

# ROMANTICISM TO REALISM

In the last decade of the eighteenth century and the first of the nineteenth, attitudes to the arts, as to life in general, underwent a profound change which has influenced Western thought to the present day. Out of the turbulence of the revolutionary epoch there emerged ideas which soon became basic assumptions for artists, architects, writers, musicians and the public for whom they worked — ideas about the artist's individual creativity, the uniqueness of his or her work and relationship to the rest of society, about artistic sincerity and integrity, about the relative importance of expression and representation and, above all, about the power of the artist to transcend logical processes of thought and break through to states of mind beyond or below conscious control. An art based on the optimism of the Enlightenment and of its faith in reason and human perfectibility could not long survive the French Revolution. The insufficiency of reason, the power of fanaticism and the role of chance in human affairs, the bewildering internal contradictions which make such rational concepts as those of liberty and equality irreconcilable, had all been made painfully apparent by the course the Revolution took. Initial, eminently reasonable reforms installing a constitutional monarchy had led to republicanism and thence, uncontrollably, to the Terror and the 'despotism of Liberty', followed by the autocracy of Napoleon's imperial rule.

These political events coincided with almost equally revolutionary changes in philosophy. Science now seemed to make the universe more, rather than less, mysterious. Isaac Newton's mechanistic conception of creation— an orderly system set in motion by 'a divine clock-maker' — gave way to one that was dynamic and organic. The classification of natural species by Linnaeus (Carl von Linne, 1707-78) and others led to the dawning realization that they had not been created in definitive form but were the products of a long evolutionary process. Speculative theories of evolution were put forward in France by Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829) and in England by Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802), grandfather of Charles Darwin (see p.623). At the same time philosophy was given a new direction by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who shifted its focus away from problems amenable to empirical investigation and rational deduction from self-evident axioms to an analysis of the most general concepts and categories. He brought to an end the heroic attempt to make philosophy a branch of natural science, breaking completely with traditions of both rationalism and empiricism. The distinctions he made between types of statement, according to the evidence they require and the interconnection between the concepts they presuppose, provided a new basis for the discussion of religious beliefs, morals and also aesthetics, which, for the first time in Western thought, moved from the periphery to the center of philosophical systems. Goethe, in an essay of 1799 on Winckelmann [see p. 592], remarked that no educated man could with impunity reject or oppose the philosophical movement initiated by Kant — a tribute from the greatest creative writer to the greatest thinker of the time. The movement led, nevertheless, to a Romantic philosophy which Goethe lived to deplore.

Unlike previous revolutions, the French Revolution had ecumenical claims: its armies set out to revolutionize the world and its ideas spread beyond Europe to South America, the Near East and India. It began a period of constant political and social unrest. In France it had effected the transfer of power from the old aristocracy to the bourgeoisie. Subsequent French governments, irrespective of their ostensible political color and the upheavals which brought them to power, all depended for survival on their ability to protect bourgeois society from the twin dangers of Jacobin republicanism and a return to the privileges and restrictions of the *ancien regime* -the Directory (1794-9); the rule of Napoleon as first consul from 1799 and as emperor from 1804; the restored Bourbon monarchy (1815-30); the constitutional monarchy of Louis-Philippe (1830-48); the Second Republic (1848-51) and the Second Empire of Napoleon III (1851-70), followed by the Third Republic.

Outside France, reaction triumphed after 1815, though there were revolutions in many different places in 1830 and 1848 simultaneous with those in Paris, all led by members of the middle classes who demanded participation in government. In countries under foreign rule (Belgium until 1830, parts of northern Italy until 1866) they were also fired by ideals of nationalism. Everywhere there was conflict between forces of continuity (monarchy, landed aristocracy and Church) and forces of change. A rapid rise in the population, the spread of industrial production and the enrichment of its entrepreneurs, a drift from the country to the cities and the consequent emergence of an urban proletariat occasioned the growth of new social structures which could not be regulated by the old systems of government based on the notion of a static order and immutable values.

The Industrial Revolution began in England in the 1780s with the mass production in mechanized factories of goods for mass consumption. Here industry was unhampered by the guild restrictions, trade unhindered by the local

customs barriers, which had survived on the Continent. Expansion was made possible by the exploitation of overseas markets, especially in the still growing colonial empire (the annexation of India amply compensating for the loss of the United States). Classes enriched by industry were placated by parliamentary reforms. But the cost in human suffering at a lower social level was appalling. 'From this foul drain the greatest stream of human industry flows out to fertilize the whole world', the French political analyst Alexis de Tocqueville wrote of Manchester in 1835. 'From this filthy sewer pure gold flows. Here humanity attains its most complete development and its most brutish, here civilization works its miracles and civilized man is turned almost into a savage.'

Just over a decade later conditions in Manchester convinced Karl Marx (1818-83) that the system of industrial production provided the key to the problem of historical change. Assisted by his friend Friedrich Engels (1820-95) –the representative in Manchester of a German cotton firm—he wrote *The Communist Manifesto* (London, 1848) which called for 'the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions'. Although it had little immediate effect, this pamphlet acquired within two decades the status of a holy text and came to be accepted by about half of the human race. It differs from previous political declarations in that its prime concern is not with the rights of man or systems of government but with theoretical certainties. The dialectical process of history would, Marx believed, inevitably lead to the triumph of the proletariat.

Artists were as much affected as everyone else by the political and social conflicts of the early nineteenth century. And since these upheavals lend themselves to interpretation as conflicts between progressives and reactionaries, a similar structure has been superimposed upon the history of art during this period. However, the parallel is not exact. Painters and sculptors and architects who were artistically innovative did not always hold advanced political views. In general, artists worked increasingly for a middle class to which many of them belonged by birth - the 'bourgeoisie' against which Marx directed his invective. Even the most politically engaged artists were usually more concerned with 'artistic freedom' than with political liberty.

## ROMANTICISM

Romanticism was the response to the situation at the beginning of the century, or rather an infinite number of individual responses to a constantly changing situation. There was no single Romantic attitude nor can the variety of Romantic ideas be encapsulated in a simple formula. The word 'Romantic' was adopted, as writers of the time remarked, simply for lack of another to define what had previously eluded definition. The term 'Romance' had originally been used in the Middle Ages to distinguish songs in the French vernacular from those in Latin and traces of this sense survived. But the eighteenth-century reappraisal of medieval literature and art played no more than a part in what was to amount to a complete revaluation of all the arts of all countries and times, including Classical antiquity. For the Romantics judged works of art, literature and music not by predetermined rules, but according to the sensibility of the individual. They were reluctant to accept any guide apart from their own inner light.

Whereas Neo-Classical artists had striven after a style of impersonal clarity for the expression of universally relevant and eternally valid truths, the Romantics sought to express only their own feelings, beliefs, hopes and fears in all their myriad forms. John Constable said that painting was for him 'but another word for feeling', Caspar David Friedrich that the artist's only law was his own feelings. The poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-67), who was also the greatest and most discerning writer about the visual arts of his time, later remarked that 'Romanticism is precisely situated neither in choice of subject nor in exact truth, but in a way of feeling'. All this is evident in, for instance, the new importance given to the sketch -as the least premeditated form of art -and thus to the free handling of materials which reveal in the most direct manner possible the individuality of the artist's 'touch'. However an equally intimate, even idiosyncratic, view of the world could also be conveyed in meticulously detailed, impersonally precise drawings and tightly handled paintings which expressed the artist's hypersensitive response to the exquisiteness of natural form —e.g. by the German 'Nazarene' artists. In such complexities and apparent contradictions the essence of Romanticism eludes definition.

Romantic attitudes precluded the development of a single style. Romanticism was neither simply a reaction against nor a development from earlier styles. Rather, a number of individual styles radiated out from the still center of Neo-Classicism. The relationship of Neo-Classicism and Romanticism is therefore quite different from that between Baroque and Rococo, or from that between Gothic and Renaissance. Neo-Classicism was not rejected but fragmented. Ideas latent in Neo-Classical theory (especially in the writings of Winckelmann; see p. 592) were developed independently. As a former pupil of Jacques-Louis David later remarked, the new movement in French painting was a

revolution but not an insurrection. David himself, after the fall of Robespierre and his own imprisonment, had relaxed the austerity of his Jacobin pictures and went on to portray the great individualistic genius of the day, Napoleon.

## HISTORICISM AND REALISM

History dominated not only architecture, but nearly every aspect of Western thought throughout the nineteenth century, very largely taking the place occupied by reason in the eighteenth. (The German term *Historismus* or Historicism was coined to describe this tendency.) Political, social and economic as well as artistic problems were referred to historical precedents and principles. Both Hegel and Marx founded their philosophies on historical studies. Where eighteenth-century naturalists had classified species, those of the nineteenth sought to trace their evolution — notably Charles Darwin (1809-82) in *The Origin of Species* (1859). 'When we regard every production of nature as one which has had a history', he wrote, 'how far more interesting, I speak from experience, will the study of natural history become!' In literature historical novels such as those by Walter Scott in Great Britain, James Fenimore Cooper in the United States, Victor Hugo in France and Alessandro Manzoni in Italy attained unprecedented popularity. The majority of operas had historical settings, Giuseppe Verdi's *Il Trovatore* (1853), *Don Carlos* (1867) and *Aida* (1871) being among the most famous. The exhibition halls of Europe and America were crammed with statues of figures from medieval and later history, and with pictures of historical events over an ever widening time-range — from the very dawn of human life with the ape-men of popular science to the French Revolution and its heroes, and victims.

Late eighteenth-century painters had used medieval as well as antique historical subjects as moral exemplars. Historical anecdotes with few didactic overtones were more to the taste of the nineteenth century, telling and touching glimpses of how people had lived and loved and died in former days: the past recorded for its own colorful sake. Although such subjects were painted by Ingres and Delacroix, the artists who scored the greatest popular success were those who held to a middle course, avoiding all extremes. They were called the painters of the *juste milieu* (happy medium), a phrase popularized in a political sense by Louis-Philippe, who announced in 1831 his wish to avoid both an excess of popular power and the abuse of royal power. The *genre* demanded detail—local color in a literary as well as in an artistic sense—and detail rendered with illusionistic veracity: the button-hole of a cloak, the pommel of a dagger. Artists were obliged to engage in historical research to guard themselves against anachronisms. *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey* by Paul Delaroche (1797-1856), the acknowledged leader of the *juste milieu* in France, was one of the most famous of these historical pictures, clearly composed and painted with consummate technical ability (15,31). The lighting is dramatic, concentrated on the heroine in her shimmering white silk dress, with an effect comparable to that of the final scene of a play or opera, a tragedy vividly enacted by substantial flesh-and-blood figures. The subject is eminently pathetic—the death on the scaffold of the hapless Lady Jane Grey, unwillingly elevated to the English throne (in 1553) in opposition to Mary Tudor—and would have been quite familiar to a French middle-class public alert to any possible parallels between English history and their own. Choice of subject was, indeed, all-important for such paintings, to catch popular attention when first exhibited and later to secure a wide and very profitable diffusion of prints after them.

Pictures of this type were produced in every European country and also in the United States of America. Sometimes they had overt political overtones, especially in Italy, where subjects alluding to the *Risorgimento* or



**15.31** Paul Delaroche, *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey*, 1833. Oil on canvas 8ft 3/4in x 9 ft 9 ins (2.462 x 2.97m) National Gallery London

struggle for national unification and independence were as popular for paintings as for operas—the battle of Legnano, for instance, at which the German emperor was defeated by the Milanese in 1176. Despite, or perhaps because of, their appeal to the general public, they were, however, scorned by the more serious painters and writers. If they reflected Romantic notions of history, they seldom answered Romantic demands for artistic authenticity, for originality of vision and individuality of touch, and for the expression of the painter's own feelings and intimate convictions. It was against their superficial Romanticism—which helped to give the whole Romantic movement a bad name—that a number of young artists in France, England and Germany rebelled in the mid-century.



**15,32** Below William Holman Hunt, *Our English Coasts* 1852. Oil on canvas, 17 x 23ins (43.2 x 58.2cm). Tate Gallery, London

## THE PRE- RAPHAELITES

In England a group of artists—William Holman Hunt (1827- 1910), John Everett Millais (1829-96), Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-82) and four others—founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848. The name is somewhat, misleading, for they did not advocate a return to the art of the period before Raphael (as a group of German painters known as 'Nazarenes' had done nearly half a century earlier), nor did they know very much about it. Their declared aim was a 'return to Nature' and a renunciation of academic practices which they traced back by way of Joshua Reynolds ('Sir Sploshua', as they called him) and the seventeenth-century Bolognese school to the first imitators of Raphael. The name was chosen, Holman Hunt said, 'to keep in our minds our determination ever to do battle against the frivolous art of the day'. He was soon drawn to religious subjects, though of a highly allusive

type (15,32). *Our English Coasts* 1852 is a comment on the defenselessness of the English Church against attacks from the Papacy (Pope Pius IX had just proclaimed the re-establishment of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in England). But it is also, and more notably, a wonderfully faithful, naturalistic view of the Sussex coastal landscape, diligent in its attention to details of natural forms clearly lit by bright cold seaside sunlight. The picture was, in fact, painted in the open air, a practice occasionally adopted by Constable but rare, except for *etudes* like those of Corot (15,23), before the mid-century. Informality of composition and a curious evenness of focus give it a kind of 'snapshot' immediacy. The original title was soon forgotten and it came to be regarded as a pure landscape without any ulterior meaning.

## COURBET

A much greater painter in France, Gustave Courbet (1819- 77), reacted against the 'frivolous art of the day' in a very different manner. He began with portraits, including more than one of himself in medieval costume, but soon discarded what he called the 'trappings of Romanticism'. After the exhibition of his first major work, *A Burial at Ornans* (15,33), in 1850-1, he was called a Realist, just as, he wrote, the title of Romantic was imposed on 'the men of 1830'. The remark occurs in Courbet's preface to the catalogue of the one-man show he set up in 1855 to display pictures which had been excluded from the international exhibition in Paris. This revealing document, which constitutes a manifesto of Realism, continues:

I have studied, outside system and without prejudice, the art of the ancients and the art of the modems. I no more wanted to imitate the one than to copy the other; nor, furthermore, was it my intention to attain the trivial goal of *art for art's sake*. No! I simply wanted to draw forth from a complete acquaintance with tradition the reasoned and independent consciousness of my own individuality. To know in order to be able to create, that was my idea. To be in a position to translate the customs, the ideas, the appearance of my epoch, according to my own estimation; to be not only a painter, but a man as well, in short, to create a living art—this was my goal.

Courbet had not cast off all Romantic ideas along with the trappings of Romanticism. But his paintings show better than his writings how his forceful personality and the circumstances of his life led him to create an art far removed from that of Delacroix, not to mention Delaroche. He was the son of a fairly well-to-do farmer at Ornans, near the Swiss border, and went in 1839 to Paris, where he taught himself to paint by studying in the Louvre and in the *ateliers libres* (open studios), which for a small fee provided a model but had no formal curriculum. His circle of friends included Baudelaire and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-65), originator of the phrase 'property is theft', whose Socialist views he shared.

*Painting of Human Figures, Historical Record of a Burial at Ornans*, as Courbet himself entitled it, is a painting on the same grand scale as Gros's *Plague House at Jaffa* (15,2), Gericault's *Raft of the 'Medusa'* (15,7), Delacroix's



15,33 Gustave Courbet, *A Burial at Ornans*, 1849-50. Oil on canvas, 10ft 3ins x 21ft 9ins (3.14 x 6.63m). Louvre, Paris.

*Sardanapalus* (15,11) and *Liberty Leading the People* (15,12). But the grand style which survives in those great canvases—*grandes machines*, as they came to be called—is lacking, although there is a distant and perhaps significant echo of the 'bourgeois' group portraits of Dutch seventeenth-century art. There are no heroic gestures. There is no firm center to the vast composition. The group of figures looking in different directions, each absorbed in his or her sad thoughts, seems hardly to have been composed at all; yet it is very subtly organized, with breaks which give the frieze-like arrangement a slow dirge-like rhythm, and a masterly use of a limited range of colors, so that the blue stockings of the man by the dog and the red costumes of the men who have carried the coffin lend the russet and black-and-white scheme a somber autumnal resonance.

The subject is insistently commonplace—just a burial at Ornans, no matter whose. Death is a leveler in more than one sense; uniting round the grave members of the various strata of rural society, the priest, the mayor, farmers and farm-laborers, with their wives and children. Courbet set the scene in the new cemetery at Ornans, opened the year before he began the picture. And he painted the figures, including among them his father and sisters, as large as life and just as plain, with such frankness that his Parisian critics supposed that he had intended to ridicule the priest with his slightly inane expression, the red-nosed coffin-bearers, the gaunt-faced women. Courbet's aim was simply to record the most solemn act in the life of any community as it really takes place and his calm and straightforward honesty of purpose is felt throughout the great painting and gives it its continuing power. The scene is dominated by the crucifix. As a Socialist, Courbet would hardly have questioned its importance, for life in the French countryside was still dominated by the Church. Socialism and Christianity were never so closely allied as they were at this moment in France, on the eve of Napoleon III's seizure of power. But later, in 1873, after his political and anti-clerical ideas had hardened and he was an exile in Switzerland as a result of his involvement in the Paris Commune in 1871, Courbet said that *A Burial at Ornans* was 'worth nothing'. By this time he had come to share Marx's view that 'Christian Socialism' is but the holy water with which the priest consecrates the heart-burnings of the aristocrat'.



**15,34** Jean-Francois Millet, *The Man with the Hoe*, 1852-62. Oil on canvas, 32 x 39 1/2 ins (81 x 100 cm). J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California.

## MILLET

The main figures in Courbet's picture were members of the rural bourgeoisie, to which his own family belonged. His near-contemporary Jean-Francois Millet (1814-75) specialized in depicting the rural proletariat, the people who had no possessions. But he, too, was misunderstood. As the painter Camille Pissarro (1830-1903), a convinced Anarchist, later remarked:

Because of his painting *The Man with a Hoe*, the Socialists thought Millet was on their side, assuming that an artist who had undergone so much suffering, this peasant of genius who had expressed the sadness of peasant life, would necessarily have to be in agreement with their ideas. Not at all.... He was just a bit too Biblical. Another one of those blind men, leaders or followers, who, unconscious of the march of modern ideas, defend the idea without knowing it, despite themselves! (Letter to his son, 2 May 1887, tr. T. J. Clark)

Millet's obstinate refusal to accept the Socialist interpretations put on his work was part of the myth he created about himself as the uneducated peasant who had worked on the land until he was 21. In fact, he was the son of a far from indigent farmer who sent him (aged 18) to study art at Cherbourg. In 1837 he went to Paris, where he became a favorite pupil of Delaroche (see p. 623), but was embittered by failure to win a scholarship to the French Academy in Rome. From 1849 he lived at Barbizon, a village on the fringe of the forest of Fontainebleau (south of Paris), where a group of naturalist landscape painters led by Theodore Rousseau (1812-67) -the so-called Barbizon School—had settled.

But if Millet the 'peasant painter' is largely a myth, he was not politically disingenuous. The peasants he depicted belonged to the class which still accounted for more than half the French population yet had benefited least from the growing mid-century prosperity. In Marx's view of society they were no more than dim background figures, destined to form the rank and file of 'industrial armies for agriculture'. But *The Man with the Hoe* (15,34), brutalized by toil, stopping for a moment in his task of hacking the stubborn soil, personifies a more fatalistic and pessimistic view in an image of eternal human labor and poverty. It recalls a description of a peasant by the sixteenth-century essayist Michel de Montaigne, one of Millet's favorite authors. But the image goes back further, to the first Book of Genesis and God's judgment on Adam: 'Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee, and thou shalt eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground...'. Millet's view of life was deeply fatalistic, redeemed only by his power to express it with an epigrammatic terseness and force of composition, a tautness of line combined with great delicacy and refinement in handling of paint. Yet the tillers and sowers and gleaners he depicted with an uncompromising realism that seemed shocking to many contemporaries soon came to be veiled in a nostalgia which gave the innumerable reproductions of them an irresistible sentimental appeal to city-dwellers. For the rural world was on the eve of a momentous change as a result of the mechanization of agriculture (already well under way by this date in the United States).