

Arts & Faith

Exploring Classicism and Romanticism in Art by [Hovak Najarian](#)

THE HEAD AND THE HEART OFTEN SERVE AS METAPHORS for form types that have persisted in art throughout history. A form described as classical is in keeping with time-honored principles, and artists who work in this tradition tend to be measured and deliberate in the creative process. They often seek technical perfection and the response to their work is likely to be on an intellectual level. In life, however, our actions are guided often by emotions and intuition, not exclusively by intellect and reason. When a work of art is intended to affect our feelings, set a mood, or be an escape from everyday life, its form is said to be romantic. The head, represents classical values and is associated with order, rational thinking, by-the-book, and tried-and-true formality. The heart represents romanticism and is associated with emotions, drama, play, the senses, and even the irrational and eccentric aspects of life. To eighteenth century neoclassicist, Jacques Louis David, art was an intellectual endeavor. He stated, “Art should have no other guide than the torch of reason.” In art, his work was planned and guided by rules and principles; in the prevailing spirit of his time this was believed to be of the highest order. Because romanticism is sometimes regarded to be in opposition to classicism, there is an inaccurate implication that it is guided by passion alone. The intellect is always an integral part of creativity but romantics tend not to make formal concerns their overriding priority; to them, communicating a mood or eliciting an emotional response is of greater importance. Blaise Pascal expressed a romantic’s outlook in his declaration: “The heart has its reasons, of which reason knows nothing...we know truth not only by reason but by the heart.”

Classicism

Classical art refers to the work of the Greeks and Romans. It also refers to a specific period of Greek art (the fourth and fifth century BC) and generally to any revival of its style and principles (as found in the fifteenth century Italian Renaissance and eighteenth century Neoclassicism in France). The term classic now is used to mean anything of the highest order and today it encompasses much more than the visual arts; when something is said to be a classic, it refers to anything that has been received favorably for many years and continues to be valued; this includes industrial and commercial products such as “classic cars” and “classic coke.” It may refer to the style of a performance as well. In the art of Western cultures, the work of the ancient Greeks continues to be praised for its idealized proportions, elegance of form, and technical achievement.

After the fall of Rome, when elements of barbarian cultures influenced art

of the medieval period, Greek and Roman contributions to art, science, and philosophy tended to be neglected. During the Italian Renaissance, however, interest in ancient cultures was renewed and the term “classic” took on broader meaning. The Romans used the word *classicus* in reference to writers that were regarded to be of the highest class of citizen. Today, we still speak of a person who is regarded highly as having class. Renaissance scholars adopted the term to designate all areas in which great work was achieved; particularly works by the ancient Greeks and Romans. From the fifteenth century onward, students of these works were said to be studying “the classics.”

Greek and Roman imagery is often found in classical art but subject alone is not a determining factor of a work’s category. A romanticist is free to use classical themes and likewise, a classicist may paint subjects associated with romanticism but in these works, attitudes about the creative process do not vary with the subject. The manner in which a work is created determines its style, not specific subject matter. In a broader look at art, classicism includes everything in which formal organization is a principal component. In this sense, although the paintings of nineteenth century pointillist Georges Seurat is linked to impressionism and did not depict classical subject matter, his working procedure and finished results are, nevertheless, a manifestation of classicism. Even abstract or non-objective works such as that of Dutch artist Piet Mondrian are a result of thinking as a classicist.

During the classical revival of the eighteenth century, Jacques Louis David was appointed by Napoleon Bonaparte to lead the French Academy of Art. Napoleon was an admirer of Roman culture, classicism, and military discipline. David’s attitude toward art was similar to Napoleon’s formula for success in war. In his *Maxims*, Napoleon wrote:

All the great generals of antiquity, as well as those who have since worthily followed in their footsteps, accomplished their great deeds by obeying the rules and principles of the art, that is to say, by the correctness of their combinations and a careful balancing of means and results, efforts and obstacles. They have been successful only by adapting themselves to these rules, whatever in other ways the boldness of their undertakings and the extent of their operations may have been. They never ceased to make war a real science.

If Napoleon were to have used the words artist and art in place of generals and war, he would be describing a classicist’s approach to the creative process.

Romanticism

During the middle ages, Latin remained the language of the elite but in regions of the former Roman Empire it evolved and popular tales of knighthood, chivalry and love were written in the “romance languages” (now known as French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and others). These “romance tales” had wide appeal and today a romantic spirit continues to be associated with one who pursues adventure and follows their heart.

In nineteenth century art, Romanticism grew as an opposition to Neoclassicism which in the teaching methods of the French Academy had become structured and pedantic. Instead of portraying heroic events in Greek and Roman culture, or its mythology, nineteenth century romantics preferred subject matter that depicted dramatic incidents and colorful places. North Africa and the Near East often were settings for their paintings. Whereas a neoclassicist’s ideal in elegant beauty would be a Roman Venus, the goddess of love, a romanticist counterpart would be an exotic Turkish odalisque (harem woman). Like the romance novels of medieval times, paintings of nineteenth century romantics offered adventure vicariously and thus the imagination provided a colorful escape from the reality of people’s lives.

In the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, artists delved into many aspects of life and attempted to give form to their feelings. Impressionism, with its depiction of the good life in an urban environment, was in the romantic spirit. Expressionism, as found in the paintings of Edvard Munch, Vincent van Gogh, and Abstract Expressionism in mid-twentieth century also were manifestations of romanticism. In the diversified area of romanticism, Marc Chagall’s images of childhood memories, Henri Rousseau’s naïve scenes of the jungle, and Salvador Dali’s surreal paintings all are part of the romantic spirit.

Manifestations of romanticism appeared in art before it was defined as such. It may be seen in ancient art – even in Greek art of the Hellenistic Period. The romantic spirit continues in literature, music, motion pictures, and in the visual arts today.

Hovak Najarian © 2014

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- [Hear what the Spirit is saying](#). A website started by Stan Hirsch in 2011 for the Sunday Morning Forum at St. Margaret's Episcopal Church in Palm Desert, CA. Search for term/tag *Hovak Najarian* for more commentaries. Note: for many years Stan edited a handout for the Sunday Morning Forum and these are being edited for publishing to this website.
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