



A Free Course on the History of Western Art

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21-04 THE ROMANTIC AGE OF ENGLISH PAINTING

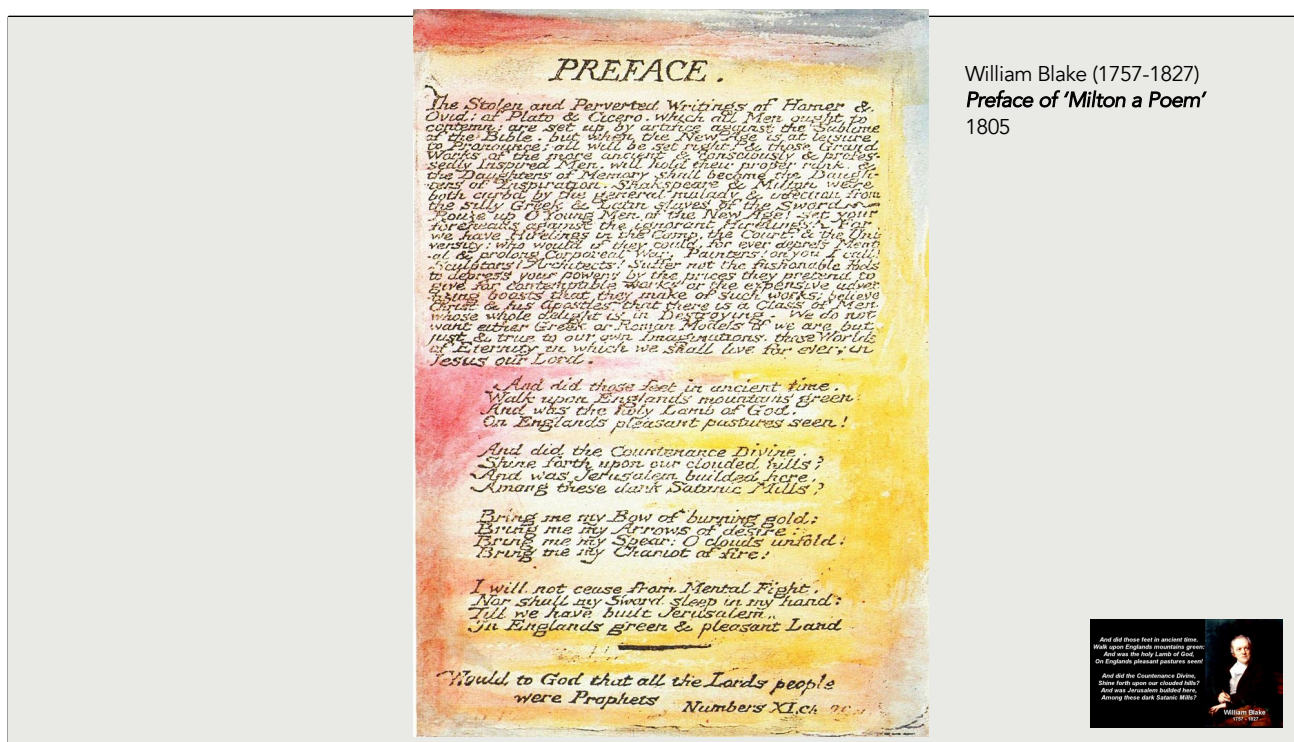
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William Blake
(1757-1827)
Title page of
Milton a Poem
1805

This lecture traces the Romantic revolt in English painting from its philosophical roots in Burke's *Sublime* and Rousseau's noble savage through to its greatest visual achievements. We examine Blake's visionary fury, Fuseli's psychological terror, Turner's annihilating storms, Constable's defiant naturalism, and Palmer's mystical pastorals. Along the way we encounter Gothic Revival architecture, apocalyptic history painting, and the abolitionist canvas — charting how imagination, feeling, and nature displaced reason as the supreme values of an age.



William Blake (1757-1827), Title page of Milton a Poem, 1805

The Romantic movement, as we've just seen, was a revolt against Enlightenment rationalism — and no single work distills that revolt more vividly than a short poem by **William Blake**. The legend behind it holds that **Joseph of Arimathea**, who in the Gospels offers his own tomb for Christ's burial, was a family friend who had brought the young Jesus to visit England decades earlier. Blake takes that apocryphal story and transforms it into something incendiary. The poem, "**And did those feet in ancient time**", forms the preface to his epic **Milton a Poem**, one of the **Prophetic Books**. The title page is dated **1804**, though the poem was most likely printed around 1808. Read the questions carefully: the first two expect the answer yes — Christ did walk on England's green hills — but the second two expect no, because the **dark Satanic Mills** of industrial England have made Jerusalem impossible. Blake calls for ancient, mystical weapons not for physical warfare but for what he terms **Mental Fight** — an act of imagination fierce enough to destroy the factories and restore the land. That summary captures the Romantic creed precisely: deep reverence for nature, imagination ranked above reason, fierce individualism, suspicion of industrial science, and a longing for an idealised, uncorrupted past.

Notes

This poem by William Blake tells us a lot about Romanticism.

The legend was that Joseph of Arimathea took Jesus to visit England between his

early years and when he was about 30. Joseph of Arimathea only turns up in the Bible after Jesus has been crucified when he offers the tomb he plans to use for his family to house Jesus's body for a short period. The implication is he was a friend of the family and so might have taken Jesus on a trip when he was young.

'And did those feet in ancient time' is a short poem by William Blake from the preface to his epic Milton a Poem, one of a collection of writings known as the Prophetic Books. The date of 1804 on the title page is probably when the plates were begun, but the poem was printed c. 1808. Today it is best known as the anthem 'Jerusalem', with music written by Sir Hubert Parry in 1916. The answers to the first two questions is 'yes' and to the second two 'no' because our Satanic mills (hell-like factories) have stopped God building Jerusalem here. In England. Ancient weapons are invoked in a mystical and mental fight to destroy the factories and return the land to its ancient green and pleasant form so that Jerusalem can be built here.

In summary Romantics:

Had a deep respect for nature and solitude.

Valued emotions (sensitivity) and the imagination over reason and rationality.

Celebrated individuality.

believed that science was risky and dangerous.

Were nostalgic for a distant past when everything was perfect

Notes

And did those feet in ancient time, Walk upon England's mountains
green: And was the holy Lamb of God, On England's pleasant pastures
seen! And did the Countenance Divine, Shine forth upon our clouded hills? And
was Jerusalem builded here, Among these dark Satanic Mills? Bring me my
Bow of burning gold; Bring me my Arrows of desire: Bring me my Spear: O
clouds unfold! Bring me my Chariot of fire! I will not cease from Mental
Fight, Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand: Till we have built Jerusalem, In
England's green & pleasant Land



Angelica Kauffman (1741–1807)
Venus Induces Helen to Fall in Love with Paris
 1790, 102 x 127.5 cm, Hermitage Museum



Henry Fuseli (1741–1825), *The Artist Moved by the Grandeur of Antique Fragments*, 1778-79, red chalk on sepia wash, 41.5 x 35.5 cm, Kunsthau Zürich

Angelica Kauffman (1741–1807), *Venus Induces Helen to Fall in Love with Paris*, 1790, 102 x 127.5 cm, Hermitage Museum

Blake's revolt against industrial reason, as we've just seen, was essentially a revolt of imagination — and that revolt had a visual counterpart in **Romantic painting**, a movement best understood by setting it against its great rival, **Neoclassicism**. The contrast is real but easily overstated. **Angelica Kauffman**, working in the grand history-painting tradition, exemplifies Neoclassical values: clear line, moral elevation, subjects drawn from antiquity. Yet the moment we look closely at individual artists, the opposition softens. **Henry Fuseli's** drawing of an artist overwhelmed before the fragments of the **Colossus of Constantine** says something Neoclassical subject matter simply could not — that classical grandeur is irretrievable, and that its very loss is sublime. Fuseli conveys not admiration but awe verging on despair. **Percy Bysshe Shelley** captured the same feeling in verse: ancient greatness, he wrote, "cannot pass away." Romantics did not reject antiquity; they mourned it, which is a different thing entirely. Where Neoclassicism centred on hierarchy, civic virtue, and the human figure, Romanticism turned outward to nature and inward to feeling. In British painting that shift appeared first in landscape — wild scenery, storms, Gothic ruins — from as early as the **1760s**, long before **Turner** or **Constable** gave it its greatest expression.

Notes

Romanticism v. Neoclassicism

The Romantic is often contrasted with the Neoclassical although if we look at individual painters the distinction is often eroded.

This painting by Angelica Kaufmann is a history painter in the grand style and is neoclassical.

'Neoclassicism is a revival of the styles and spirit of classic antiquity inspired directly from the classical period, which coincided and reflected the developments in philosophy and other areas of the Age of Enlightenment, and was initially a reaction against the excesses of the preceding Rococo style. While the movement is often described as the opposed counterpart of Romanticism, this is a great over-simplification that tends not to be sustainable when specific artists or works are considered. '

The Romantic spirit is conveyed by this drawing by Henry Fuseli (1741-1825) showing the overwhelming despair of an artist confronted with the grandeur of the classical period. A grandeur which is moving and can never be recaptured or repeated. Romantics valued Ancient Greece and Rome and Percy Bysshe Shelley Ode to Liberty described their greatness as one which 'cannot pass away' and which returned as 'Saxon Alfred' and Milton. The Romantic representation of Greek and Roman subjects often strove to convey the artists sheer awe at the colossal dimensions of classical works.

Neoclassicism was about hierarchy and people and Romanticism was about nature and feeling...

Notes

The Judgement of Paris is a story from Greek mythology about the events that led to the Trojan Wars, and later the foundation of Rome. There are various versions but in one version Zeus, king of the gods, held a banquet to celebrate a marriage and did not invite Eris, goddess of discord. She arrived with a golden apple from the Garden of Hesperides which she threw into the party as a reward for the most beautiful guest. Three goddesses claimed it, Hera (in Roman mythology Juno), Athena (Minerva) and Aphrodite (Venus) and Zeus was asked to judge so he appointed Paris who had not selected his own prize bull in a contest. The three goddesses try to bribe Paris by making him king of Europe and Asia (Hera), wisdom and skill in war (Athena) and the love of the world's most beautiful woman, Helen of Sparta, wife of the Greek king Menelaus (Aphrodite). Paris accepted Aphrodite's gift and awarded the apple to her, receiving Helen as well as the enmity of the Greeks and

especially of Hera. The Greeks' expedition led by Agamemnon (brother of Menelaus) set out to retrieve Helen from Troy where Paris had taken her and this is the mythological basis of the Trojan War.

The foot and the hand are from the Colossus of Constantine, a statue of the late Roman emperor Constantine the Great (c. 280–337) that once occupied the west apse of the Basilica of Maxentius near the Forum Romanum in Rome. Portions of the Colossus now reside in the Courtyard of the Palazzo dei Conservatori of the Musei Capitolini, on the Capitoline Hill, above the west end of the Forum. Strangely, in the ruins, two right hands were found and it is speculated that the hand was remade to change it from holding a sceptre to a Christian symbol. The seated statue would have been about 12 metres (40 feet) high.

Romanticism is easier to define in literature with William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and the much older William Blake, followed later by the isolated figure of John Clare. Also such novelists as Jane Austen, Walter Scott and Mary Shelley, and the essayists William Hazlitt and Charles Lamb.

In the visual arts, Romanticism first showed itself in landscape painting, where from as early as the 1760s British artists began to turn to wilder landscapes and storms, and Gothic architecture.

The best known English Romantic painter was J.M.W. Turner and John Constable. Other groups of artists expressed feelings that verged on the mystical, many largely abandoning classical drawing and proportions. These included William Blake and Samuel Palmer and the other members of the Ancients in England

In Europe the Romantics were Francisco Goya (Spain), Théodore Géricault (France), Eugène Delacroix (France), Philipp Otto Runge (Germany), Johan Christian Dahl (Norway).



John Constable (1776-1837)
The Hay Wain
1821
130 x 185 cm
National Gallery

John Constable (1776-1837), The Hay Wain, 1821, 130 x 185 cm, National Gallery

That opposition between grandeur mourned and nature celebrated brings us directly to **John Constable**, whose **Hay Wain of 1821** is the painting most people picture the moment Romanticism in English landscape is mentioned. The work looks serene, even inevitable — but Constable was anything but uncontroversial in his own time. Critics attacked his surfaces as disagreeable and disfigured, complained of what they called "a huge quantity of chopped hay," and *The Times* regularly censured his habit of scattering white flecks across the canvas. *The Gentleman's Magazine* in **1829** dismissed a Constable outright as showing "execrable taste, having no resemblance to any appearance in Nature." His use of bright greens provoked particular resistance — the legend runs that his patron **George Beaumont** demanded the foreground match the mellow brown of an old violin, whereupon Constable silently placed a real violin on the grass to make his point. Yet France grasped what England refused. **Théodore Géricault** praised the work in Paris, **Eugène Delacroix** famously repainted the background of his **Massacre de Scio** after seeing the Constables at **John Arrowsmith's** gallery, and the **Paris Salon of 1824** awarded the Hay Wain a gold medal. Constable sold barely twenty paintings in England across his entire career; France exceeded that within a few years. He still refused every invitation abroad, writing that he would "rather be a poor man in England than a rich man abroad" — a remark that is itself a Romantic manifesto.

Notes

Nature was the principle subject matter of Romantic painting and the people were secondary figures in the background.

You all know this painting so I thought I would use it as the typical Romantic painting before looking at the pre-history of Romanticism.

It shows a golden age before industrialization and today is uncontroversial.

However, in his day Constable was revolutionary in the way he depicted nature and earned a great deal of criticism. They described his 'disagreeable', 'disfigured' and 'mannered' surface and complained his scenes were scattered with 'a huge quantity of chopped hay'. The Times noted his habit of 'scattering white spots over the surface of his picture', a criticism later applied to Turner. The Gentlemen's Magazine, May 1829, commented on a Constable as '...an execrable taste, having no resemblance to any appearance in Nature'. There was great resistance to Constable using lighter shades of green, there is a legend that his patron, George Beaumont, criticized him for not making the grass in the foreground the required mellow brown of an old violin. Constable, took a real violin and put it on the grass to show his patron the difference.

Constable was born in East Bergholt in 1776, a year after Turner. He was an articulate painter who defined his personal philosophy as 'I should paint my own places best' and 'painting is but another word for feeling', both Romantic notions. He was never financially successful in his own lifetime and was not made an academician until he was 52. His work was successful in France where it inspired the Barbizon School.

But this is not all there is to Romanticism. There is a darker side...

Notes

Constable painted the Hay Wain in 1821 and it was exhibited by the Academy that year where it was seen by Théodore Géricault on a visit to London. He praised Constable in Paris and a dealer called John Arrowsmith bought four paintings, including The Hay Wain. It was exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1824, winning a gold medal.

Delacroix repainted the background of his 1824 Massacre de Scio after seeing the Constables at Arrowsmith's Gallery.

In his lifetime, Constable sold only 20 paintings in England, but in France he sold more than 20 in just a few years. Despite this, he refused all invitations to

travel internationally to promote his work, writing to Francis Darby: 'I would rather be a poor man [in England] than a rich man abroad.' A Romantic sentiment.

The shadowy figure in the centre foreground was originally a man on a horse which was changed to a barrel and then painted out. The paint has become more transparent over time so the shadow of the underpainting can now be seen. The dog was added late in the composition but is an essential part of the balance as it leads the eye across over the hay wagon into the distance scene.

Driving a hay wagon through water had a practical benefit as in hot weather the metal rim expanded and the wooden wheel dried out and shrank. The water cooled the metal which shrank and it expanded the wood as it absorbed water thus ensuring the metal rim became a tight fit.

The flash of red on the fisherman (right, middle distance, in the reeds) and on the horse intensify the green by the juxtaposition of its complementary colour.

The cottage was owned by Willy Lot a local tenant farmer admired by Constable as he lived in the cottage for 80 years and only spent four nights away. He was a deaf, eccentric tenant farmer and the smoke from the chimney shows his unseen presence. The woman outside is probably gathering water using a jug as she is too far above the water surface to clean clothes effectively. The men in the distant field are gathering hay in a manner that had been abandoned in Suffolk 20 years earlier. Constable is presenting a traditional, reactionary view of the countryside that invokes the nostalgia of the previous century. In fact, his brother Abram wrote in 1822 about, 'never a night without seeing fires near or at a distance'.

References

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William Hogarth (1697–1764)
*Satan, Sin and Death (A Scene from
Milton's 'Paradise Lost')*
c.1735–40
61.9 x 74.5 cm
Tate Britain

William Hogarth (1697–1764), *Satan, Sin and Death (A Scene from Milton's 'Paradise Lost')*, c.1735–40, 61.9 x 74.5 cm, Tate Britain

Constable's defiant attachment to English soil connects, unexpectedly, to the very concept that gives Romantic landscape its intellectual backbone: **the Sublime**. To understand where that idea stood by Constable's era, we need to step back roughly eighty years and look at this painting by **William Hogarth**. It is the earliest known painted treatment of the confrontation scene from **Milton's Paradise Lost**, and it predates by some years **Edmund Burke's** landmark philosophical text on the subject, his **Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful**, published in **1757**. Hogarth shows **Satan** on the left, barred from his passage out of Hell by the figure of **Death** — described by Milton as a formless, darkened shape wearing a crown and carrying a dart. Between them stands **Sin**, a naked woman, who reveals she is Satan's daughter and Death the monstrous product of Satan's own assault upon her. It is a scene saturated with dread, transgression, and boundless power — precisely the qualities Burke would later theorise as productive of the Sublime. The concept itself stretches back further still, to the ancient treatise **On the Sublime**, attributed to **Longinus**. Burke transformed it into a modern psychological framework, and from Burke it passed directly into the hands of the Romantic poets and painters who made it central to their entire visual and literary project.

Notes

The Sublime

Let us go back 80-90 years and examine this work by Hogarth in order to approach Romanticism from a different direction.

This is an early illustration of the sublime, which later becomes an important element of Romanticism.

This painting by Hogarth predates Edmund Burke's (1729-1797) book (*A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1757) and shows that John Milton's (1608-1674) seventeenth century ideas are related to the discourse on the sublime in the eighteenth century. It is the earliest known painting of this theme from Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). From its publication Milton's poem was associated with the sublime which was known from antiquity. The first study of the sublime is Pseudo-Longinus *On the Sublime* (1st or 3rd century CE).

The painting follows Milton's text and shows Satan, on the left, confronting Death who bars his way from hell to earth. Between them is Sin, shown as a naked woman. She reveals to Satan that she is his daughter, and that Death is their incestuous child.

I have a short guide to Edmund Burke's view of the sublime...

Notes

In John Milton's (1608-1674) *Paradise Lost*, Sin is described as a beautiful woman who was born out of the left side of Satan's head. Satan raped his offspring and she gave birth to Death and her lower half was changed into that of a serpent. Death raped Sin who gave birth to a pack of hellhounds. Death would destroy Sin but knows this would destroy him. Death is described as a dark formless shape who wears a crown, to symbolise his rule over all living beings, and carries a 'dart' (dagger) with which to pierce his victims.

The idea of the sublime was taken up by Immanuel Kant and the Romantic poets including especially William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The so-called 'second generation' Romantics employed the sublime as well, but as the early Romantics had different interpretations of the literary sublime, so too did Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, and John Keats. In many instances, they reflected the desire for Enlightenment that their predecessor showed, but they also tended to stick closer to the definition of the sublime

given by Longinus and Kant. They tended to focus on the terror in the sublime, and the ecstasy found there.

Hogarth's earliest satirical work, *Emblematical Print on the South Sea Scheme*, was c. 1721 but his first series of moral stories was *The Harlots Progress* (1731) and his second, *A Rake's Progress* (1735) was painted about the same time as this painting.

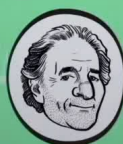
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BEAUTY

Edmund Burke on the Sublime

Narrated by



Harry Shearer

From Burke, the Sublime passed into one of the most powerful intellectual currents of the age — and it did not travel alone. Its companion was a radical rethinking of human nature itself, driven above all by **Jean-Jacques Rousseau**. In his **Discourse on the Sciences and Arts**, published in **1750**, Rousseau argued what became one of the most consequential ideas in modern European thought: that human beings are born good, and that civilisation corrupts them. His own formulation is unambiguous — "nature made man happy and good, but society depraves him and makes him miserable." From this followed the longing for unspoiled wilderness, and the figure of the **noble savage** — not a primitive to be pitied, but a moral ideal held up against urban refinement. Burke's framework, which we encountered on the previous slide, gave that longing its aesthetic vocabulary. Where the **Beautiful** calms and pleases — smooth, small, delicate, associated with love — the **Sublime** overwhelms: vast, infinite, terrifying, rooted in the fear of death and in the primordial contest between God and Satan. The nerves tighten rather than soften. It is this preference for the Sublime over the merely Beautiful that marks the decisive turn from **Neoclassicism** to **Romanticism** — and that charges Romantic landscape with its characteristic undercurrent of awe and dread.

Notes

The Romantic movement is connected to the sublime.

In 1750 Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) is his book *Discourse on the Sciences*

and Arts describes how we are born good but corrupted by civilisation. This was associated with a return to nature and the idea of the noble savage. Rousseau describes the 'great principle that nature made man happy and good, but that society depraves him and makes him miserable....vice and error, foreign to his constitution, enter it from outside and insensibly change him'.

In 1757 Edmund Burke wrote *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* a treatise on the aesthetic in which he separates the idea of beauty from the sublime. Briefly, the beautiful, according to Burke, is related to the passion of love and is associated with the small, smooth and delicate. It calms the nerves and the original cause is God's providence. The sublime is related to the passion of fear, especially the fear of death, and is related to vastness, infinity and magnificence. It causes tension in the nerves and its original cause is the battle between God and Satan.

The preference for the sublime over the beautiful was to mark the transition from the Neoclassical to the Romantic era. Although the Romantics were concerned with beauty there was often an undercurrent, explicit or implicit, of terror and awe.



Henry Fuseli (1741-1825)
The Nightmare
1781
101.6 x 127 cm
Institute of Arts, Detroit

Henry Fuseli (1741-1825), *The Nightmare*, 1781, 101.6 x 127 cm, Institute of Arts, Detroit

The Sublime, as we have seen, carried within it an appetite for the overwhelming and the terrifying — and in the work of **Henry Fuseli**, that appetite found its most scandalous expression. Born in Zurich in **1741**, Fuseli was ordained as a minister before fleeing Switzerland after exposing a corrupt magistrate, arriving in England in **1765**. It was **Joshua Reynolds** who persuaded him to devote himself entirely to painting. ***The Nightmare***, exhibited at the **Royal Academy** in **1782**, caused an immediate sensation, exciting what one contemporary account called "an uncommon degree of interest." A woman lies prostrate in helpless sleep; a leering incubus crouches on her chest; a wild-eyed horse thrusts its head through the curtain behind. The word "nightmare" itself derives not from horses but from the Old English *mære*, a spirit sent to suffocate sleepers — Fuseli layers folkloric terror with overt, disturbing sexuality. The painting's biographical dimension is hard to ignore. The year before, Fuseli had written to his friend **Felix Lavater** of his obsessive passion for Lavater's niece **Anna Landolt**: "Last night I had her in bed with me... fused her body and soul together with my own." A sketch of a girl was found on the back of the canvas. The engraved version earned the publisher over **£500**, far outstripping the twenty guineas the original fetched — proof, if any were needed, that Romanticism's darker energies had found a mass audience.

Notes

Romanticism had a darker side associated with a lack of restraint, violence, passion, ghosts and satanic practices.

The Nightmare was painted in 1781 by Anglo-Swiss artist Henry Fuseli (1741–1825). It was exhibited in 1782 at the Royal Academy and 'exited ... an uncommon degree of interest' and it has remained his best known work ever since. The engraved version sold widely and the painting was parodied in political satire. Due to its fame, Fuseli painted at least three other versions of the painting.

Interpretations of The Nightmare have varied widely. The canvas seems to portray simultaneously a dreaming woman and the content of her nightmare. The incubus and the horse's head refer to contemporary belief and folklore about nightmares, but have been ascribed more specific meanings by some theorists. Contemporary critics were taken aback by the overt sexuality of the painting, which has since been interpreted by some scholars as anticipating Carl Jung's ideas about the unconscious (some way Freud's ideas). Unlike Freud Jung believed the libido was not just sexual energy but a generalized psychic energy and that the psyche is made up of the ego, the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. The collective unconscious is a uniquely Jungian idea. It is shared with other members of the human species and consists of latent memories from our ancestral and evolutionary past. 'The form of the world into which [a person] is born is already inborn in him, as a virtual image' as a result of evolution.

An incubus is a male demon that according to legend lies on sleeping women in order to engage in sexual activity. Its female counterpart is a succubus. Her position was believed to encourage nightmares and the horse or mare reinforces this interpretation. The etymology of nightmare does not relate to horses but to Scandinavian mythology and spirits sent to suffocate sleepers and the early meaning of nightmare included the experience of having a heavy weight on the chest while asleep and a feeling of dread. The Old English word *mære* means incubus.

Fuseli was an ordained minister and he painted other scenes involving sleep but his other paintings had biblical, mythological or literary references.

The original painting sold for twenty guineas but the engraving earned the publisher more than £500. The engraving included a short poem by Erasmus Darwin called 'Night-Mare'.

So on his Nightmare through the evening fog
Flits the squab Fiend o'er fen,
and lake, and bog;
Seeks some love-wilder'd maid with sleep

oppress'd,Alights, and grinning sits upon her breast.

Many contemporary critics found the work scandalous because of its sexual associations. It has been suggested that the painting is autobiographical and represents Fuseli's suppressed lust for Anna Landholdt, a young woman he fell passionately in love with in 1779. Landholdt or Landolt was the niece of Fuseli's friend Felix Lavater and Fuseli wrote to him a passionate letter containing the passage, 'Last night I had her in bed with me, tossed my bedclothes hugger-mugger wound my hot and tight-clasped hands about her, fused her body and soul together with my own, poured into her my spirit, breath and strength. Anyone who touches her now commits adultery and incest! She is mine, and I am hers. And have her I will.' However, the love was one-sided and came to nothing but it may have been the inspiration for the painting. Further circumstantial evidence is a sketch of a girl on the back of the painting.

The Nightmare may have influenced Mary Shelley as the scene in *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) when the monster murders Frankenstein's wife describes her thrown across a bed with her head hanging down and her pale distorted features half covered by hair. She would have known the painting as her parents Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin were friends of Fuseli.

Henry Fuseli (1741–1825) was a Swiss painter, draughtsman and writer on art who spent much of his life in Britain. Many of his works, such as *The Nightmare*, deal with supernatural subject-matter. He held the posts of Professor of Painting and Keeper at the Royal Academy. His style had a considerable influence on many younger British artists, including William Blake. Fuseli's father was a portrait painter and author and Fuseli was educated as a minister. He had to flee Switzerland after exposing a corrupt magistrate. He arrived in England in 1765 and supported himself by writing until he met Joshua Reynolds who convinced him to devote himself to art. Between 1770 and 1778 he studied art in Italy. In 1778 he married and in 1779 he returned to England and joined the Royal Academy. The early feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, whose portrait he had painted, planned a trip with him to Paris, and pursued him determinedly, but after his wife's intervention the Fuseli's door was closed to her forever. Fuseli later said 'I

hate clever women. They are only troublesome'.



Philip James De Loutherbourg
(1740–1812)
An Avalanche in the Alps
1803
109.9 x 160.0 cm
Tate Britain, London

Philip James De Loutherbourg (1740–1812), *An Avalanche in the Alps*, 1803, 109.9 x 160.0 cm, Tate Britain, London

Fuseli's nightmare visions represent one extreme of the Sublime — the psychologically monstrous. **Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg** pursued a different register: the Sublime as natural catastrophe, vast and indifferent to human life. De Loutherbourg was born in **Strasbourg** in **1740** of Polish origins and trained in Paris before settling in London in **1771**. His background was emphatically cosmopolitan, not British — yet he became one of the most influential interpreters of the British Romantic landscape. Crucially, he brought theatrical expertise to that role: for years he worked as a stage designer, pioneering spectacular illusion at **Drury Lane**. He then extended that work into his celebrated **Eidophusikon**, a miniature theatre in which painted landscapes were animated through moving parts, coloured light, and coordinated sound — storms, waterfalls, eruptions — a precursor of cinema in everything but name. That theatrical instinct is legible in his painting **An Avalanche in the Alps**, where the mountain's overwhelming force is measured against the tiny, helpless figures below: one flees, one prays, one stands transfixed. The bridge they meant to cross has already vanished. De Loutherbourg almost certainly visited Switzerland around **1769 to 1771**, and the painting carries the authority of someone who had stood inside that landscape and felt its scale press down upon him.

Notes

Later in the century the sublime was refined into ideas of awe and terror.

The Alps were a familiar landscape for generations of British travellers, but it was only in the later part of the eighteenth century that their rugged and immense qualities were appreciated for their Sublime associations. De Loutherbourg adds human drama to the avalanche's awesome power by means of the terrified people. The bridge they were about to cross has been swept away and they are just about to be overwhelmed. One person flees, another prays and a third appears to be transfixed by the sublime spectacle.

De Loutherbourg's exploration of sublime effect was assisted by his work as a theatre set designer. He also created the 'Eidophusikon', a miniature theatre where landscapes were animated and accompanied by music and sound effects.

De Loutherbourg was not Swiss but was born in Germany of Polish origins and trained in Paris, settling in London in 1771. He seems to have visited Switzerland c. 1769–71, again in 1787, and perhaps in 1802–3 in the short period of peace following the Treaty of Amiens.

References

Tate website



Claude Joseph Vernet (1714-1789)
A Shipwreck in Stormy Sea
1773
114.5 x 163.5 cm
National Gallery

Claude Joseph Vernet (1714-1789), *A Shipwreck in Stormy Sea*, 1773, 114.5 x 163.5 cm, National Gallery

De Louthembourg's theatrical Sublime, then, did not emerge in isolation — he was absorbing and transforming a tradition already well established on the Continent, above all in the work of **Claude Joseph Vernet**. Vernet was born in **Avignon in 1714** and came to painting through his father, whom he assisted from the age of fourteen. He spent nearly twenty years in Rome, where his unflinching attention to weather, light, and the movement of water built him an international reputation. British aristocrats encountered his work on the Grand Tour, and in **1745** he married an Englishwoman — so the connection to British taste was not merely commercial but personal. Recalled to France, he produced his celebrated series of the **French seaports**, now in the **Louvre**, which confirmed his standing as the pre-eminent marine painter of the age. What we see in a Vernet storm scene anticipates almost everything Romantic painters would later do with the sea. The ocean is not backdrop — it is antagonist. Tiny figures in the foreground drown, pray, or flee, subsumed entirely by forces indifferent to them. Vernet himself put it with characteristic confidence: *Others may know better how to paint the sky, the earth, the ocean; no one knows better than I how to paint a picture.* That assurance was entirely justified.

Notes

This is a pre-Romantic work by a French painter that shows all the features of a

Romantic seascape. The sea as a source of terror and violence became an important subject for Romantic painters. Vernet often used figures in the foreground to add another layer of interest to the painting in a similar way to do Loutherbouurg. Notice that the figures are subsumed and overwhelmed by the raw power of nature.

Claude Joseph Vernet was a French painter who, when he was 14, started to help his father with his painting. He worked in Rome and was renowned for his honest depiction of the weather, landscapes and the sea. He worked in Rome for 40 and was popular with British aristocrats on the Grand Tour and in 1745 he married an Englishwoman. He was recalled to Paris to paint the French seaports which are now in the Louvre. He said, 'Others may know better how to paint the sky, the earth, the ocean; no one knows better than I how to paint a picture'.



William Blake (1757-1827)

Newton

1795

Colour print with pen & ink and
watercolour

Tate Britain, London

William Blake (1757-1827), Newton, 1795, Tate Britain, London

Vernet gave the Romantic tradition its ocean — **William Blake** gave it its cosmos. Where Vernet looked outward to storm and shipwreck, Blake looked inward to prophecy and vision. Blake was born in **Soho in 1757**, the son of a hosier, and was taken from school at ten on account of his headstrong temperament. He trained at a drawing school in the Strand, was apprenticed to an engraver at fifteen, and later attended the **Royal Academy Schools**, where he came to detest **Joshua Reynolds** with a fervour that was entirely characteristic. His marginalia on Reynolds's Discourses are withering. He married **Catherine Boucher in 1782**, teaching her to read, write, and engrave — she remained his collaborator for life. From childhood Blake experienced visions. At eight or ten, at Peckham Rye, he saw a tree filled with angels, bright wings bespangling every bough like stars. He nearly received a thrashing from his father for reporting it. These visions saturated everything he made. His print **Newton of 1795** is a direct assault on scientific materialism: Newton crouches, blind to the universe behind him, compassing a scroll that seems to grow from his own skull. Blake's contempt for classical authority was absolute. In his preface to **Milton**, he wrote: *We do not want either Greek or Roman models if we are but just and true to our own imaginations.* He died singing hymns in **1827**, largely unrecognised — his wife borrowed money from **John Linnell** to bury him.

Notes

We started with William Blake as one of the first Romantic painters. Blake started seeing visions in his childhood and these images infused his poetry and painting. He poured scorn on the traditional veneration of Greek and Roman art. He wrote in a preface to Milton's work, "We do not want either Greek or Roman models if we are but just and true to our own imaginations".

Blake's *Newton* (1795) demonstrates his opposition to scientific materialism: Newton fixes his eye on a compass (recalling Proverbs 8:27, 'When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth', an important passage for Milton) to write upon a scroll that seems to be connected to his own head.

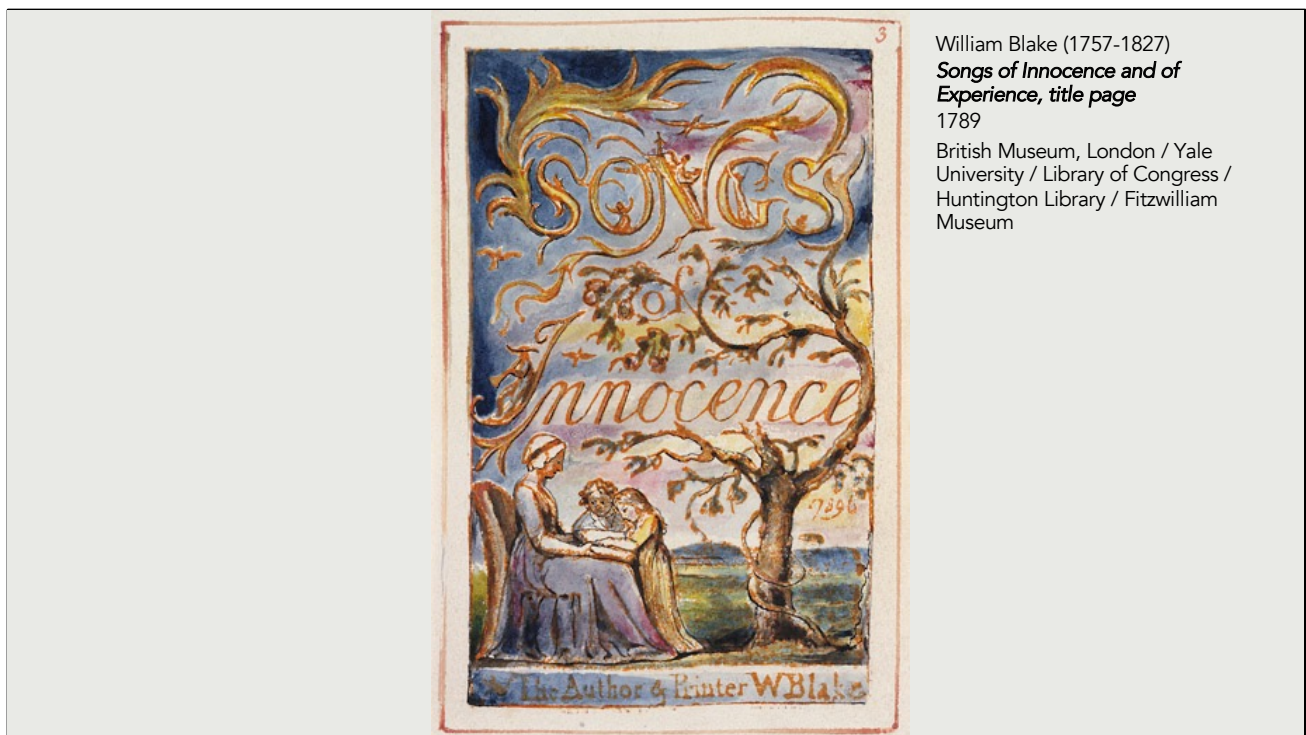
Blake was born in Soho, the son of a hosier and he was taken from school when he was ten because of his headstrong nature. He was enrolled in a drawing school in the Strand. Blake was influenced by the Bible from his early years and he started engraving copies of drawings of Greek antiquities purchased by his father. He discovered the works of Raphael, Michelangelo and Albrecht Durer. He was apprenticed to an engraver when he was 15 for seven years and became an engraver. When he was 22 he attended the Royal Academy School and came to detest Joshua Reynolds. Blake married Catherine Boucher in 1782 and taught her to read and write and to engrave and she worked as his assistant through her life. Blake opened a print shop and mixed with Joseph Priestley, John Henry Fuseli, Mary Wollstonecraft and Thomas Paine. He had great hopes of the French Revolution but changed his views, like many others, following the Reign of Terror. In 1800 Blake moved to a cottage in Felpham Sussex and in 1804 started work on *Milton*. In 1818 he met a young artist, John Linnell, and through him Samuel Palmer. His last work were illustrations for Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Close to death he bought a pencil with his last shilling and continued working up to the day he died. It is reported that he ceased working and turned to his weeping wife and said, 'Stay Kate! Keep just as you are – I will draw your portrait – for you have ever been an angel to me.' He lay down his pencils and began to sing hymns and at six in the evening he died. A female lodger who was present said, 'I have been at the death, not of a man, but of a blessed angel.' His wife had to borrow the money from John Linnell to bury him.

Blake was largely unrecognised in his lifetime he is now considered the most significant figure in the history of poetry and the visual arts of the Romantic Age. One critic recently described him as the greatest artist Britain ever produced. This was on the basis that he is one of the few British artists to

tackle all the most difficult questions of life and death, moral absolutes, the limits of perception and the tragedy of the dishonest way we live our day-to-day lives. Blake wrote 'Pity would be no more, / If we did not make somebody Poor'.

From a young age, William Blake claimed to have seen visions. The first may have occurred as early as the age of four when, according to one anecdote, the young artist 'saw God' when God 'put his head to the window', causing Blake to break into screaming. At the age of eight or ten in Peckham Rye, London, Blake claimed to have seen 'a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars.' According to Blake's Victorian biographer Gilchrist, he returned home and reported the vision and only escaped being thrashed by his father for telling a lie through the intervention of his mother. Though all evidence suggests that his parents were largely supportive, his mother seems to have been especially so. Blake claimed to experience visions throughout his life. They were often associated with beautiful religious themes and imagery, and may have inspired him further with spiritual works and pursuits.

Blake was ignored for a generation but following the publication of his biography in the 1860s he was taken up by the Pre-Raphaelites. He influenced the British surrealist artists such as Paul Nash and Graham Sutherland and in the 1950s the beat poets, such as Allen Ginsberg.



William Blake (1757-1827), *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, title page, 1789, British Museum, London / Yale University / Library of Congress / Huntington Library / Fitzwilliam Museum

That contempt for institutions — for Reynolds, for Newton, for classical authority — runs directly through *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, the collection Blake wrote, illustrated, and printed himself, issuing **Innocence** in **1789** and binding it with **Experience** in **1794**. The pairing is his reinterpretation of Milton's states of Paradise and Fall — not as theology, but as modes of perception. Childhood, for Blake, is not the site of original sin but of protected imaginative vitality. Experience is what corrupts it: fear, inhibition, the machinery of Church and State grinding down the human spirit. As he wrote in **London**, one of the collection's most devastating poems, he hears in every voice **mind-forged manacles** — oppression that is internalised, self-perpetuating, invisible to those who wear it. The poems **The Tyger** and **The Fly** both turn on this tension — the first asking who could dare create something so ferocious, the second dissolving the boundary between the human and the expendable. Blake printed every copy by hand, refusing the commercial book trade as he refused every other institution. **Michael Phillips** has shown how Blake's printing process was itself a political act, keeping the work outside the reach of censors and publishers alike.

Notes

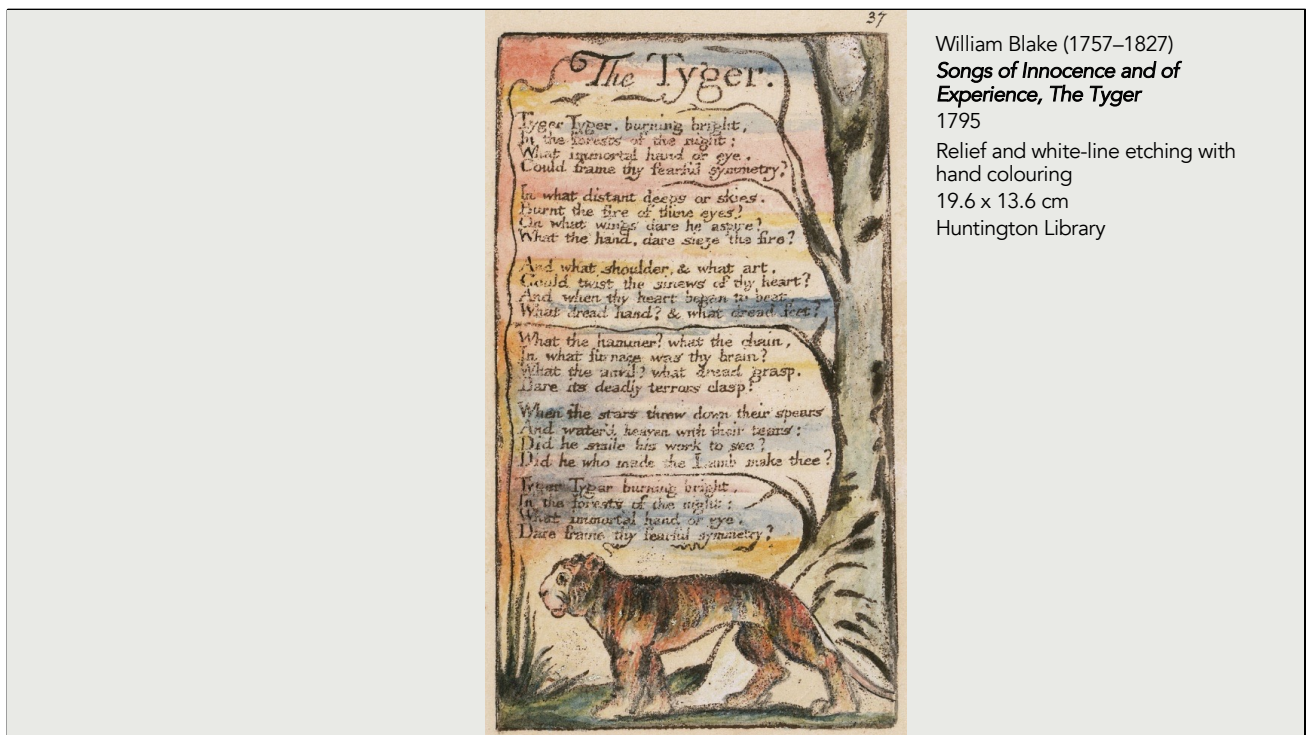
Songs of Innocence and Experience are an illustrated collection of poems written,

illustrated and published by William Blake over a number of years.

'Innocence' and 'Experience' are Blake's reinterpretation of Milton's mythic states of 'Paradise' and the 'Fall'. Blake is describing modes of perception that would be adopted by the Romantics. Blake believed that childhood is a state of protected innocence rather than original sin, but not immune to the fallen world and its institutions. This world sometimes impinges on childhood itself, and in any event becomes known through "experience", a state of being marked by the loss of childhood vitality, by fear and inhibition, by social and political corruption, and by the manifold oppression of Church, State, and the ruling classes.

Blake did not believe in any organised religion.

The work includes the poems 'The Fly', 'Tyger' and 'London'.



William Blake (1757–1827)
Songs of Innocence and of Experience, The Tyger
 1795

Relief and white-line etching with
 hand colouring
 19.6 x 13.6 cm
 Huntington Library

William Blake (1757–1827), *Songs of Innocence and of Experience, The Tyger*, 1795, 19.6 x 13.6 cm, Huntington Library

That refusal to submit to institutional authority — Blake printing by hand, outside the trade, outside the system — places him at the hinge between two great intellectual movements. Understanding what Romanticism was pushing *against** means understanding the **Enlightenment** clearly. The Enlightenment, running roughly from the **1620s** to the **1780s**, held that reason and scientific method could resolve every human problem. Its confidence was enormous. **Francis Bacon**, **René Descartes**, **John Locke**, and above all **Isaac Newton** had established that the natural world operated according to discoverable, rational laws. **Voltaire** and **David Hume** applied that scepticism to religion and political authority. **Denis Diderot's** **Encyclopédie**, published between **1751 and 1772**, was the movement's great collective project — a systematic inventory of human knowledge, reason made into a reference work. These ideas proved genuinely revolutionary. The principles animating **1789** — toleration, rational governance, the reform of corrupt institutions — were Enlightenment principles. And yet the Revolution's violence forced a reckoning. What reason had promised, terror delivered instead. Romanticism emerged from that disillusionment: not as a coherent programme, but as a turning inward — toward feeling, imagination, and the irrational energies that pure reason had dismissed and failed to account for.

Notes

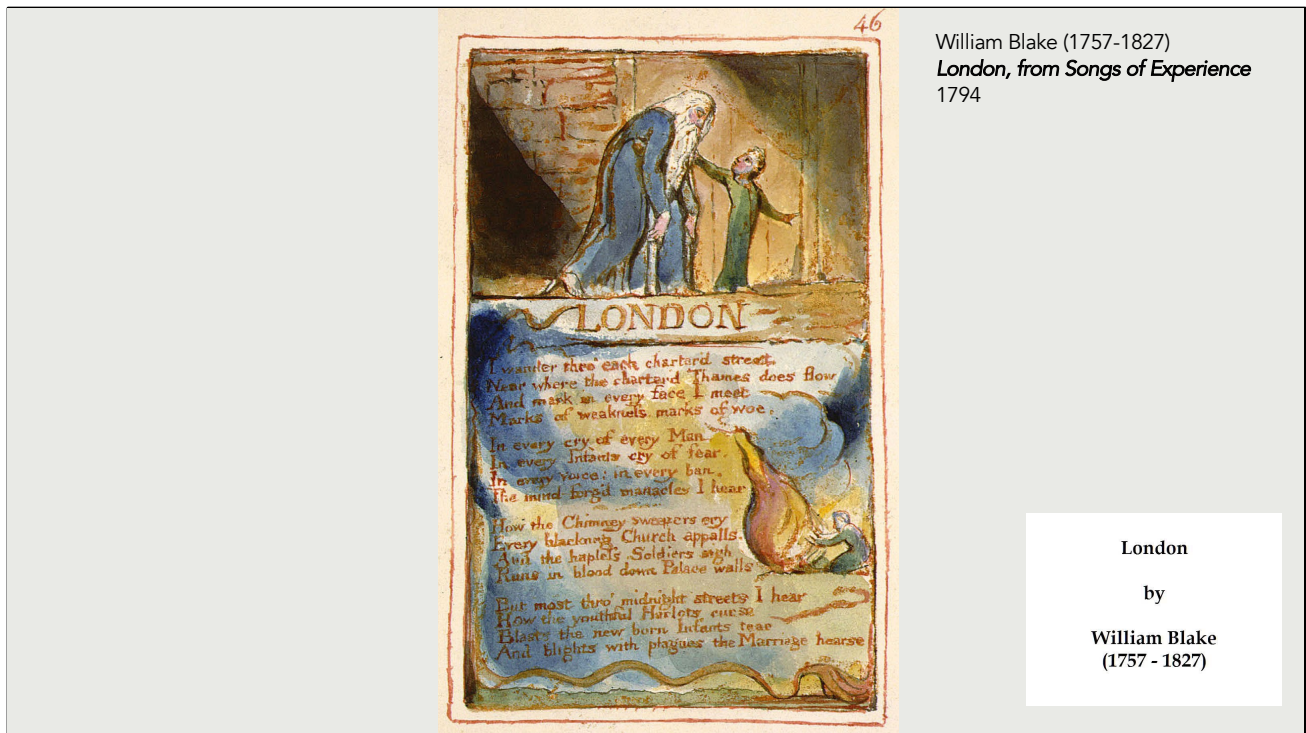
Romanticism was a rejection of the ideas of the Enlightenment, the 'Age of Reason' (1620s to 1780s). The Enlightenment believed that scientific progress and reason could solve all problems and it rejected conventional structures and figures of authority. It was promoted and discussed in coffee houses and Masonic lodges. It challenged institutions particularly the Catholic church. It believed society could be reformed with toleration, science and scepticism.

Philosophers including Francis Bacon (1562–1626), René Descartes (1596–1650), John Locke (1632–1704), Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), Voltaire (1694–1778), David Hume (1711–1776), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), and Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727). Enlightenment ideas were spread by Denis Diderot's *Encyclopedia* (1751–72) and Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764).

It was associated with the scientific revolution, spearheaded by Newton, and an increase in literacy. Some of these ideals proved influential and decisive in the course of the French Revolution, which began in 1789. After the Revolution, the Enlightenment was followed by an opposing intellectual movement known as Romanticism.

Notes

"White line" etching is a process where intaglio line etching plates are printed using surface rolling, creating prints with white not black lines. The crude look it produces was criticized at the time but was intentional. Blake may have intended to give an antique or primitive look that suggests the ancient origins of the text.



William Blake (1757-1827), *London*, from *Songs of Experience*, 1794

That turning inward — toward feeling, toward the irrational — finds one of its sharpest expressions not in painting but in Blake's own poetry, and **London** is the place to begin. Published in ***Songs of Experience*** in **1794**, **London** is remarkable for its fury. The poem's repeated word "**chartered**" does exactly what Blake's friend **Thomas Paine** had identified as the mechanism of class oppression — the granting of royal charters to control trade and limit freedom. But Blake compresses two meanings into the word at once: chartered streets are both commercially licensed and mapped, measured, owned. The river itself has been absorbed into the system of property. What sustains the poem's power beyond that political anger is the famous phrase "**mind-forg'd manacles**" — the recognition that oppression works not only through poverty and prohibition but through the internalised beliefs of the oppressed. People police themselves. The chimney sweep, the soldier, the midnight prostitute are not simply victims of circumstance; they are caught inside a way of thinking that the Enlightenment's rational institutions had constructed and the Churches had consecrated. The final image — the "**Marriage hearse**" — fuses birth, disease, and death in a single compound noun. It is among the most compressed indictments of institutional hypocrisy in the English language.

Notes

London is a poem by William Blake, published in *Songs of Experience* in 1794. It is

one of the few poems in Songs of Experience which does not have a corresponding poem in Songs of Innocence.

The use of the word 'Chartered' is ambiguous and goes against control and ownership. It may express the political and economic control that Blake considered London to be enduring at the time of his writing. Blake's friend Thomas Paine had criticised the granting of Royal Charters to control trade as a form of class oppression. However, 'chartered' could also mean 'freighted', and may refer to the busy or overburdened streets and river, or to the licensed trade carried on within them.

Notes

A ban is a prohibition or any form of restriction. So, 'In every voice: in every ban, The mind-forg'd manacles I hear' can be interpreted as meaning that in everything he hears said and in restriction and prohibition the person's mind is being shackled by their own constricted thinking and beliefs. So people are imprisoned not just by poverty but by the way they think.

London by William Blake

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow.
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infants cry of fear,
In every voice: in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear

How the Chimney-sweepers cry
Every blackning Church appalls,
And the hapless Soldiers sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlots curse
Blasts the new-born Infants tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse



J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851)
Hannibal and his Men crossing the Alps
 1810–1812
 144.7 × 236 cm
 Tate Britain, London

J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851), *Hannibal and his Men crossing the Alps*, 1810–1812, 144.7 × 236 cm, Tate Britain, London

From Blake's vision of London's suffering, we move to its most spectacular painted equivalent — **J. M. W. Turner's** **Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps**, exhibited at the **Royal Academy** in **1812**. Hannibal was, for the Romantics, the archetypal heroic commander — a figure who bent nature itself to his will, only to be broken by it. Turner's canvas makes that irony overwhelming. A vast black vortex of storm cloud swallows the army whole; an avalanche descends on the right; and at the leading edge of the column, almost lost in the glare, a figure on an elephant may be Hannibal himself, gazing toward the sunlit plains of **Italy**. The rear of the army is being cut to pieces by **Salassian tribesmen**, exactly as the ancient histories record. The political reading was unmistakable to Turner's contemporaries. **Napoleon** had crossed the Alps into Italy in **1800**, and **Jacques-Louis David's** famous portrait of him doing so — which Turner had seen in Paris in **1802** — hung in recent memory. Turner reversed the usual allegory: where most commentators cast France as Rome and Britain as Carthage, he identified Napoleon with Hannibal, framing French imperial ambition as a force that nature itself would eventually defeat.

Notes

Hannibal was a Punic (Carthaginian) military commander generally considered one of the greatest military commanders in history, a Romantic 'hero'. One of his

most famous achievements was at the outbreak of the Second Punic War, when he marched an army, which included elephants, from Iberia over the Pyrenees and the Alps into Italy. In his first few years in Italy, he won three dramatic victories, in which he distinguished himself for his ability to determine his and his opponent's strengths and weaknesses, and to play the battle to his strengths and the enemy's weaknesses—and won over many allies of Rome. Hannibal occupied much of Italy for 15 years, but a Roman counter-invasion of North Africa forced him to return to Carthage, where he was decisively defeated by Scipio Africanus at the Battle of Zama.

The painting depicts Hannibal's struggle to cross the Alps in 218 BCE opposed by nature and local tribes. A black storm cloud dominates the sky and threatens to swamp the soldiers while an avalanche descends on the right. We are looking from the Alps down into the sunlit plains of Italy and at the front of the army it might be Hannibal riding an elephant. The rear of the army is fighting Salassian tribesmen (Italian Celts) as described in histories of the period. Turner saw parallels between Hannibal and Napoleon and between the Punic Wars between Carthage and Rome and the Napoleonic Wars between Britain and France. Identifying Napoleon and France with Hannibal and Carthage was unusual because as a land power with a relatively weak navy, France was more usually identified with Rome, and the naval power of Britain drew parallels with Carthage.

Possible influences are Jacques-Louis David's portrait of Napoleon Crossing the Alps, of Napoleon leading his army over the Great St Bernard Pass in May 1800, which Turner had seen during a visit to Paris in 1802. Also, possibly an oil painting of Hannibal's army descending the Alps into northern Italy by watercolourist John Robert Cozens, *A Landscape with Hannibal in His March over the Alps, Showing to His Army the Fertile Plains of Italy*, the only oil painting that Cozens exhibited at the Royal Academy. Thomas Gray speculated that Salvator Rosa could have painted "Hannibal passing the Alps" and another spur could have been the visit of a delegation from the Tyrol to London in 1809, seeking support to oppose Napoleon.



J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851)
Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth Making Signals in Shallow Water, and going by the Lead. The Author was in this Storm on the Night the 'Ariel' left Harwich
 c. 1842
 91 x 122 cm
 Tate Britain, London

J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851), *Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth Making Signals in Shallow Water, and going by the Lead. The Author was in this Storm on the Night the 'Ariel' left Harwich*, c. 1842, 91 x 122 cm, Tate Britain, London

Thirty years after Hannibal's army was swallowed by an Alpine vortex, Turner returned to the same annihilating power of nature — this time with himself placed directly inside it. ***Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth***, exhibited at the **Royal Academy** in **1842**, is one of the most physically demanding pictures in the British tradition. Turner claimed he had sailors lash him to the mast of a steam vessel during a night storm off **Harwich**, remaining there for four hours. He was sixty-seven years old. Whether the story is literally true or not, it shaped how the picture was received, and it perfectly describes what the canvas actually does — it refuses the viewer any safe distance. The critical response was savage. One reviewer dismissed it as "**soapsuds and whitewash**", and Turner, stung, repeated the phrase aloud and shot back: *"**What would they have? I wonder what they think the sea's like? I wish they'd been in it.**"* **John Ruskin**, defending the work in ***Modern Painters*** in **1843**, called it one of the greatest statements of sea-motion, mist, and light ever committed to canvas. The palette — greens, greys, and dark brown smoke from the steamer's hull — circles around a pale silvery core, pulling the eye into chaos rather than composure. This is the **Sublime** stripped of all heroic framing.

Notes

J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851), *Snow Storm, or Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth*, (full title: *Snow Storm - Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth Making Signals in Shallow Water, and going by the Lead. The Author was in this Storm on the Night the 'Ariel' left Harwich*), c. 1842, 91 x 122 cm, Tate Britain

Although criticized by contemporary critics, one described it as 'soapsuds and whitewash', John Ruskin commented in *Modern Painters* (1843) that it was 'one of the very grandest statements of sea-motion, mist and light, that has ever been put on canvas'. Reportedly Turner was hurt by the criticism, repeating 'soapsuds and whitewash' over and over again, and saying, 'What would they have? I wonder what they think the sea's like? I wish they'd been in it'. Ruskin commented, 'It is thus, too often, that ignorance sits in judgment on the works of genius'. More recently, art historian Alexandra Wettlaufer wrote that the painting is one of Turner's 'most famous, and most obscure, sublime depictions'.

There is a story that Turner asked to be tied to the mast of a steam-ship during a nocturnal storm at sea, to experience the feeling of it, and was there for four hours. He was 67 years then. Some later commentators doubt the literal truth of this account. Other critics accept Turner's account, and one wrote, 'He empathized completely with the dynamic form of sovereign nature.' This inscription allows us to better understand the scene represented and the confusion of elements.

The paddle steamer 'Ariel' was formerly called the 'Arrow', being built in 1821-1822. In 1837 she was acquired by the Admiralty and renamed 'Ariel', and was used as the Dover packet up to 1846. This is a late Turner when he was at the peak of his ability to capture the terror and awe caused by the power of the sea during a violent storm. Turner uses different layers of paint which are brought to life by the intensity of his brushstrokes. The palette is limited to similar tones of greens, browns and greys and Turner draws us into the central action by using pale, silvery grey wrapped in the dark brown smoke from the steamship and its hull.



J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851)
Slavers throwing overboard the Dead and Dying — Typhoon coming on
 ('The Slave Ship')
 1840
 90.8 × 122.6 cm
 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851), *Slavers throwing overboard the Dead and Dying — Typhoon coming on* ('The Slave Ship'), 1840, 90.8 × 122.6 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

The savage response to **Snow Storm** did nothing to slow Turner — two years earlier, in **1840**, he had exhibited a picture that pushed the Sublime into explicitly moral territory. **Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying — Typhoon Coming On**, known simply as **The Slave Ship**, was painted after Turner read **Thomas Clarkson's** **History and Abolition of the Slave Trade**. The source incident was the **Zong massacre of 1781**, in which the captain of a slave ship ordered **133 enslaved people** thrown overboard so the owners could claim insurance on cargo lost at sea. Anti-slavery campaigner **Granville Sharp** worked unsuccessfully to have the crew prosecuted for murder. Turner timed the exhibition deliberately: the **Royal Academy** show opened one month before the first **World Anti-Slavery Convention** in London in **1840**. The painting works through colour rather than outline — a predominance of blood red, chained bodies breaking the water's surface, and indistinct sea creatures closing in. The ship itself is tiny against the approaching typhoon. The frenzied brushwork, the insignificance of human figures against elemental force — this is the Sublime turned into moral indictment. **John Ruskin**, the picture's first owner, wrote: *"If I were reduced to rest Turner's immortality upon any single work, I should choose this."*

Notes

This perhaps most famous seascape after *The Fighting Temeraire*, he was inspired to paint *The Slave Ship* in 1840 after reading *The History and Abolition of the Slave Trade* by Thomas Clarkson. In 1781, the captain of the slave ship *Zong* had ordered 133 slaves to be thrown overboard so that insurance payments could be collected. This event probably inspired Turner to create his landscape and to choose to coincide its exhibition with a meeting of the British Anti-Slavery Society. Although slavery had been outlawed in the British Empire since 1833, Turner and many other abolitionists believed that slavery should be outlawed around the world. Anti-slavery campaigner Granville Sharp, worked unsuccessfully to have the ship's crew prosecuted for murder. The painting was shown at an important time in the movement to abolish slavery worldwide, as the Royal Academy exhibition opened one month before the first World Anti-Slavery Convention in London. The painting was admired by its owner, John Ruskin. It has been described by the 20th-century critic Marcus Wood, as one of the few truly great depictions in Western art of the Atlantic slave trade.

The sails are furled as it prepares for a typhoon. There are a number of chained bodies in the foreground indicating they are slaves thrown overboard. One can see fish and sea monsters swimming in the water. Objects are defined by their colour rather than by their outlines and the predominant colour is red of blood and death.

The indistinct shapes, the emphasis on colour and emotion are typically Romantic and the focus is on nature as superior to man. The tiny figures and small shift further place the emphasis on the power of nature and the insignificance of man. This is enhanced by the quick, frenzied brushstrokes. The idea of the sublime is demonstrated by the utter powerlessness and terror of humanity in the face of nature.

Some have seen the painting as an allegory of the exploitation of human labour associated with capitalism and the storm is either the coming collapse of capitalism as it is overwhelmed by its own immorality or the storm demonstrates that all man's efforts are insignificant before the power of nature.

John Ruskin, who was the first owner of *The Slave Ship*, wrote, 'If I were reduced to rest Turner's immortality upon any single work, I should choose this.'



J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851)
*The Burning of the Houses of Lords
 and Commons, 16th October, 1834*
 1834 or 1835
 92.1 x 123.2 cm
 Philadelphia Museum of Art

J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851), *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons, 16th October, 1834*, 1834 or 1835, 92.1 x 123.2 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art

Ruskin's moral Sublime gives way here to something equally spectacular but rooted in a single, documented night. On **16 October 1834**, fire broke out in the **Palace of Westminster**, and Turner watched it from the south bank, sketchbook in hand, possibly from a hired boat on the Thames. He was not the only witness to grasp the moment's significance. **Benjamin Robert Haydon** recorded from Westminster Bridge: "The feeling among the people was extraordinary — jokes and radicalism universal."* Turner translated that charged atmosphere into two oil paintings, the first exhibited at the **British Institution** in February **1835**. That canvas shows the **House of Commons** consumed in the **St Stephen's Hall** chamber, the towers of **Westminster Abbey** glowing in the distance, and **Westminster Bridge** rendered in a distorted perspective that amplifies the drama. The cause was mundane: two cartloads of medieval **tally sticks** — hazelwood rods notched to record tax payments, a system stretching back to **William the Conqueror** — were burned too enthusiastically in the furnace stoves. Within nine hours, almost every structure on the site had gone. Among the spectators were **Charles Barry**, who immediately began thinking about reconstruction, and **Augustus Pugin**, who rejoiced that the awkward neo-Classical and neo-Gothic compromises of **John Soane** and **James Wyatt** had been mercifully erased.

Notes

Turner painted two oil paintings of the fire that broke out in the Palace of Westminster on the evening of 16 October 1834. Turner witnessed the fire from the south bank at Westminster and made sketches from different points, including possibly from a rented boat. The first painting was exhibited at the British Institution in February 1835 and shows the fire consuming the chamber of the House of Commons in St Stephens Hall. In the distance the towers of Westminster Abbey can be seen illuminated by the fire.

The distorted perspective of Westminster Bridge intensify the drama. The next day *The Times* wrote 'Shortly before 7 o'clock last night the inhabitants of Westminster, and of the districts on the opposite bank of the river, were thrown into the utmost confusion and alarm by the sudden breaking out of one of the most terrific conflagrations that has been witnessed for many years past....The Houses of the Lords and Commons and the adjacent buildings were on fire.'

Many saw this as divine retribution for the passing of the Reform Act of 1832 and the fortuitous destruction of the poor architecture of some extension buildings by others. The House of Lords had recently been rebuilt in a mixture of neo-Classical by Sir John Soane and neo-Gothic by James Wyatt (1746-1813) and some saw the burning as God's displeasure with the resulting aesthetic mess.

Some thought the fire was an arson attempt but it was caused by the excessive burning of 'tallies'. These are square hazelwood sticks notched to show amounts of tax paid or deposited and then split in half to record the transaction. The system went back to William the Conqueror. Two cartloads of tallies had accumulated and the Board of Works decided to burn them in stoves. The two workers assigned were overly enthusiastic and despite warnings from the housekeeper who told them that two tourists could not see the tapestries for the thick smoke, they continued to pile on the wood. They left at five o'clock and by six some oak panels had ignited. Within nine hours all the buildings except the Westminster Hall had been destroyed. Some of the destroyed buildings dated back to Edward the Confessor.

Benjamin Robert Haydon wrote, 'The terrify burning ... from the bridge it was sublime ... The feeling among the people was extraordinary—jokes and radicalism universal.'

Among the spectators were Charles Barry (1795-1860) who realised a new building would be required and Augustus Pugin (1812-1852) who rejoiced in the destruction of Soane's mixtures and Wyatt's heresies.



Sir Charles Barry (1795-1860) and
Augustus Pugin (1812-1852)
Palace of Westminster
19th century
Westminster, London

Sir Charles Barry (1795-1860) and Augustus Pugin (1812-1852), Palace of Westminster, 19th century, Westminster, London

Pugin and Barry were already present that night in 1834, and the ruins had barely cooled before the debate began about what should replace them. The decision to rebuild in **Neo-Gothic** rather than Neo-Classical was not simply aesthetic — it was a statement that Gothic was the authentic national style, rooted in England's medieval Christian past rather than in pagan antiquity. **Charles Barry**, trained as a Classical architect, won the competition in **1836**, but his design depended entirely on **Augustus Pugin** for its Gothic vocabulary — the tracery, the pinnacles, the carved detail. Pugin's own verdict on the result was characteristically blunt: *"All Grecian, sir; Tudor details on a classic body."* The symmetrical plan was Barry's; the surface was Pugin's. The style they settled on was **Perpendicular Gothic**, the distinctly English variant that flourished in the fifteenth century, used here to stitch the new building to the one medieval survival on the site, **Westminster Hall**, built in the eleventh century and spared by the fire. Pugin's contribution included the **Elizabeth Tower**, home to **Big Ben**, which was completed after his death in **1852**. He died at forty, worn out, having designed churches, furniture, metalwork, and textiles with a ferocity that broke him entirely.

Notes

The Palace of Westminster is a victory for Romanticism. Following intensive debate it was decided to rebuild The Palace of Westminster in Neo-Gothic style rather

than Neo-classical. It was thought this was more true to the history of the country.

The other strand of Romanticism was Neo-Gothic architecture as promoted by Augustus Pugin (1812-1852). Sir Charles Barry's (1795-1860) collaborative design for the Palace of Westminster uses the Perpendicular Gothic style, which was popular during the 15th century and returned during the Gothic revival of the 19th century. Barry was a classical architect, but he was aided by the Gothic architect Augustus Pugin. Westminster Hall, which was built in the 11th century and survived the fire of 1834, was incorporated in Barry's design. Pugin was displeased with the result of the work, especially with the symmetrical layout designed by Barry; he famously remarked, 'All Grecian, sir; Tudor details on a classic body'. Neo-Gothic architecture was focused on Romantic ideas that harked back to what was believed to be the creativity and individual free work of the medieval craftsman compared with the rigid symmetry of classical architecture.

Notes

The Palace of Westminster has three towers the largest of which is the Victoria Tower (renamed in tribute to Queen Victoria on her Diamond Jubilee) at 323 feet. At the north end is the more famous Elizabeth Tower (previously known as the Clock Tower or St. Stephens Tower, it was renamed in 2012 to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of Elizabeth II). It is commonly known as Big Ben and is 315/6 feet high. The clock was built by Edward John Dent and is accurate to a second. It has four 23 feet faces and the minute hand is 14 feet long. Elizabeth Tower was designed by Augustus Pugin and built after his death. The largest bell is officially called The Great Bell of Westminster and generally as Big Ben.

In 1852 aged 40 Pugin was travelling by train when he suffered a complete breakdown from overwork and was unable to speak or recognise anyone. He lived in an asylum for four months and was taken home and recovered slightly but died the same year in Ramsgate. Some suggest he died from hyperthyroidism and others from syphilis. His death certificate says he died from 'convulsions followed by a coma'.



John Martin (1789-1854)
Belshazzar's Feast
 1820
 80 x 120.7 cm
 Yale Center for British Art

John Martin (1789-1854), *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1820, 80 x 120.7 cm, Yale Center for British Art

From the fevered Gothic detail of Pugin's Parliament buildings, we turn to another kind of sublime — one painted rather than built, and equally obsessed with the drama of civilisations at their moment of collapse. **John Martin** was born in **1789** in Haydon Bridge, a small Northumberland town, and his early life was genuinely impoverished. He made his way to London via an Italian drawing master whose son he travelled with, and for years he earned a living decorating porcelain and glass — a training in luminous colour that would never entirely leave his work. His strategy for recognition was audacious: paint the **Old Testament** at overwhelming scale. **Belshazzar's Feast**, exhibited in **1820**, was the result. Martin himself said beforehand, *"it shall make more noise than any picture ever did before... only don't tell anyone I said so."* Five thousand people paid to see it. The subject is the Book of Daniel — the last night of **Belshazzar**, last king of the **Neo-Babylonian Empire**, when a disembodied hand writes its doom on the palace wall. Martin floods the scene with Egyptian and Indian architecture barely known to Western audiences, and drenches everything in burning red. The **National Gallery** refused it as too large, and it passed into private hands — where it remains.

Notes

English Romantic painter, engraver and illustrator

John Martin began life in poverty in a one room cottage in a small

Northumberland town called Haydon Bridge. He met an Italian drawing master and travelled with his son to London. We don't know how he learned to paint but he earned a living painting on porcelain and glass. He set himself up as an artists and started submitting works to exhibitions. To get himself noticed he painted large, spectacular paintings of Old Testament scenes. The Fall of Babylon of 1819 got him noticed and a year later he painted Belshazzar's Feast. This was Martin's triumph from which he never looked back. He boasted beforehand, 'it shall make more noise than any picture ever did before... only don't tell anyone I said so.' Five thousand people paid to see it. In 1854 it was nearly ruined when the carriage in which it was being transported was struck by a train at a level crossing. It embodies Ancient Egyptian and then hardly known Indian architecture and is painted in shades of red.

Notes

Balthazar or Belshazzar was the last king of the neo-Babylonian empire ; as recounted in the book of Daniel, he dared to drink wine from the gold vases taken from the temple in Jerusalem. A hand then appeared and wrote a message on the wall of the royal palace which no one could decipher. Finally, Daniel was called to help and explained that the inscription "counted, weighed and divided" meant that God had counted the king's reign and ended it, the king had been weighed in a basket and found of little import, and his kingdom would be divided and given to the Medians and the Persians.

The original was rejected by the National Gallery as too large (160 × 249cm) and is now in a private collection.



John Martin (1789–1854)
The Last Judgement
1853
196.8 x 325.8 cm
Tate Britain, London

John Martin (1789–1854), *The Last Judgement*, 1853, 196.8 x 325.8 cm, Tate Britain, London

The Belshazzar crowds who paid to witness one night's destruction now faced something far larger: the end of everything. Martin spent the final years of his life producing his great triptych, completing ***The Last Judgement***, ***The Plains of Heaven***, and ***The Great Day of His Wrath*** between 1851 and 1853, just months before his death. The sequence moves from cosmic judgement through heavenly reward to geological catastrophe. In ***The Last Judgement***, God sits enthroned amid twenty-four elders while Satan's armies tumble into the abyss — and Martin populates the ranks of the saved with Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Newton, Dante, and Copernicus, among others. A railway train plunges into the pit, its carriages labelled London and Paris. Martin's apocalypse is thoroughly modern. Promoted as the most sublime and extraordinary pictures in the world and valued at eight thousand guineas, the triptych toured Britain, America, and reached Australia in 1878, seen by an estimated eight million people. Then taste turned. By the twentieth century Martin was dismissed as "Mad Martin," his ambitions merely theatrical. In 1935 the three panels sold for seven pounds and were dispersed. Tate reunited them in 1974, finally restoring the sequence Martin intended.

Notes

John Martin could also painted mythological idyllic scenes such a Clytie and landscapes, such as Richmond Park, 1850 but perhaps his best known work is the

triptych The Last Judgement (c. 1849-1853), The Great Day of His Wrath (1851-1853) and The Plains of Heaven (1851-1853). Martin's aim in producing this series was typically Romantic: to express the sublime, apocalyptic force of nature and the helplessness of man to combat God's will. They were described as 'The most sublime and extraordinary pictures in the world valued at 8000 guineas'. After he died, the three paintings travelled around the United Kingdom before going on display in New York and then as far away as Australia in 1878-1879 ; it is said they were seen by over eight million people around the world. By the twentieth century, Martin's work had fallen into obscurity and he became known as 'Mad Martin'. In 1935 the triptych was sold for seven pounds and the separate panels dispersed. It was reunited by the Tate in 1974.

Notes

The triptych is in the sequence:

First: The Last Judgement

Second: The Plains of Heaven

Third: The Great Day of His Wrath

'This and two other pictures compose a triptych, and are the last major works Martin produced before his death. They are generally considered among his most important achievements, possibly his masterpiece. The subjects are taken from The Book of Revelation. The Last Judgement illustrates the central event of the Book, and is composed from various passages in the narrative. On a throne in the heavens sits God in judgement, surrounded by the four and twenty elders. The four angels have sounded their trumpets after the opening of the Seventh Seal. Below on the right the forces of evil commanded by Satan are defeated; the armies of Gog and Magog tumble into the bottomless pit. To the left on Mount Zion are the good, already in the 'plains of heaven' and awaiting the call to appear before the throne.

The principal figures were identified in an engraved key published in 1855 to accompany the picture. The damned include richly dressed women, notably Herodias's daughter and the whore of Babylon, lawyers and churchmen who have sought only worldly wealth. The saved, at God's right hand, are anonymous figures of virtuous women and innocent children, true lovers, martyrs, philanthropists, and foreground, portraits of the famous. Among the

good Martin has included a high percentage of artists and poets, as well as statesmen and philosophers. These include Thomas More, Wesley, Canute, Dante, Washington, Copernicus, Newton, Watt, Chaucer, Tasso, Corneille, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Rubens, D-4rer and Wilkie. The great men are ranged in a timeless tableau; Martin reproduces their best known images. Included among the contemporary detail is a railway train plunging into an abyss, its carriages marked 'London', 'Paris', and so on.' (Terry Riggs, Tate website)

'The three pictures in the triptych became famous in the years after Martin's death and were toured throughout England and America. Many mezzotints of the pictures were sold, but the vastness and theatricality of Martin's visions now appeared outmoded to the mid-Victorians, and the paintings themselves failed to find a buyer.' (Frances Fowle, Tate website)



John Constable (1776–1837)
Weymouth Bay
c. 1816
53 × 75 cm
National Gallery

John Constable (1776–1837), Weymouth Bay, c. 1816, 53 × 75 cm, National Gallery

From the apocalyptic grandeur of John Martin, we turn now to a painter whose revolution was quieter but no less profound. **John Constable** was born in **1776** in Suffolk, and in **1799**, aged twenty-three, persuaded his father to let him pursue painting seriously. He entered the **Royal Academy Schools**, where he studied the landscape tradition closely — **Gainsborough**, **Claude Lorrain**, **Rubens**, and the Dutch master **Jacob van Ruisdael** all shaped his eye for atmospheric light and naturalistic composition. His personal life shaped his art just as decisively. By **1809** Constable had fallen in love with Maria Bicknell, but her grandfather, rector of East Bergholt, considered the Constables socially beneath them and blocked the match for years. When his parents died in **1816**, leaving him a fifth of their estate, the financial objection dissolved. He and Maria married that October, honeymooning along the south coast. The landscape of **Chesil Beach** he painted during that trip shows something genuinely new — liberated brushwork, brilliant colour, a sense of direct emotional encounter with weather and light. That same scientific curiosity drove his extraordinary cloud studies. Reading **Thomas Forster's** *Researches About Atmospheric Phaenomena*, Constable produced around fifty cloud sketches between **1821 and 1822**. In a lecture in **1836** he stated plainly: "Painting is a science, and should be pursued as an inquiry into the laws of nature."

Notes

In 1799, aged 23, he persuaded his father to let him pursue a career in art and he entered the Royal Academy School where he studied Thomas Gainsborough, Claude Lorrain, Peter Paul Rubens and Jacob van Ruisdael.

By 1809 he had fallen in love with his childhood friend Maria Elizabeth Bicknell but their marriage was opposed by her grandfather, the rector of East Bergholt as he thought the Constables were his families social inferiors. His parents, who supported the marriage, died in 1816 and Constable inherited a fifth of their estate. This enabled permission to be obtained for the marriage which took place in October 1816 and their honeymoon was a tour of the south coast including Weymouth and Brighton.

This landscape of Chesil Beach was painted on their honeymoon and shows a new freedom in the brushwork and the use of brilliant colours. He did not sell his first painting until *The White Horse*, in 1819, the year he became an associate academician.

Constable studied the writings Thomas Forster's *Researches About Atmospheric Phaenomena*, a popularization and extension of Luke Howard's 1804 essay *Modification of Clouds*. Between 1821 and 1822 he painted about 50 sketches of clouds. In 1836 he wrote promising to deliver a lecture on clouds. In one of his lectures in 1836 he said, 'Painting is a science and should be pursued as an inquiry into the laws of nature. Why, then, may not a landscape be considered as a branch of natural philosophy, of which pictures are but experiments?' In other words, although Constable's cloud sketches are quick, impulsive and energetic responses to nature they are also meticulous, accurate observations of natural phenomena.



John Constable (1776–1837)
Sketch for 'Hadleigh Castle'
 c.1828–9
 122.6 x 167.3 cm
 Tate, London

John Constable (1776–1837), Sketch for 'Hadleigh Castle', c.1828–9, 122.6 x 167.3 cm, Tate, London

Maria's death in **November 1828** was the pivot around which Constable's late work turns. He had already lost his French market — a bitter blow, since **Théodore Géricault** and then **Eugène Delacroix** had championed his work there, and *The Hay Wain* had won a gold medal at the **Paris Salon of 1824**. The quarrel with his dealer Arrowsmith in 1825 closed that door, and Maria's prolonged illness had worn him down throughout. When she died of tuberculosis aged forty-one, he wrote to his brother Golding: "the face of the World is totally changed to me." He dressed in black for the rest of his life and raised seven children alone. It is against that grief that we must read **Hadleigh Castle**, the large oil sketch now at the **Tate**. Constable had made a pencil note of the Essex ruin back in **1814**, describing it in a letter to Maria as "a really fine place." He returned to that sketch fifteen years later, and what had been a topographical record became something altogether darker — storm light, crumbling towers, a solitary figure dwarfed by ruin. The scientific observer of cloud formations had become, through loss, a painter of desolation.

Notes

He quarrelled with Arrowsmith, his dealer in France, in 1825, perhaps due to the worry of his wife's ill-health, his dislike of living in Brighton and the pressure of many outstanding commissions and as a result he lost his French outlet.

After the birth of their seventh child in January 1828, Maria fell ill and died of tuberculosis at the age of 41. Intensely saddened, Constable wrote to his brother Golding, "hourly do I feel the loss of my departed Angel—God only knows how my children will be brought up...the face of the World is totally changed to me". After that, he dressed in black and was, according to Leslie, 'a prey to melancholy and anxious thoughts'. He cared for his seven children alone for the rest of his life. Shortly before Maria died, her father had also died, leaving her £20,000. Constable speculated disastrously with the money, paying for the engraving of several mezzotints of some of his landscapes in preparation for a publication. He was hesitant and indecisive, nearly fell out with his engraver, and when the folios were published, could not interest enough subscribers.

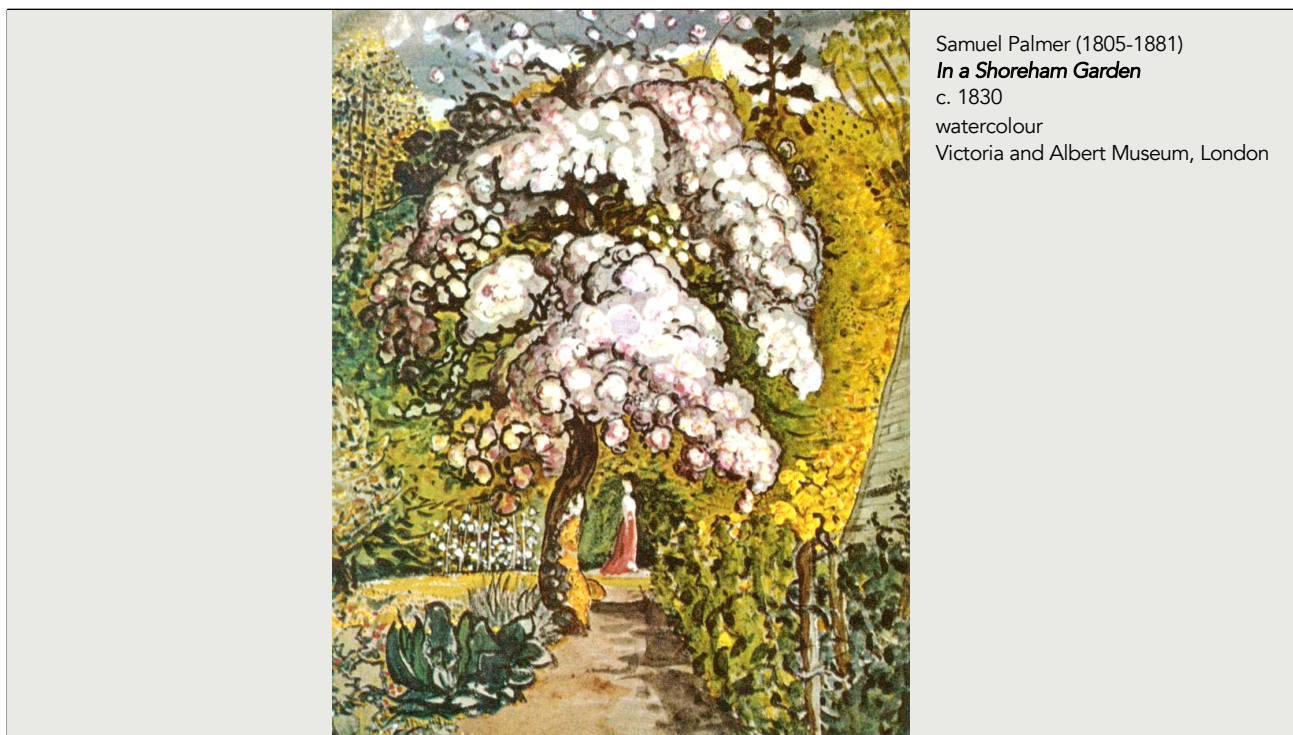
Notes

This is a full-size oil sketch for the painting now in the Paul Mellon Collection at the Yale Center for British Art. Constable submitted the finished work to the Royal Academy exhibition in 1829, the year in which he was elected an Academician. He began painting six-foot canvases in 1818, in emulation of the works of the past masters of landscape such as Claude, Poussin and Rubens. He saw these large pictures as a means to gain further recognition as an artist, and to elevate what many considered the mundane subject matter of rural scenery. Unable to paint from nature on this scale, he turned increasingly to invention, and these large studio sketches enabled him to work out the compositional problems he was encountering in the preparation of his exhibition pieces. The oil sketch would be made either prior to, or simultaneously with, the finished picture.

Constable made a small pencil sketch of Hadleigh Castle near Southend in Essex in 1814, on his only visit to the area, when he wrote to his future wife Maria: 'At Hadleigh there is a ruin of a castle which from its situation is a really fine place - it commands a view of the Kent hills, the Nore and North Foreland & looking many miles to sea' (letter of 3 July 1814; in R.B. Beckett, ed., *John Constable's Correspondence*, II, Ipswich 1964, p.127). He returned to the pencil sketch fifteen years later, to develop the six-foot painting. He made a small preparatory oil sketch, probably in 1828 (Paul Mellon Collection, Upperville, Virginia), based on the drawing, but with the addition of a shepherd and his flock at the bottom left. In a pen and ink drawing made at around the same time (collection David Thomson), the composition has

become decidedly more horizontal, having been extended on the right to include the distant Kent shore. A dog has replaced the shepherd's flock, and a tree has been added beside the castle's left-hand tower. The Tate's large oil sketch introduces cows in the middle-distance and gulls flying above the sea.

Constable's wife Maria died in November 1828, and the sombre, desolate tone of the work is generally assumed to reflect his mood at this time. In a letter of 19 December of that year, he wrote to his brother Golding: 'I shall never feel again as I have felt, the face of the World is totally changed to me' (in C.R. Leslie, ed. Hon. Andrew Shirley, *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable, R.A.*, London 1937, p.234).



Samuel Palmer (1805-1881)
In a Shoreham Garden
 c. 1830
 watercolour
 Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Samuel Palmer (1805-1881), *In a Shoreham Garden*, c. 1830, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Where Constable found desolation in the English landscape, **Samuel Palmer** found rapture. Palmer was a born visionary — he described experiencing mystical states from childhood — and his early life moved swiftly toward the people who would crystallise that gift. He first exhibited at the **Royal Academy** at fourteen, and in **1824**, through the painter **John Linnell**, he met **William Blake**, whose influence proved decisive. Blake did not create Palmer's mysticism; he intensified what was already there. In **1826** Palmer moved to **Shoreham in Kent**, settling eventually in a Queen Anne house called Waterhouse, and there produced the extraordinary body of work for which he is now celebrated. Around him gathered a Blake-inspired circle calling themselves **the Ancients**. **In a Shoreham Garden** is characteristic of this period — dense, almost hallucinatory, saturated with a visionary pastoral that owes nothing to Constable's meteorological precision. Palmer's politics were high Tory, deeply hostile to the reform movements convulsing England by the early **1830s**, yet **Graham Sutherland**, who acknowledged Palmer as a formative influence, called him "essentially the English Van Gogh" — a comparison **Kenneth Clark** endorsed. After returning to London in **1835** and marrying Hannah Linnell in **1837**, the visionary intensity faded, and Palmer never recovered it.

Notes

The Romantic and the mystical.

This is Samuel Palmer's In a Shoreham Garden.

Samuel Palmer was another born artist, although he had little formal training he first exhibited at the Royal Academy when he was only 14.

In 1822, when he was 17 he met the artist John Linnell who introduced him to William Blake in 1824.

Like Blake, Palmer had visionary experiences from childhood and the effect of Blake was to intensify his inherent mystical leanings.

In 1826, he moved to Shoreham, near Sevenoaks, where he became the central figure of a Blake-inspired group of artists known as the Ancients.

Palmer was an old-fashioned high Tory, he thought the Tories gave 'liberty to the poor' but the Whigs were more cruel than the worst papists. He was deeply distrustful of any revolutionary principles. The ancient institutions, such as the Anglican Church, were sacred.

In 1832 he wrote a pamphlet in support of his local Tory candidate who came last in the poll.

Although his politics were reactionary his art was revolutionary.

Graham Sutherland who was influenced by Palmer described him as 'essentially the English Van Gogh', a comparison also made by Kenneth Clark.

Notes

Voting Reform

By the 1830s dissent had grown into the Swing Riots and part of the discontent was with the voting system. Birmingham and Manchester had no MPs to represent them yet Old Sarum returned two MPs to represent an abandoned medieval town. Lord Grey's Whig Government presented a reform bill in 1831 but it was rejected and eventually despite opposition the Great Reform Act of 1832 was passed. It gave the vote to only 18% of the total adult male population (in towns everyone whose home's rateable value was over £10 pa). Seats with less than 2,000 voters were removed.

Samuel Palmer – Visionary Landscapes

Samuel Palmer was an important artist whose most original period was when he worked in Shoreham, near Sevenoaks in Kent. He purchased a rundown cottage he called 'Rat Abbey' but later moved to a Queen Anne house called

Waterhouse, which still stands. He lived in Shoreham there from 1826 to 1835, producing some of his greatest work. He had little formal training but first exhibited Turner-inspired works at the Royal Academy at the age of fourteen. He met William Blake in 1824 and his Shoreham work is influenced by Blake's visionary and mystical approach.

In Shoreham he fell in love with fourteen-year old Hannah Linnell, daughter of the then famous artist John Linnell and married her when she was nineteen. In 1832 what he described as his 'primitive and infantile feeling' began to fade and after returning to London in 1835 and marrying Hannah Linnell in 1837 we went on a two-year honeymoon to Italy. When he returned the break with his visionary period was complete and he painted more conventional topographical and pastoral paintings for the rest of his life. It is generally assumed he painted this way in order to sell the paintings more easily in order to support his wife and children. Tragically his eldest son died at the age of 19, a blow from which he never recovered.

Samuel Palmer was largely forgotten after his death. In 1909, many of his Shoreham works were destroyed by his surviving son Alfred Herbert Palmer, who burnt "a great quantity of father's handiwork ... Knowing that no one would be able to make head or tail of what I burnt; I wished to save it from a more humiliating fate". The destruction included "sketchbooks, notebooks, and original works, and lasted for days". It was not until the 1950s that his reputation began to recover and his rediscovered Shoreham work had a powerful influence on many English artists including Graham Sutherland and Eric Ravilious.



Samuel Palmer (1805-1881)
Cornfield by Moonlight
 c. 1830
 19.7 x 29.8 cm
 British Museum

Samuel Palmer (1805-1881), *Cornfield by Moonlight*, c. 1830, 19.7 x 29.8 cm, British Museum

We ended with Palmer losing his visionary intensity after leaving Shoreham. This work shows that intensity at its absolute height. ***Cornfield by Moonlight with the Evening Star***, painted around 1830, is one of the largest and finest moonlights from the Shoreham period. A man in a smock and broad hat moves through a harvested cornfield with his dog, the cut sheaves stacked around him, a waxing sickle moon and the planet Venus presiding overhead. The light is deliberately impossible — far stronger than any sickle moon could cast, closer to the luminosity of a full moon — and that unreality is precisely the point. The handling is extraordinarily free for Palmer. Vigorous strokes build the sheaves; broad washes of light press against emphatic drawn lines. **Raymond Lister** connected the picture's mood to the opening of **Virgil's Georgics** — and the connection holds, since Palmer spent decades with Virgil, eventually translating the complete **Eclogues**. But the feeling here runs deeper than Virgil's celebratory panegyric; there is a contemplative religious awe that brings Palmer remarkably close to **Caspar David Friedrich**, whose moonlit figures he almost certainly never studied directly. Palmer's own words explain everything. He recalled standing with his nurse as a child, watching elm shadows cast by a rising moon, and wrote: "I never forgot those shadows, and am often trying to paint them." This was the canvas **Kenneth Clark** kept for himself.

Notes

Samuel Palmer, a little known, but one of the most profound of the mystical Romantics.

From Samuel Palmer: Vision and Landscape. One of the largest and finest 'moonlights' from Palmer's early Shoreham period, this shows a man in a smock, broad hat and staff travelling with his dog through a cornfield that has already been cut and stacked in sheaves. The sky has a large waxing sickle moon and evening star (Venus). The ethereal nature of the work is heightened by the glimmering light, which is stronger than any that could have been cast by a sickle moon and has more of the character of full-moon light. There is no specific location indicated in this work, but the rounded hills are highly reminiscent of the Shoreham area where this work was doubtless painted.

While the design of the picture is carefully composed, the handling is extremely free, Palmer using vigorous strokes to depict the sheaves of corn. Its rich tonalities show how much Palmer developed as a colourist around 1830. Indeed, much of the allure of the work comes from the vivid way in which broadly applied areas of light interact with emphatic draughtsmanship. It was this kind of vivid representation of light and nature that so attracted Palmer to the Neo-Romantics in Britain in the mid-twentieth century. This particular work was owned by Sir Kenneth Clark, a great admirer of Palmer and supporter of Neo-Romantics such as Graham Sutherland in his early years.

Lister suggests that this picture reflects the mood of the opening passage of Virgil's 'Georgics', quoting from the 1790 translation by Joseph Davidson; 'What makes the fields of corn joyous; under what star, Maecenas...O most radiant lights of the firmament, that guide through heaven the gliding year.'

Virgil was one of Palmer's favourite poets. In later life he made a complete translation of the 'Eclogues', and his ink painting of 1825 'A Rustic Scene' had a passage from the Georgics attached to it. In this case, however, the inspiration appears to be general rather than specific. There is, perhaps too, a more religiously-orientated contemplative awe in the picture than is suggested by Virgil's celebratory panegyric. Commentators in recent decades have been struck by the affinity of mood between works such as this and contemporaneous religiously-inspired scenes of figures contemplating the moon by the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich. Palmer never came closer to Friedrich than in this picture - though in technique their

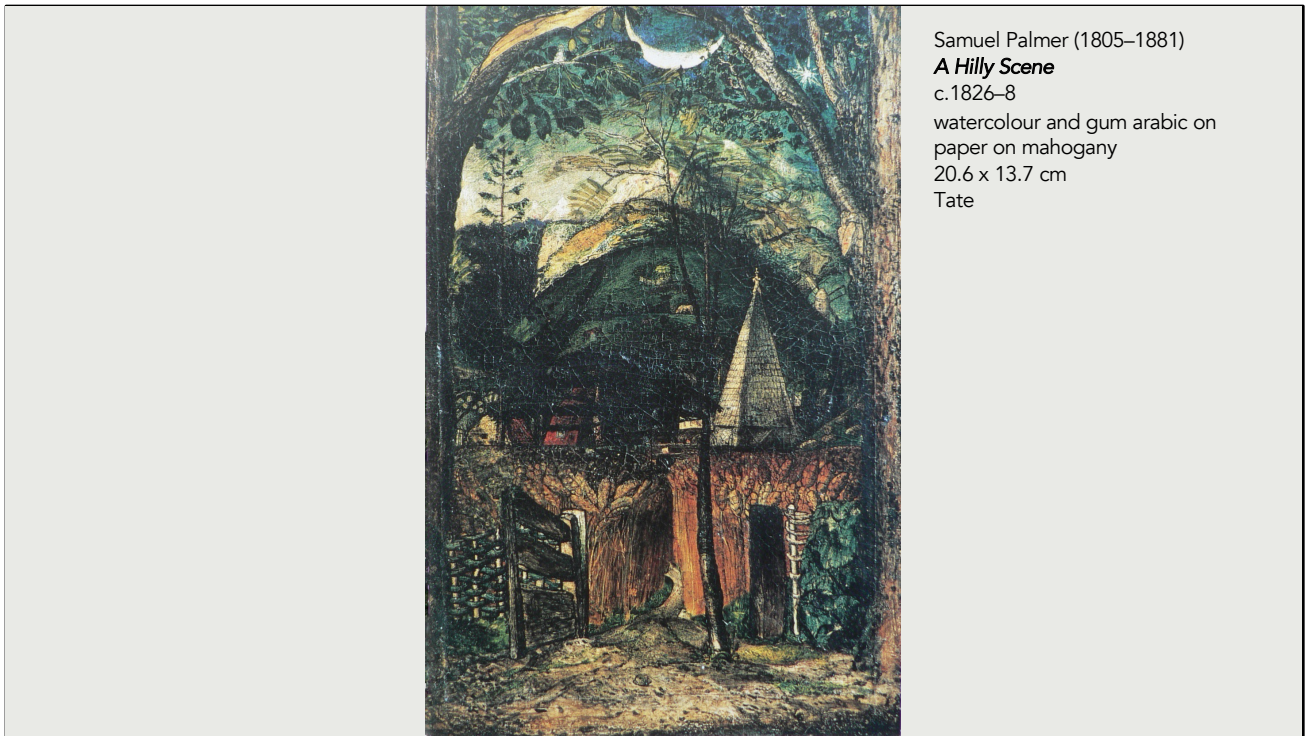
methods were utterly different.

Palmer depends on shadows for his best effects. In a letter, Palmer wrote that when he was 'less than four years old' and standing with his nurse, as he was 'watching the shadows on the wall from branches of elm behind which the moon had risen, she transferred and fixed the fleeting image in my memory by repeating the couplet, "'Vain man, the vision of a moment made,/ Dream of a dream and shadow of a shade.'" He continued, 'I never forgot those shadows, and am often trying to paint them' - implying that they signify the retrieving and re-enactment of a time of lost innocence which suggest transience and mortality. It is a sober picture with a mood of contentment and the mystical passing of time signified by the waxing moon becoming, in our minds, the full moon. For Palmer, shadows created a land of lost content that is under threat from the modern age.

References

Andrew Motion, *The Guardian*, 24 September 2005

William Vaughan, *Samuel Palmer: Vision and Landscape* (2005), pp. 124-5.



Samuel Palmer (1805–1881)
A Hilly Scene
 c.1826–8
 watercolour and gum arabic on
 paper on mahogany
 20.6 x 13.7 cm
 Tate

Samuel Palmer (1805–1881), A Hilly Scene, c.1826–8, 20.6 x 13.7 cm, Tate

That moonlit cornfield was not an isolated vision — it belongs to a whole world Palmer built around himself in Shoreham. He arrived in the Darent valley in **1826** and almost immediately recognised it as what he called his **Valley of Vision**, a neo-Platonic paradise where the spiritual and agricultural were inseparable. **A Hilly Scene** is among the finest distillations of that world. The unseasonal combination of flowering horse-chestnut and swollen wheat heads is deliberate: fertility made symbolic rather than botanical. Palmer drew on **Edmund Spenser's Faerie Queene**, specifically the lines from Book Three — "There is continual spring, and harvest there" — to authorise an image of perpetual abundance untouched by the fallen world outside Shoreham. The prominent church spire and the gothic arch formed by overhanging branches connect the composition directly to **Coming from Evening Church**, also **1830**, anchoring divine presence within pastoral landscape. For technique, Palmer adopted a fresco-like **tempera**, comparable to **William Blake's** own panel method in works like **The Ghost of a Flea**. The brilliant star visible through the branches at upper right almost certainly nods to Blake directly. Palmer's description of Blake's Virgil engravings — "visions of little dells and nooks and corners of Paradise" — reads as a precise account of his own ambitions here.

Notes

'This is one of Palmer's finest works, painted shortly after he settled in Shoreham in

Kent. The Darent valley appeared to Palmer a perfect, neo-Platonic world and he called it the 'Valley of Vision'.

In this picture he creates an ideal image of pastoral contentment, unaffected by the outside world. The unseasonal combination of flowering horse-chestnut and huge ripe heads of wheat symbolise fertility and the richness of the soil, and Palmer may have been inspired by Edmund Spenser's lines from the *Faërie Queene* (1596), Book iii, Canto VI, beginning 'There is continual spring, and harvest there'.

The prominent church spire signifies a divine presence within the landscape. This is emphasised by the gothic arch created by the branches at the top of the composition, which relates closely to *Coming from Evening Church* (1830). In the background, the characteristic rounded hills of Shoreham and the crescent moon, here shown on its back, were later adopted as motifs by artists of the mid-twentieth century. Inspired by John Milton's poetic evocations, the moon in its various phases became a recurring feature in Palmer's work.

Palmer's pictures of this period are intensely personal, but often have a mystical, even visionary quality comparable to the work of William Blake (1757-1827). Palmer was greatly inspired by Blake's illustrations to Ambrose Philips' imitation of Virgil's *First Eclogue* (1821), and could have been describing his own work when he wrote of the Blake engravings: 'They are visions of little dells, and nooks, and corners of Paradise; models of the exquisite pitch of intense poetry...There is in all such a mystic and dreamy glimmer as penetrates and kindles the inmost soul' (A.H. Palmer, *The Life and Letters of Samuel Palmer*, 1892, pp.15-16). In *A Hilly Scene* Palmer adopts a fresco technique (really a form of tempera) which is comparable to Blake's 'fresco' panels such as *The Ghost of a Flea*, and to which the brilliant star shining through the branches at the top right appears to refer.

The Shoreham works are characterised by a deliberate medievalism and stylistically they were influenced by the work of such Northern European artists as Breughel and Dürer. This particular picture is packed with detail, reminiscent of the miniatures found in illuminated manuscripts. Palmer may also have been inspired by works such as Mantegna's *The Agony in the Garden* (1460, National Gallery).

References

Frances Fowle, Tate



J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851)
Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway
1844
National Gallery, London

J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851), *Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway*, 1844, National Gallery, London

From Palmer's sheltered Valley of Vision, we move to the painter who stood at the opposite extreme of Romantic ambition — **J. M. W. Turner**, and specifically ***Rain, Steam and Speed***, exhibited at the **Royal Academy** in **1844**. The painting shows **Maidenhead Railway Bridge**, designed by **Isambard Kingdom Brunel** and completed in **1838**, spanning the Thames looking east toward London. Turner pushes colour and light to dissolution — the locomotive barely coheres as a solid object, consumed by atmosphere. What makes the picture inexhaustible is its refusal to settle its own argument. The tiny **hare** in the lower right was the fastest thing in England before steam — its presence either confirms the locomotive's triumph or shows nature fleeing in terror. The figures on the riverbank, dancing in what reads as a bacchanalian scene, and the parasol-carrying figure who appears to be sketching them, suggest an older, bucolic England existing alongside the new. Turner does not arbitrate between these readings. John Ruskin, Turner's most devoted champion, wrote that Turner "had been sent as a prophet" to reveal nature's truth. Yet here the natural world is not transcribed but overwhelmed — which is precisely the tension Romanticism lived inside. The **Pre-Raphaelites**, reacting to exactly this industrial momentum, would shortly turn toward the medieval as their answer.

Notes

I am finishing with the great English Romantic painter Turner. This is a painting you have seen a number of times but I am showing it again to present it in a slightly different light. As a Romantic painting one would expect nature to dominate and for progress and the industrial revolution to be criticized. However, as we have discussed the painting is ambiguous. The painting could be seen to be celebrating progress and steam or it could be a rejection of the railways as a destroyer of nature, such as the hare, as old ways, such as the dancing figures on the shore.

The Pre-Raphaelites and their celebration of the medieval period can be seen as a Romantic movement.

J. M. W. Turner

This is an example of one of Turner's late landscapes. It is not clear whether some of his late landscapes are finished works that were intended to be displayed but this is clearly the case with *Rain, Steam and Speed*.

Turner redefined landscape painting by pushing the boundaries of how we appreciate colour and light. In this painting, a conventional interpretation is that it is a celebration of power and progress and the new scientific age. It shows Maidenhead Railway Bridge, across the River Thames between Taplow and Maidenhead and the view is looking east towards London.

The bridge was designed by Isambard Kingdom Brunel (1806-1859, died aged 53 of a stroke) and completed in 1838. The Great Western Railway was one of a number of private British railway companies created to develop the new means of transport.

A tiny hare appears in the bottom right corner of the painting. Some have interpreted this as a positive statement about technology as the train is able to outrun what was the fastest animal before the steam train. Others see the hare running in fear of the new machinery and Turner warning us of the danger of man's new technology destroying the beauty of nature. My view is that this is a masterpiece precisely because it contains both contradictory interpretations.

The other interesting element of the picture is the boat on the river. It looks possible that this is an artist on the river with a parasol to keep off the sun and sketching a group of wild, bacchanalian dancers on the shore. Is this this Turner saying he prefers a bucolic scene of dancers to the new technology or are they celebrating the wonders of the new form transport that was changing

the face of Britain? Again it is up to you to decide.



21-04 THE ROMANTIC AGE OF ENGLISH PAINTING

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Samuel Palmer
*In a Shoreham
Garden*
c. 1830
V&A

From Blake's prophetic fury to Turner's dissolving steam and light, this lecture has traced the full arc of Romantic painting in England — its revolt against Enlightenment reason, its cult of the Sublime, its transformation of landscape into moral argument. We have seen Constable fight for naturalism, Martin pursue apocalypse, Palmer retreat into visionary pastoral, and Turner push paint itself to the edge of dissolution. Romanticism was never a single thing — it was a conversation conducted in colour.

Thank you for your time and attention and goodbye for now.



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