the Artist's Vision

Romantic Traditions in Britain

by Stacey Sell

Because it was not a formal school and was not characterized by a single artistic style, the artistic and intellectual movement called Romanticism can be difficult to define. In part a reaction against the rigorous logic of eighteenth-century Enlightenment, the movement dates roughly from 1780 to 1850, a period when artists and writers asserted the importance of emotion over intellect and affirmed the value of individual creative genius, internal vision, and imagination.

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Samuel Palmer (British, 1805–1881), *Harvesters,* 1830. Pen and black ink with watercolor and gouache, 11-1/4 x 14-7/16 inches. National Gallery of Art, Paul Mellon Collection, 1986.72.12.

A visionary artist who was deeply inspired by William Blake, Samuel Palmer settled in the village of Shoreham, Kent, and was a founding member of the artist community known as the Ancients. In the mid-1820s, this group of rebellious young artists was startling the locals with nocturnal walks through the countryside and other eccentric habits. Their art was as unconventional as their behavior; they shared with Blake the belief that inner vision, rather than objective observation, was the way to see and express the divine in nature. Although the attribution of *Harvesters* was once doubted, the vivid color and simplified composition are typical of Palmer's late works from his Shoreham period. The abstraction of the landscape conveys his intensely personal vision of spiritual reality.

William Blake (British, 1757–1827), *The Great Red Dragon and the Beast from the Sea,* circa 1805. Pen and ink with watercolor over graphite, 15-13/16 x 14 inches. National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection, 1943.3.8997.

Now regarded as one of the most important artists of British Romanticism, William Blake was a marginal figure during his own time, isolated by his rebellion against academic conventions and his adherence to his own personal vision. *The Great Red Dragon and the Beast from the Sea* comes from a series of over a hundred Biblical paintings and drawings commissioned by Blake's faithful patron, Thomas Butts. Within this series, a group of four watercolors depict the Great Red Dragon from the Book of Revelations. Here the Dragon, representing Satan, arms the Beast for their war against the saints. Apocalyptic imagery was popular around the turn of the nineteenth century, as the taste for the sublime combined with fears generated by the French Revolution and the century's end. Blake had little interest in the naturalistic watercolor techniques being explored by his contemporaries. Instead, he favored strong contours, filled in with tonal washes and overlaid with color. Like many artists of the Romantic era, Blake drew inspiration from Gothic art. Here, the stylized forms and symmetrical composition recall aspects of the Gothic sculpture he studied as a young artist.

George Fennel Robson (British, 1788–1833), *A Loch in Scotland,* Watercolor over graphite, 19-1/16 x 30-7/8 inches, National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1989.37.1.

One of the most important artistic developments of the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was the rise of the British watercolor. Watercolor artists responded to Romantic ideas about nature, developing new techniques to capture transient effects of weather and light. The availability of watercolor paints in hard, portable cakes allowed artists to work more easily in the open air, while new pigments fed the enthusiasm for brilliant color. Watercolor artists formed their own societies and organized their own exhibitions, which drew great crowds, and watercolor painting was enormously popular with amateur artists. International recognition of British accomplishments in watercolor gave rise to nationalistic pride in the medium and encouraged the popularity of such atmospheric depictions of the British countryside as Robson's *Loch.*

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP:
John Martin (British, 1789–1854), *View on the River Wye, Looking Towards Chepstow,* 1844. watercolor, gouache, and touches of oil paint over graphite with scraping out, heightened with varnish and/or gum arabic, 12 x 25-1/8 inches. National Gallery of Art, Gift of the Circle of the National Gallery of Art, in honor of the 50th anniversary of the National Gallery of Art, 1990.87.1.

Nineteenth-century watercolor artists developed new techniques that rivaled oil painting in their complexity. Here, Martin combined transparent washes of watercolor with opaque gouache, scraped the paint down to the bare paper to create bright highlights, and used gum arabic to give the dark areas a glossy brilliance. In addition to the apocalyptic landscapes that made him famous, Martin also painted more naturalistic views. Although the scene is easily recognizable as a specific spot on the Wye, Martin chose to emphasize elements of the sublime, such as the vast spaces and dramatic heights. According to eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, a "sublime" view provoked terror at the recognition of man's insignificance in the face of nature and left the observer full of awe and reverence for God's limitless power. Although in some ways Romantic artists reacted against eighteenth-century ideas, the theory of the sublime continued to influence landscape painters well into the Romantic era, as seen here.

Although his career began during the waning years of the Romantic era, the Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones embraced many Romantic ideals. Inspired by his friends William Morris and John Ruskin, he made hundreds of designs for decorative arts, including this sketch for a wall hanging. These reformers rebelled against the mechanization of the Industrial Revolution, seeking a return to the high-quality craftsmanship that they felt had been characteristic of medieval decorative arts. Like Romantic artists of earlier generations, they often favored medieval subject matter as well. *Ariadne* is one of a series of designs depicting heroines from Geoffrey Chaucer's *Legend of Goode Wimmen.* Burne-Jones and Morris returned a number of times to this theme from Chaucer, depicting it in stained glass and book illustration. Ariadne is shown here with the ball of yarn with which she helped the Athenian hero Theseus to escape from the labyrinth that imprisoned him.

Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones (British, 1833–1898), *Ariadne,* 1863/1864. Watercolor and gouache over graphite, 48-3/4 x 21-1/4 inches. National Gallery of Art, The Armand Hammer Collection, 1989.2.1.

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In Britain this period was also one of social and political upheaval contributed to by the effects of the French and American Revolutions, the rise of Napoleon, and the Industrial Revolution. Partly as a result of this unrest, many elements of British Romantic art were colored by feelings of nationalism, giving a new importance to domestic landscape scenes; watercolor, regarded as a national specialty, rose in popularity. Artists also favored subject matter from English history and literature, especially Shakespeare. The enthusiasm for all things medieval, ranging from architectural revivals to the craze for the melodramatic Gothic novel was a closely related development. In addition, the Romantic artist's passionate identification with nature led to new developments in landscape by artists as varied as J. M.W. Turner, John Constable, and Samuel Palmer.

Although Romanticism had already peaked by the mid-nineteenth century, many of its major trends lingered in the work of Pre-Raphaelite artists such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones, or reappeared in the twentieth century in the work of followers of William Blake and Samuel Palmer.

Drawing on loans and the permanent collection of British prints and drawings at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., *The Artist's Vision: Romantic Traditions in Britain,* runs from November 19 through March 18, 2007. For more information, call 202.737.4215 or visit www.nga.gov/exhibitions/britaininfo.htm.

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Dante Gabriel Rossetti, British, 1828–1882, *Desdemona's Death-Song,* circa 1878, black chalk over traces of red chalk on two joined sheets of blue-green paper, 50-3/8 x 29-1/2 inches. National Gallery of Art, New Century Fund and Paul Mellon Fund, 2005.76.1.

A major recent acquisition for the National Gallery of Art, this is the most complete version of a subject that haunted Rossetti throughout the last decade of his life. His earliest efforts on the subject were delayed when he suffered a breakdown and attempted suicide. At the time of his death in 1882, he had barely begun an oil painting, noting hopefully, "when finished, it will certainly be one of my best and most attractive things."

In this scene from Shakespeare's *Othello,* Desdemona prepares for bed, singing her "willow song" of unrequited love, moments before her death at the hands of her jealous husband. Stylistically, the drawing fits into Rossetti's late period, providing a link between Romanticism and later art: the writhing linear movement conveys the intense emotion of the scene, while the gracefully stylized figures anticipate the abstraction of Art Nouveau.