathetic treatment of insanity.

Naturally such associations remain in the sphere of speculation. The kind of interaction one is talking about is too complex, too full of counter-currents and turbulences to be calculable. Yet they can at least represent the scope of the engagement between the Romantics and their world. And it is as well to remember too that Novalis, the poet who sought to 'romanticize' the world through his creative faculties, was in his professional life gauging it in his capacity as a surveyor and mining engineer.

Novalis himself in fact felt genuinely inspired by the potential of his profession, and in his unfinished masterpiece *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* wrote a



200 TELFORD Craigellachie Bridge 1815

ecology to the miner – the discoverer of hidden treasures in the bowels of the earth – that must have made ironic reading for anyone familiar with the abject status to which these craftsmen had sunk in the developing industrial areas of Britain. Most engineers had more tangible reasons for taxing their fantasy. The daring new technological advances – the multiplication of human potential in the mechanized factory, the use of metal to create bridges of unheard-of span and of steam to build a transport system of unthinkable speed – was the outcome of economic incentives that hardly needed the encouragement of any Romantic theory. And while the effect that these new productions had on the imagination of contemporary artists is clear enough (see p. 20), the engineers themselves tended to be more constrained than liberated by the stylistic conventions of their day. Thus, when Thomas Telford built an iron bridge at Craigellachie in the Scottish Highlands, he felt it necessary to supplement his sublime achievement with castellations.

Such concessions to current taste were largely perfunctory; but the movement's effect on personal mores was of a different order. The changing styles of costume – that touchstone of social mood – suggest a growing abandonment of constraint. By 1800 the wig, that curious habit that had prevailed since the time of Louis XIII, had been given up; while women's dress had been pared down almost to the point of nudity. And, if a certain formality began to reassert itself during the Empire, natural hair remained, as did the introduction of such lower-class garments as full-length trousers into fashionable male dress. Such changes were as distressing to the old guard as the replacement of the formal intricacies of the minuet by the shockingly intimate variant of a South German peasant dance, the waltz: 'the first step to

seduction', as it was described by a correspondent to the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1817.

Often Romantic postures had a direct effect on fashion, as when the beau adopted something of the sentiment lassitude of the melancholic, or ladies during the Restoration followed the medieval craze by dressing in 'Mary Stuart' costumes. Yet perhaps the most important change was that, even after the mainstream of bourgeois society had reverted to more formal clothes, there remained an alternative, freer style. From the time of the Nazarenes long hair and flowing garments became the hallmark of the aesthetic non-conformist.

Such distinctiveness, of course, had its own significance — a way of emphasizing a much-vaunted independence. And when the Romantic movement dispersed, the habit of separateness remained. The Primitifs, Nazarenes and Ancients were the ancestors of a permanent *avant-garde* that became established in Paris during the 1830s in the disaffected world of the Bohemians. Alienation is one of Romanticism's most lasting legacies.

The hierarchy of the arts

The belief in artistic separateness was intimately connected with the notion that the work of art could provide a unique revelation. And this, in its turn, affected the way in which the arts themselves were evaluated. No doubt every generation plays the game of comparing the different arts, but the Romantics became obsessed with this — particularly when it involved the question of which art expressed most completely the properties of Romanticism.

For them — as for earlier ages — poetry was supreme. But it became appreciated now above all for its evocative and speculative qualities. For Shelley 'the great instrument of moral good is the imagination' and it is poetry that strengthens it 'in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb'. The emphasis in Romantic poetry was on the symbol, the intensive enigma, while formal structure became a secondary consideration.

To some it seemed that such suggestiveness could be achieved even more effectively by the art that transcended descriptiveness, and was devoted to pure communication: music. From the time of Rousseau — himself a musician — the highest premium was placed on music by those writers and artists who explored the emotive. For Wackenroder, despite his predominant interest in visual art, it was music that was the 'balm of the soul', the inexplicable language that brought man closer to an intimation of the Divine.

The Romantics had no more interest in formal abstraction in music than they had in metric rules in poetry. It was the evocative qualities of pure

sounds that led E. T. A. Hoffmann to consider the most Romantic of all artistic forms to be the symphony, that type of music that was free of all descriptive requirements but which had the fullest tonal range. And when Jean Paul remarked that 'no colour is so Romantic as a tone', he was expressing a similar preference.

It is easy enough to see how the music of the day supported such an interpretation. It was indeed the age in which the symphony came into its own. That exploration of effect and breaking of conventions that Delacroix so deplored in the 'Romantic' Beethoven (p. 246) became the dominant tendency in nineteenth-century music; and it is appropriate that this art should have been the one in which Romantic notions remained influential the longest.

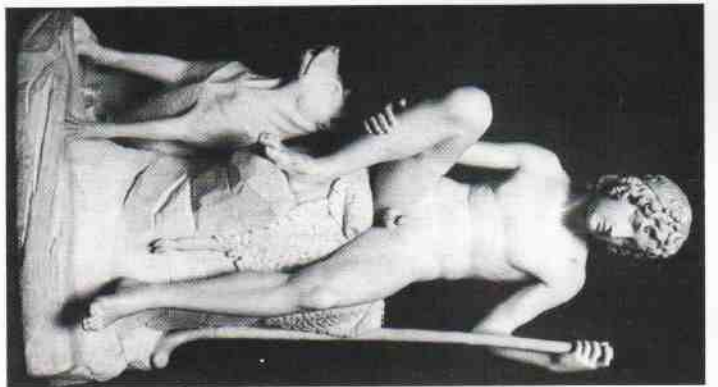
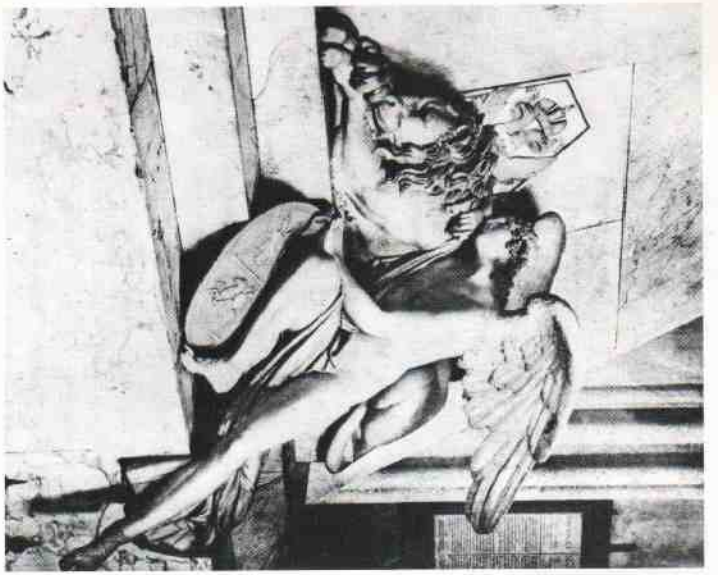
Such preferences were also reflected in pictorial art. For theorists, from A. W. Schlegel to Théophile Gautier, were agreed that painting was the true visual medium for Romanticism. The reasoning — embodied in Schlegel's Berlin lectures of 1802–03 and not materially altered since — was as follows.

Of the three principal visual arts — painting, sculpture and architecture — painting was the only one that was two-dimensional and which therefore relied completely on illusion for its effect. The point becomes all the more clear when painting is compared directly with sculpture, since both are descriptive arts. Sculpture reproduces the material aspect of its subject, its solidity and volume; while painting evokes, through colour and contour, the intangibles of light and space. Thus painting can suggest the ethereal or the impassioned without the encumbrance of materiality.

For the historically minded Schlegel this observation took on further implications. Taking up a remark made by the Dutch theorist Hemsterhuis in relation to the sculptors Bernini and Pigalle — that in the ancient world painting was too much like sculpture and in the modern world sculpture is too much like painting — Schlegel developed the idea of each art being uniquely suited to one of these ages. The ancient world had achieved a physical, but not a spiritual, perfection, and it was this that the 'material' art of sculpture was capable of presenting. The modern world, on the other hand, having achieved through Christianity a direct revelation of the eternal, tends always towards a more aspiring and immaterial expression of the kind that can be intimated in a painting. It is this that explains as well the difference between the Greek temple and the Gothic cathedral.

The status of sculpture

The remarkable thing about this account is not so much its viability — it is, after all, not so hard to imagine an evocative sculpture, and few would wish to censure Bernini now for his 'painterliness' — as that it was taken so



201 CANOVA Monument to Maria Christina, Vienna, 1799–1805

202 THORWALDSEN *Shepherd Boy* 1817

203 HAXMAN *Come Thou Blessed*. Sketch for monument to Agnes Cromwell, 1800



seriously by contemporaries. On a popular level the problem was stated frequently in terms similar to those of Mrs Jannesson who, in her travelogue of Germany in 1833, exclaimed: 'Now why should not sculpture have its gothic (or Romantic) school as well as its antique or classical school?' and came back to Schlegel's equation. And when, in 1866, Gautier published his obituary of the Romantic movement he not only pronounced the failure of sculpture to participate in it, but gave again as the reason the inability of this tangible medium to escape the materiality of the antique: 'One can say that this art, so noble and so pure, thrives even today on the antique tradition, and that it has degenerated every time it has moved away from it.'

It is certainly true that the classical tradition prevailed in nineteenth-century sculpture more consistently than in painting. The most internationally famed sculptor of the turn of the century, the Italian Antonio Canova (1757–1822), may have flirted with sentiment in his works, but this remained an overtone. Both the imagery and technique of his art – as can be seen from the figure of mourning death from his monument to Maria Christina in Vienna – were faithful to the classical tradition. Nothing interferes with the clarity of his surfaces – a point all the more striking when his sculptures are compared to the few paintings that he executed, which are

rich in *sfumato*. Canova's successor in reputation, the Dane Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844), was even more assiduous in his adherence to antique purity. And this move towards greater simplicity makes a striking contrast to the direction indicated in Neo-classical painting by the progression from the directness of David to the intricacies of Ingres. What is more curious is that Thorvaldsen, like Canova, was a great enthusiast for those revivalist tendencies in the visual arts represented by the Nazarenes. Canova, indeed, arranged for the Germans to be employed by the Vatican, while Thorvaldsen – who spent most of his working life in Rome – became a close friend of Overbeck and Schadow.

Yet although those sculptors who came into contact with Christian-Romantic circles seem to have accepted the material limitations of their own art, this hardly precluded the practical use of sculpture for religious monuments. Thorvaldsen himself devoted a large part of his life to creating a religious cycle for the Church of Our Lady in Copenhagen, although the style in which they were created owed little to modern Europe. The English sculptor John Flaxman certainly attempted a more ambitious solution to the problem. Throughout his life he took an active interest in medieval artefacts, and went so far as to proclaim that the art of sculpture had been ruined in



204 RUDÉ
Maréchal Ney 1852–53

87 England by the Reformation. Yet although his numerous relief monuments show a certain Gothicism in their patterning, there is nothing of the medieval in the morphology of his figures or in his free-standing work. This situation was repeated throughout the monumental sculpture of the period. While artists and patrons became fully prepared to sanction the use of full Gothic effects in architectural ornament, anything that counted as free-standing sculpture remained classical in style. One can see such a discrepancy in the contrast between the figures and decorative elements in the Scott Memorial in Edinburgh.

Outside the sphere of Christian-Romanticism there was certainly a more spirited attempt to create a sculpture for the modern age. Yet the outcome was hardly decisive. If one excepts the kind of spontaneous modelling that certain painters turned to from time to time as an extension of their pictorial interests – as in the case of Gércault and Daumier – there was really little created that was strikingly sensory or evocative. The greatest French sculptor of the period, François Rude (1784–1855), propagated an uneasy eclecticism. Trained in a rigorous classical tradition, and a strong admirer of David, he devoted the first part of his career to executing strictly classical works. An ardent Bonapartist, he went into exile in Brussels in 1814. Like

David himself, and did not return to France until 1828. In the 1830s he certainly tried to come to terms with the current fashion of Romanticism – executing remarkably expressive reminders of the former heroism – notably in the *Departure of the Volunteers of 1792* on the Arc de Triomphe. He also made a series of statues of heroic figures from French history, such as Joan of Arc and Marshal Ney, that were unrepentantly in the modern mode, showing the figures in the costume of their day rather than in classical drapes. Yet these concessions to current historicism did not undermine a pervading sense of structure. Spiritually Rude still belonged to the Davidian age of dramatic classicism, and in his later years he reverted almost completely to the themes and styles of antiquity. It was left to lesser figures like P. J. David d'Angers (1788–1856) to give themselves over completely to modernity. D'Angers, a kind of Horace Vernet of sculpture, built up a reputation by touring Europe making portraits of famous contemporaries. Very much interested by the physiognomic theories of Lavater, he would dash down spirited and exaggerated accounts of the features of Men of Genius. It was the kind of reportage that was in its element with such a subject as the daring virtuoso Paganini; yet even here the bulging brow, flowing hair and impassioned expression amount to little more than high-class journalism – and, it must be added, a journalism without the perception of Daumier's magnificent evocation of the mythical agent provocateur 'Ratapouff'.



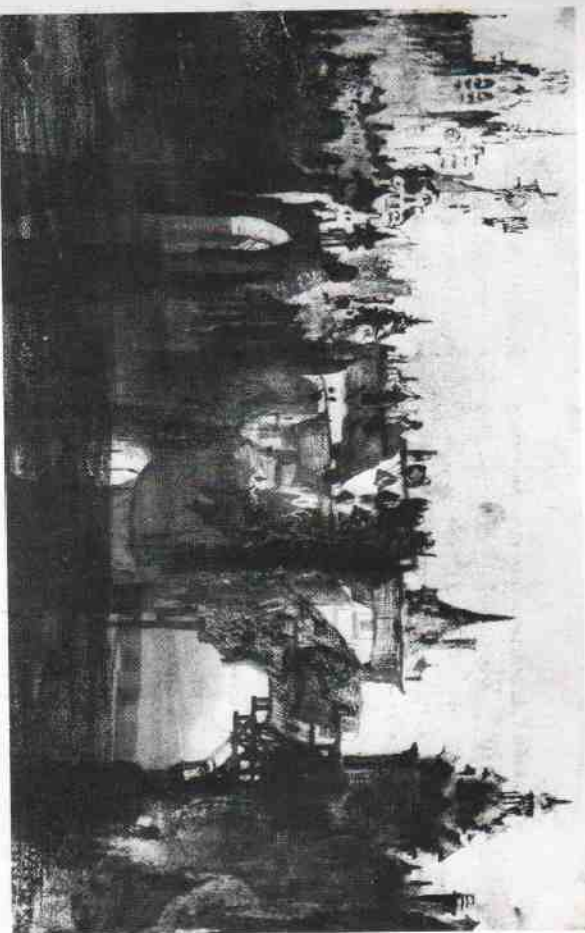
205 DAVID D'ANGERS *Paganini* 1830



206 DAUMIER *Ratapouff* 1850

Yet if such experiments lent substance to Gautier's claim that excursions away from classicism had failed to establish any comparable alternative, there was one genre which can be said to have come into its own. This was animal sculpture, whose leading light was A.-L. Barye (1796–1875). A pupil of Gros, Barye certainly lived up to his master's sense of staging. From an early age he devoted himself to themes that enabled him to explore violence and conflict. In his emphasis on the non-human, the sensory, and the significance of what had been till then thought of as a minor genre, Barye was certainly subversive. Like Géricault, his 'minor' subjects gain authority from the precision with which they are observed and controlled. And there is a sense of continuous exploration in them not simply in the complexity of their movement, but also in the unresolved relationship between such animal passions and the human emotions of the spectator. In this sense they take on a symbolic function of a kind envisaged by Carl Gustav Carus when he supposes that the 'only kind of Romantic sculpture' that could arise would be in the 'symbolic' genre of the *animalier*.

207 BARYE *Lion Attacking Serpent* 1832



208 HUGO *The Broken Bridge* 1847

Illustration

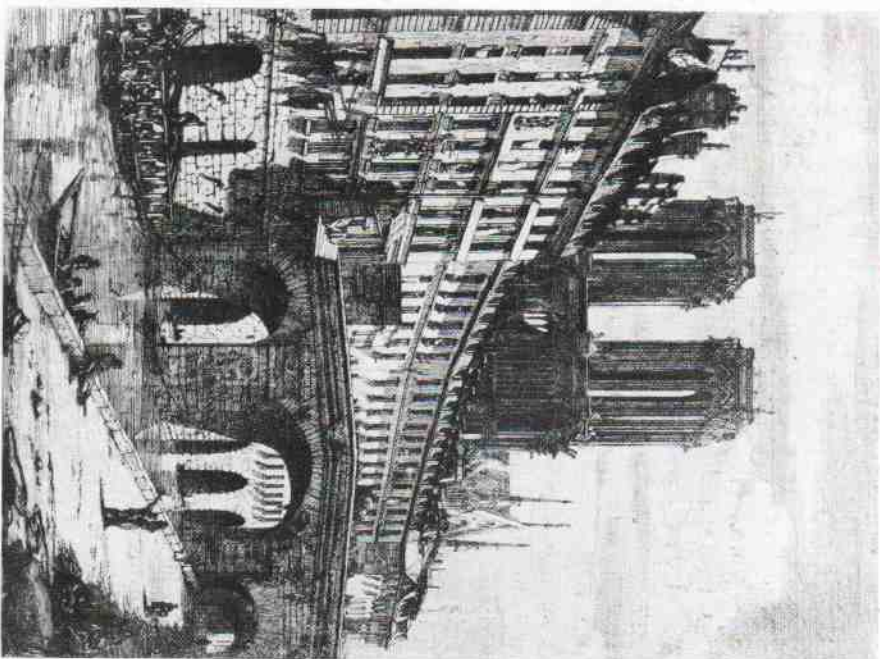
If painting was preferred to sculpture by the Romantic theorists on account of its ability to suggest the intangible, these were not, as has already been said, looking for an art of total abstraction. Association was their key interest. And more important to them than any hierarchy of the arts was the way in which the arts related to each other. For comparisons between them seemed to enhance their sensory qualities. The doctrine of *synaesthesia* – in which one sensation will set off another in a different sphere; a sound evoking a colour, or a colour a taste or smell – became highly attractive for this reason, and artists like Philipp Otto Runge prefigured that union of the arts, the 'Gesamtkunstwerk', that was to be explored by Wagner and by the Symbolists.

Given this interest in association, it is perhaps hardly surprising to find so much interest being taken during the period in illustration. There was, it is true, a commercial incentive in the rapidly expanding book trade for an increasingly literate populace and the innovation of cheaper and more rapid reproduction techniques like lithography and wood-engraving. Yet there was also a concern for the whole concept of illustration, for the way which one art could respond to an image evoked by another. And just as musical analogies were frequently invoked by writers, so many took an active

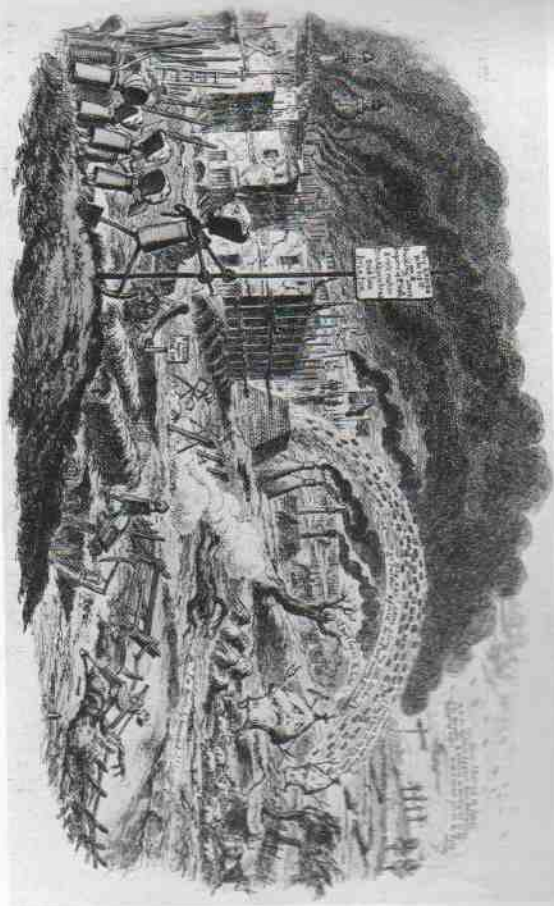
interest in the way in which pictorial techniques could suggest literary ideas.

208 There is no more extreme example of this than the drawings of Victor Hugo (1802–85). For this great writer drawing was a constant release, and while he attempted some topographical work in his earlier days he came increasingly to use the medium to express that 'vague and indefinable fantasy' that he considered to be the epitome of Romanticism. For this he worked with an experimental freedom that few professionals could emulate. He told Baudelaire that he used all kinds of mixtures – charcoal, soot, sepia and even coffee grounds – to gain the rich textures and lively movement of his monochromes.

Theophile Gautier was convinced that Hugo would have been a great painter if he had not been a great writer, and compared his fantastic effects of lighting to those of Goya and Piranesi. Yet however much the impenetrable shadows and startling bursts of luminosity may be reminiscent of these artists, these works lack their curiosity and attentiveness. Hugo does not



209 MERYON
Le Petit Pont
1852

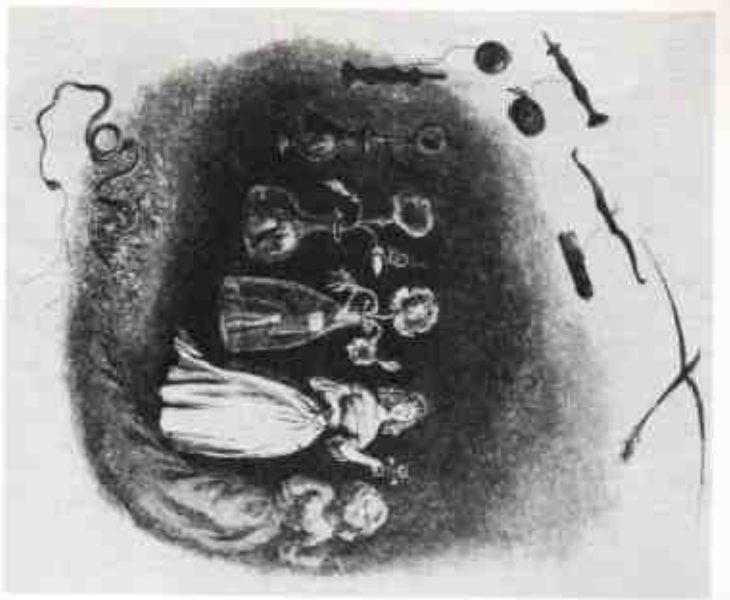


210 CRUIKSHANK *London Going Out of Town* 1829

press in them to the edges of his experience, as Goya did, but lets the imagery – the castles, ruins, storms and condemned men – flow freely from his random markings. His art is akin to fire-gazing, in which memories and fancies are allowed free play.

Hugo's imagery had no parallel among the professional illustrators. Yet there were many who fully explored the associative range of their art. Hugo's own favourite black and white artist was the etcher Charles Meryon (1821–68), an ailing man who worked in monochrome on account of his colour blindness. Meryon turned to art in the late 1840s after having previously spent several years at sea. He remained something of an outsider – even, Baudelaire hinted, an innocent – in the Parisian milieu. Never able to reconcile himself to the stigma of his own illegitimacy, Meryon was obsessed with the sinfulness of the modern world. Yet much though he hated the contemporary Babylon, he could not ignore it, and his *Etchings of Paris* are full of an incomparable spleen. He uses the etching needle with devastating precision to bring out the latent menace of the city. The Cathedral of Notre-Dame becomes a macabre, looming presence, and the Seine beneath it a satanic river which featureless figures surround like lost souls. It seems all too inevitable that he eventually lost his reason.

Meryon's sense of the supernatural was haunted by tragedy, yet the art of association also encouraged a more playful fantasy. The savage



211 GRANDVILLE: *The Metamorphoses of Sleep* 1844

metamorphoses that Gillray introduced into the political cartoon mellowed in England after the Napoleonic wars into more innocuous puns. It is a change that can be seen in the art of the illustrator George Cruikshank (1792–1878), who began his career in the Gillray style and had already turned by the 1820s to social comment. His *London Going Out of Town* was a protest against a proposed encroachment on Hampstead Heath. Yet the slyer enjoyment of an anthropomorphic game—the turning of building tools and materials into a relentless army and haystacks and trees into despairing fugitives—has taken over from any sense of outrage. In later life Cruikshank was to pay dearly for such levity, when he tried to convince his contemporaries of the seriousness of his campaign against the evils of drink.

For the French illustrator Grandville (1803–47), the development was reversed. For after beginning his career as a satirist he turned under the growing impact of censorship towards a world of pure make-believe where one thing turns continuously into another. In such works as *Another World* the spectator is continuously presented with one new way of looking after another. It is a dream without end, an infinity of metamorphoses that turn out to be merely marking time.

Realism

Like so many other artists in the 1840s, Grandville was suffering from a sense of stagnation. In political terms, the predicament was clear enough, and led to its own solution in the Revolution of 1848. Pictorially, the promise of 1830 had soon withered, for the much-vaunted liberty that would allow Daumier the honesty of publishing a searing exposure of a senseless massacre of working-class citizens asleep in their beds by Government troops was gradually stifled through censorship. And the outcome was not simply the make-believe of Grandville, but also an alternative dissatisfaction with fantasy. The 'Bohemian' world of the 1830s—so picturesquely recommended by the novelist Henri Murger in his *Scenes of Bohemian Life* (1847–49)—was in fact a world of abject squalor, a last refuge for those who had set out to embody the Romantic notion of the artistic individual. It was they who paid the full price for the attempt to 'romanticize the world'; their discontent gave the lie to the textbook Romanticism of the Salon.

And finally, there was, as well as criticism, assertion. When the young Gustave Courbet (1819–77) came to Paris at the age of twenty-one, and determined to trash himself to paint, he entered a milieu in which Romanticism was the norm. For such an egotist the lure was irresistible, and,

212 DAUMIER: *Rue Transversale* 1834





213 colour The Stonebreakers 1849

213 during the decade in which he gradually found his feet, he produced innumerable dramatizations of young men – frequently himself – rendered with a fashionable Spanish bravura. Yet by the end of the 1840s Courbet had emerged with an art that, while remaining utterly personal and largely autobiographical, could present its themes without make-believe. *The Stonebreakers* does not seek to excuse, condemn or plead for these labourers at their backbreaking toil. Turned away from us, their faces obscured, the young boy and old man proceed with their tasks unmindful of us. There is no rhetoric here, only an uncompromising presence. And the man who could turn bravura into hottest description was also the man who reversed the Romantic assessment of his own métier by proclaiming that ‘painting is an essentially concrete art’ and that ‘imagination in art consists in knowing how to find the most complete expression of an existing thing, but never in inventing or creating that thing itself’.

The association of Courbet’s artistic revolution with a political one fitted with a neatness that one has come to expect from French nineteenth-century art. Yet if the confluence of Realism with Radicalism in 1848 seems to follow on an example already set by Neo-classicism in 1789 and Romanticism in 1830, it is at least as remarkable that this strictly Parisian phenomenon should



214 MILITARY Christ in the House of his Parents 1850

214 have been matched in Berlin by Adolph Menzel’s (1815–1905) unchanged repertoire, and in London by the emergence of a new brotherhood who turned the tenets of revivalism on their heads. For the Pre-Raphaelites did not look to the past for mystic piety, but for ‘truth to nature’. And when John Everett Millais (1829–96) painted his *Christ in the House of his Parents*, which shows the Christ Child with a wound that prefigures his suffering on the cross, he could not have been further from the Nazarenes in his meticulous description of an actual carpenter’s shop, or his use of an actual carpenter’s body for that of Joseph. For the early Victorians such an undervalued presentation of a devotional scene amounted to blasphemy.

Unlike Courbet, the realism of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood still had strong narrative and moralizing elements. For one of the members, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–82), make-believe too was to remain a potent force. In the decade following the uproar over Millais’s ‘realist’ Holy Family he wove a world out of Dante and the Arthurian legends that gave a very different meaning to the term ‘Pre-Raphaelite’. A year after his death Ruskin was to call him the leader of the ‘romantic school in England’, explaining that by ‘romantic’ he meant ‘the habit of regarding the external and real world as a singer of Romantics would have regarded it in the Middle Ages’.

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